
Inori.
illust
Aonoshimo
Homunculus Tears
Alchemy for the Brokenhearted



Homunculus Tears: Alchemy for the Brokenhearted

Author: Inori.

Translation: Kevin Ishizaka
Editing: Hanna Fenimore
Proofreading: Rob Probst

Table of contents:

Prologue: Weapon
Chapter One: Puppet
Chapter Two: Training
Chapter Three: Change
Chapter Four: Betrayal
Chapter Five: Lament
Epilogue: Together

Prologue: Weapon

They called her a weapon. She was an alchemist, brought into this world for the sole purpose of fighting. She had fought through many battlefields and still fights to this day. Her experiences made her unshakable. Even after all her comrades were wiped out, she stood strong.

“Maha, may I suggest retreat?”

Her short silver hair shook as she rejected my suggestion. Her eyes, as red as the blood that stained her, dropped to the alchemy tome I was communicating through.

“It’s a straight shot to the town if they get past here. We need to hold out until reinforcements arrive,” she answered in her cold, intelligent voice. A tepid breeze reeking of blood washed over her as she touched the edge of her glasses to readjust them.

The hour was early afternoon. The plain she stood on was vast and desolate, offering no cover. Several kilometers behind her was a small town that shone faintly in the sunlight. She ran a finger across her alchemy tome and took one of the vials dangling from her hip.

A pack of grotesque figures stood before her—near human but for the sharp horns sprouting from their heads and the bat-like wings on their backs. Humanity called them demons. They regarded Maha warily and slowly closed the distance, one step at a time.

“As reckless as ever, you are. So, what will it be?”

“There are thirteen left, too many to take out all at once. Let’s take out the one in charge first with a Spear of Mercury.”

“And the compensation?”

“My memory of everyone we lost here.”

“How extravagant.”

“Not like I have a choice. This needs to work, or else.”

Maha dexterously took the cork off the vial with her left hand alone, then poured out the silver liquid within—mercury—onto the ground. Light emerged from her alchemy tome and mixed with the mercury. She extended her free hand, palm forward, and closed her eyes.

“That which pierces, spear of beautiful poison. Come forth and tear through my prey.”

An almighty power filled her as she spoke. The chant connected us, opening the doors to a greater force. The shimmering mercury rose from the ground and formed a narrow, glistening spear in front of her palm.

“Spear of Mercury!”

Her eyes shot wide as she invoked the spear and felt the burning, trance-like sensation of something being unmistakably taken from her. The silver spear became a blur of light as it shot forth at the largest of the demons. This was by far the most precise and lethal of the techniques in Maha’s arsenal. The spear struck the demon’s head and bore clean through. The demon twitched for a few moments before dropping to its knees and scattering as ash.

“Well done, Maha.”

“Let’s finish the rest before they can reorganize.” She drew the dagger on her hip and dove alone, save for my intangible presence, into the pack of demons.

“Are you trying to rush to an early death?”

“Nothing of the sort. I’m just following orders.”

Today’s attack was unanticipated. Our main fighting force was lured away by a feint while this detached force attacked. The unit Maha was a part of was ordered to defend this road with their lives. The demons numbered dozens while they only numbered six. There was no hope of survival; they were sacrificial pawns meant to buy time. But they had their orders, and Maha was intent on seeing them through.

She danced around the attacks the demons made with their massive, knife-like claws and butchered them one by one. Her cold

visage was showered in a spray of vivid red. Time was forgotten as her melee with the demons stretched long.

After managing to get through several, one of the demons she thought she had killed grabbed her by the legs. Her flowing movements came to a sudden halt, giving two more demons an opening to lunge at her. She wrenched her leg free of the first demon's grip, but the claws of the approaching adversaries were near.

For a moment, she was sure she was dead. Her automatic defenses, which were registered beforehand with me, were already depleted. With no thought in particular, she accepted her death, even felt relief, as though she were being released from something. But then...

"'Twas a close one."

Blocking the claws, only inches from Maha's head, was a massive blade that resembled a lump of metal more than a sword.

"But you can rest easy now."

Standing protectively in front of Maha was a woman with the small build of a young child. Despite looking so young, her speech was old-fashioned, and she wielded with ease the crude, massive blade almost twice her size.

"Ney..."

"'Tis all over now that we've arrived." Ney readied her blade and signaled with her gaze for Maha to look back. Maha did just that and saw a dozen or so people running over.

Only then did she realize she was at the limit of her stamina. She had fought alone for over an hour now. It took Ney and the others around another hour to finish off the rest of the demons. After seeing the last one fall, Maha let out a deep sigh of relief.

"I survived again..." she murmured. She sounded almost regretful, but I, and only I, knew better.

Now, I'm sure you're starting to wonder just who I am, so allow me to introduce myself. I am your humble narrator, the one who records the events of this world, known as...

"...Oh well. Nice work, Metako."

"And you, Maha."

Metako is what Maha calls me. Please, feel free to do the same.

CHAPTER ONE: PUPPET

Maha sometimes felt she could feel the color of people's gazes. For instance, the people she crossed paths with now as she walked down the corridor looked upon her with a mixture of cold blue and purple fear.

"Ugh..." She sighed, thinking to herself that this was the seventh time today. She had a habit of counting her sighs.

"You should say something if it bothers you that much."

"No, it's fine. I'm used to it."

Some praised her for the way she always survived even the most difficult of battles, but others scorned her for that same reason, believing death followed wherever she went. They saw her as a soulless fighting machine and regarded her icily. But she didn't do anything to dispel that impression, always acting indifferent to their treatment. In my opinion, such an attitude only made things worse.

"You could let your guard down more."

"And let the demons walk all over me? No thanks."

Maha lived in a place colloquially known as the Base, a military facility located on the outskirts of the continent in a town near the ocean. It was carved out of several hundred meters of stone, so although the furniture was wood and alchemy was used all over, the cold, oppressive feel of the place was omnipresent. It had training grounds, meeting rooms, and more. Maha lived alone in a room assigned to her here.

The first thing she did after returning to her room was toss the alchemy tome that I communicated through onto the bed. She then removed her glasses and placed them on the neighboring sideboard. Her room was unnaturally tidy; or rather, it lacked

enough clutter to create any mess. It felt terribly unlived-in compared to the rooms of her colleagues.

Demon blood speckled her glasses. She removed her blood-stained combat uniform and, wearing just her underwear, dampened a towel and began to clean her body. Though she could wipe off the blood, its smell was a permanent part of her after her countless battles. No girl her age should have such a smell, of course, but she didn't seem to care and continued to indifferently wipe herself down.

"Maha... Don't you think you should be a little more... What's the word? Embarrassed? Self-conscious?"

"There's nothing weird about being half-naked in my own room. It's just us here." Her reply was dry, her hands not stopping once. Her facial muscles rarely, if ever, saw use.

"No, I mean... You should be more mindful of the fact you're a young lady. Take whatever is going on with your underwear, for instance. There isn't an ounce of allure in those. At least make sure the top and bottom match—"

"All that matters is that they be practical and cost-effective," she cut in. "Besides, it's not like anyone's going to see these," she said with exasperation. She didn't get it one bit, the poor thing.

"Listen here, Maha. There are plenty of rather lovely people around you, are there not? Like Ney, for instance."

"I guess...? What of it?"

"With so many candidates to choose from, a girl your age should be out there finding a lover or two, then reporting back to me so you can brag about this and that—"

"Metako, please. Everyone here's a woman. Besides, I don't have time to waste on such frivolous things." Unamused, she returned to wiping her body.

Good grief. I couldn't tell if she was too straight-laced for her own good or just obstinate. She was right about one thing, though. Most of the male combatants had long since died in battle. Things were so dire that women now needed to be dragged to the front lines. Maha herself was one such example of that. But

there wasn't really an issue with two women being together, as alchemy could easily give them a child.

"Salutations, Maha!"

The door flew open abruptly. Maha looked over to see a small person with black hair and dark brown eyes approach—Ney. She was short, only coming up to Maha's hips. Given that Maha's own stature was fairly average for a girl, Ney could pass for a young child or perhaps even a toddler. Maha made no effort to hide any part of her body from her.

"Please knock when you come in, Ney."

"Aha ha, apologies." Ney cackled, showing no guilt. She was like a ferocious beast in battle, but in moments of peace she was just a cute, expressive girl.

Maha looked exasperated, but there was some affection in her expression, not that her facial muscles moved much at all.

"'Twas good work you did out there, and on such short notice. Be proud."

"It's no big deal."

"Spare me the modesty. Without you, the demons might have reached the town. Everyone bears nothing but praise for you."

"It's really nothing. Fighting is all I'm good for anyway."

"There you go saying such things. A girl as talented as you is meant for better things than bloodying your hands." Ney frowned slightly. "But... Your aptitude for alchemy is far too great for us to not rely on you at the moment. If only all alchemists had your capability, then I'd gladly place you elsewhere..."

Indeed. Maha was special in that, through me, she had direct access to a greater power. But, an explanation of what exactly I am will have to wait until later, I'm afraid.

"I'm sure my mother would have something to say about that," Maha said.

"Diriyah, huh... She's, well..."

Diriyah was Maha's mother, but the face Maha made when she said her name showed things were not all well between them.

"The girl considers research to be her life's purpose, so it can't be helped." Diriyah was nearing her forties, but Ney still spoke of her as though she were younger. Nobody around Maha actually knew how old Ney was. They all say she's looked the same for as long as they could remember.

"I'm nothing but a guinea pig to her," Maha said.

"I wouldn't say that. She properly loves you as her daughter."

"Sure..."

Maha recalled the gazes of the people she passed earlier. She couldn't see a difference between the coldness of their eyes and those of her mother's.

"Aha. You wish she would dote on you," Ney stated.

"I do not."

"Perhaps you're beginning your rebellious streak then. You *are* at that age."

Maha turned fifteen this year. In this world, that made her an adult... But only in name. The truth was, she was caught in that gap between youth and maturity, and that set her on edge. Or perhaps her curtness was just an attempt to appear older, like a child trying to look taller by standing on their toes.

"At any rate, you did well today. The town is safe from demons thanks to you. As captain of the Al-kimiya shock troops, you have my thanks."

Al-kimiya was the name of the alchemist force Maha was part of, and Ney was its captain. Maha was a bit too close to her to call her by title, however.

Ney meant her words to be a compliment, but Maha's expression remained stiff. Noticing that, Ney softened her tone. "... How many?"

"Five."

“I see... A shame. Come here.”



Ney spread her arms, and Maha kneeled down to bury her face in the much shorter Ney's chest. Ney took her arms and wrapped them around Maha's small head.

The five alchemists that died left no bodies behind. Demons could grow stronger by eating alchemists, so Maha made sure to incinerate their bodies in battle. The short swords that alchemists carried were for taking one's own life if necessary just as much as they were for fighting demons.

"Ney... I survived... Again." Maha's voice was a low, pained murmur. She'd experienced countless battles, but she still couldn't grow accustomed to the loss of her comrades, even when I'd salved most of the pain.

By offering her memories to me, Maha was able to use more powerful alchemy than she could on her own. Those memories were expunged from her mind, and though she could learn of what she lost, the memories themselves would never return. With her memories of those that died today already gone, just where her sadness came from was hard to put into words.

"You've had it rough, my dear. But that is simply the way things are in these times. Your efforts have allowed many to see another day, however, so I think you've earned a head pat or two." With a joking smile, Ney tousled Maha's silver hair. It was unclear if she understood how Maha felt or not.

"Ney, that hurts."

"Aha ha, sorry, sorry."

Maha frowned slightly, but she wasn't actually hurt. She was just going along with Ney's playful mood. For some time, she silently let Ney pat her head.

"Have you been eating properly? You're scrawny," Ney said.

"Oh, stop it."

"Just look at your hips! So terribly thin. You would do well to fleshen out some, and in *certain* places mind you." Ney rudely looked down at Maha's breasts.

"Are you trying to pick a fight?" Maha said, unamused.

“‘Tis all in jest.”

“I’d hope so. You’re not exactly one to talk given your stature. I outgrew you long ago.”

“Who’re you calling a loli?!” Ney shouted suddenly, then began to sulk. Her small, youthful face made it hard to imagine she was older. But Ney had always been the way she was in even the earliest of Maha’s memories. Incidentally, the word ‘loli’ was a mocking term that originated from a novel written by a woman said to have loved a little girl.

“I didn’t.”

“Oh dear, oh dear. You used to be this darling little thing. Since when did you become this cheeky? Who do you think used to change your diapers when—”

“That was ages ago. What are you even here for, anyway?” Maha forced the conversation along as she picked up her glasses and carefully wiped the blood off. Once they were clean, she put them back on.

Ney grinned wryly and relented, letting the topic go. “My vice-captain has a message for you. Submit your report ASAP, she says.”

“All right. I’ll have it in today.”

“Good, good. That’ll be all from me then.” Ney moved to leave the room, but came to a stop. “Oh, I almost forgot. One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Welcome back, Maha.”

“…Thank you.”

Despite the insignificance of those parting words, it made the fact Maha lived to see another day feel all the more real.

◆◇◆◇◆

The next day, Maha went out into town, which was situated toward the border of the continent. It had been a research hub with academies dedicated to studying alchemy before the demons appeared, but now it stood on the front lines of the war against them. Not even a shadow remained of what it once was like. The people's expressions were grim. To live here, in these times, was a struggle.

The town was mostly carved out of stone like the Base, except for some buildings that were made out of brick. Unlike the Base, however, the people of the town cared for appearances and embellished their stone and brick with reliefs here and there, giving the town a sense of beauty that the cold and practical Base lacked.

Maha ran through the town with no particular destination in mind. As part of her training, she ran ten kilometers every morning, always traversing the same path.

The slums came into sight not long after leaving the Base. The town as a whole was by no means well off, but the people here were particularly down on their luck and public safety was at its worst. Normally, it would be a poor place to cross through, but most of the men had already died fighting demons, leaving mainly women and children in the slums. Maha was well-known for being a powerful alchemist, so most people left her alone. Only a few idiots hoping to make a name for themselves ever tried to pick fights with her.

Everyone's got it rough, she thought, confirming the obvious as she jogged through the slum. There were a few buildings that, though weathered, still held shape, but many seemed only just barely able to withstand the elements, and some seemed not even capable of that.

"I'm sure Ney's reminded you countless times already, but don't stop for the beggars."

"I know."

Beggars weakly pleaded for money on the edges of the road. Some were covered in bandages, and there were even children among them. Though she was hesitant, Maha didn't stop.

A line of people waiting for food came into sight next. A religious organization called the Spiritual Church ran this soup kitchen as an act of charity, and most of those living in the slums relied on it to survive. Today, a salt-based soup with meat dumplings was being served. It was a basic meal, the meat likely only junk scraps from a butcher, but it was a godsend to the people of the slum. The line of hungry people stretched far.

"People supposedly used to eat for pleasure in the past."

"But now everyone has their hands full just surviving."

Alchemists could synthesize food as long as they had materials to use, but materials were by no means free. To create something with nutritional value, you need materials of nutritional value. The principle of equivalent exchange was one of the fundamentals of alchemy. Though some thought alchemy to be all-powerful, in truth, it was far from it.

"Maha, I know I've said this before, but you should really consider changing your running route."

"Why?"

"For your own mental wellbeing. This area isn't good for you." Maha was a soldier. Her heart was weary enough just fighting all day. I saw no reason why she should burden herself further by seeing all this.

"No. I'm fine with this route."

"Why?"

"Because. I get to remind myself."

I didn't bother asking what she meant. I already knew. She needed to tell herself she wasn't the only one suffering. She needed daily proof that the lives of the people here were just as bad, if not worse, than her own life of constant fighting.

"Can you not go on if you don't?"

She didn't answer. But her silence alone said it all.

Neither of us spoke for a time. Only the rhythm of her breathing filled the void.

Maha did not particularly like running, but she didn't hate it either. That same sentiment extended to training in general. Her training was the only time she didn't feel tortured by her thoughts. She didn't like thinking about the more difficult aspects of her life, though she certainly wasn't stupid. On the contrary, it was her intellect that made her overthink too much. That's why she liked being able to turn her mind off and just run without worrying about what was behind her. In a way, she lived her whole life like that.

I felt sorry for her. She had no choice but to live this way and had nobody who could tell her why such a way of living was so wrong.

"You should share your worries with others more, Maha."

"...Trying once was enough."

"Are you still hung up over what happened with Ney?"

"It was unnecessary. I shouldn't have."

"I wouldn't say that. She understands your circumstances and can sympathize. Maha, you're still only—"

"Be quiet for a bit. I want to focus on running."

I obliged and stopped talking. But, really, I wanted to ask her: *Do you still wish you weren't born?* It seemed to me she was running from such questions, though.

◆◇◆◇◆

A few days later, Maha and several others were summoned to the meeting room. Looking around, it wasn't just the combatants but also those from intelligence and logistics that were present. It wasn't uncommon for those with live combat experience to be called to meetings, but for so many divisions to be called upon was rare. Maha had a bad feeling about what was coming.

"What do you think it'll be?"

“How should I know?”

“It could be a wedding.”

“So we were gathered to give our blessings? Unlikely. Who would even be getting married?”

“Someone unexpected. Maybe Diriyah is getting remarried?”

“Impossible. That woman cares about nothing but her own research.”

The two of us made light banter to pass the time until the captain, Ney, walked in with a woman wearing a white coat. All the chatter in the room ceased at once.

The woman at Ney’s side was Maha’s mother, Diriyah. She didn’t have the image of an alchemist that fought demons. Her hair was unkempt, and her clothes were threadbare. Her white lab coat was the only thing new on her, as well as the only thing giving her even the barest impression of a functioning adult. Diriyah did use alchemy, but she was less of a combatant than she was a scientist. She was also the woman who could be considered the brains of Al-kimiya.

“Everyone, we bring good news!” Ney began with a grin. Putting a smile on her already cute face made her seem even more charming. Though she looked like a small child, she was a dependable presence. It was almost magic the way her smiles set people at ease. “You’ve all fought well up until now, but the end of this conflict might soon be at hand.”

A commotion kicked off at those words. An end to the war? Every soldier dreamed of such a thing.

“Are the demons giving up on their invasion?!”

“Have we developed some powerful alchemy that can bring an end to the demons?!”

The excited soldiers spouted off their theories one after another. Ney let them clamor for a few moments before clapping her hands together to call for silence.

“I can see you’re all very interested in learning the particulars. I’ll leave that to my vice-captain here. Diriyah?”

“Right…” Diriyah scratched her head and stepped forward. Curtly, she asked, “You all know what a homunculus is?”

A few fidgeted at the mention of the word ‘homunculus.’ One said, “Of course, everybody knows. It's a long-held taboo among alchemists—artificial life.”

A frightening grin spread across Diriyah’s face as she said, “Humanity has always been on the losing end in this battle against the demons. It’s only natural, of course. Alchemists may be stronger individually, but there’s nothing to be done when we’re so vastly outnumbered. That’s not even mentioning the rate at which they proliferate. For every demon we kill, another is born. But we can amend that issue. Bolstering our dwindling forces with homunculi will bring victory within reach.”

The room began to clamor again. Most questioned whether it was even possible. They knew of homunculi as a concept, but making one seemed beyond humanity at the moment.

“I thought making homunculi was a lost art!”

“It was. But not anymore.”

“Then you successfully made one?!”

“But of course. I suppose I’ve kept you all waiting long enough.” Diriyah made a confident nod. “The first homunculus is already complete. Ruri, come in.”

“Yes!” A strange yet lovely voice answered Diriyah’s summons. The meeting room’s door opened, and a small figure entered.

“Huh? Ruri…?” Maha murmured.

“You know her?”

“…No. I just recognized the name is all.”

“Is that so? She’s cute. I’d say she’s my type.”

“Sure, whatever.”

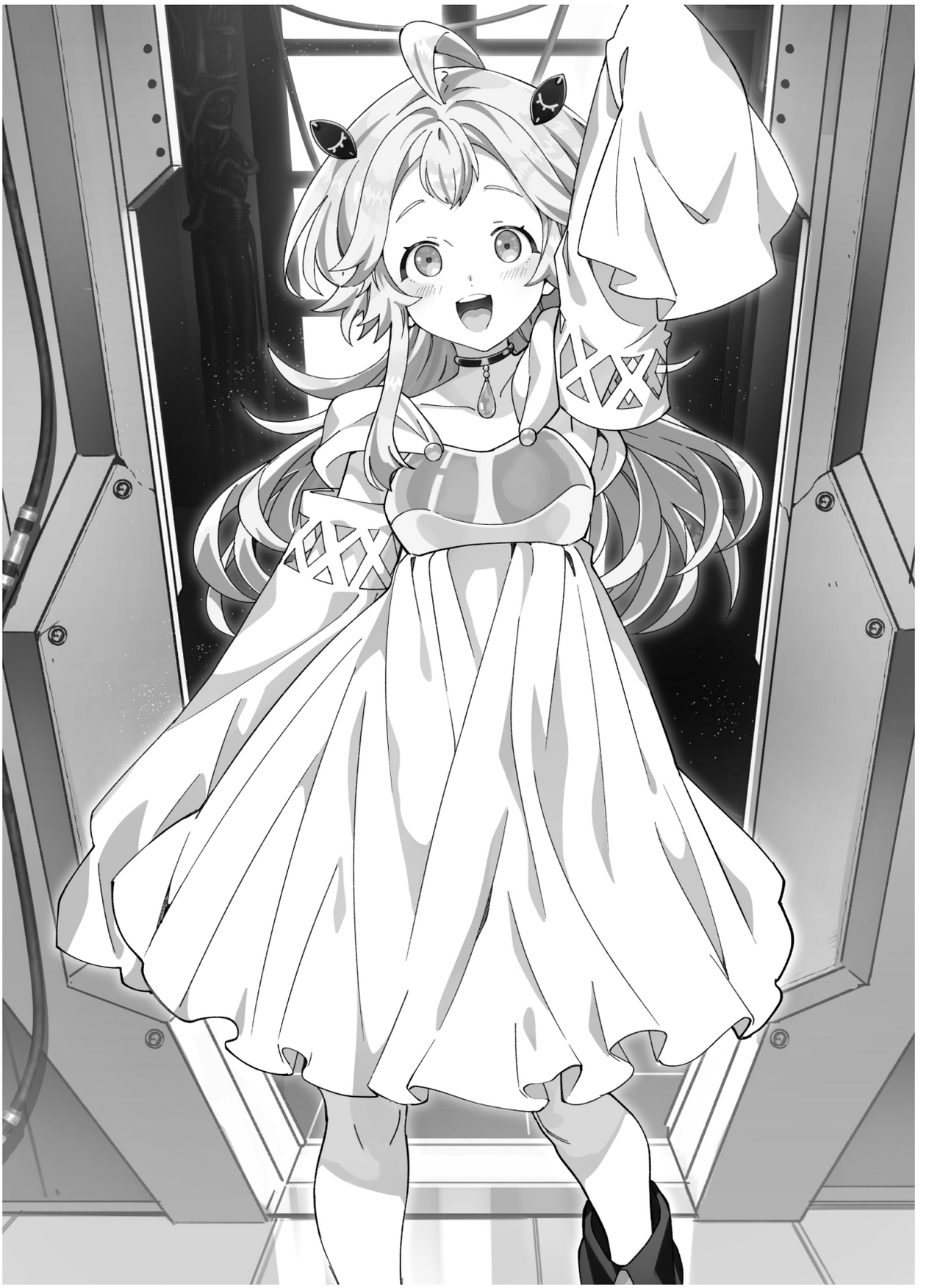
“Why not make her your bride?”

“Just be quiet.”

The homunculus called Ruri resembled Maha slightly. Her silver hair seemed to shimmer in the light, and her eyes were a deep crimson. Her height was only slightly greater than Ney's, but she could easily pass as Maha's little sister. She walked nervously past everyone and lined up at Diriyah's side.

"Ruri, greet everyone," Diriyah ordered.

"Yes! Anti-Demon Homunculus! Mark One! Ruri! Hello everyone!" Ruri introduced herself, her speech strange and inarticulate.



“There are still problems with the speech cortex and some other areas, but those will be ironed out as we go. Not bad for

only being made half a day ago, right?"

The reveal Ruri was only made half a day ago sent the room into an uproar for the third time that day. She didn't appear ready for combat, only looking to be in her young teens, but her creation being just half a day ago placed her growth rate at around 7,300 times that of a human.

"Metako, is she…?"

"Yes, she's a real homunculus. Furthermore, she has the same perfect connectivity to the Akashic Record as you."

"Huh? Wait, what do—"

Before Maha could ask, Diriyah explained, "Ruri here was created from Maha's blood, allowing her to connect to the Akashic Record. I'm certain her specs will prove to be even higher than Maha's."

There was a stir in the room. Maha's face paled, but Diriyah didn't seem to notice as she continued.

"No longer do we have to rely on Maha alone. These homunculi will fight for us now. Well, soon. We'll need to hold out a little longer, but not much. Maha…" Still showing no sign that she noticed her daughter's discomposure, Diriyah turned to look at Maha. "I'm assigning you to be Ruri's instructor."

"…What?"

"Don't 'what' me. I'm ordering you to cram all your fighting know-how into Ruri here."

"O-oh."

Diriyah likely didn't understand how Maha interpreted her order. Unlike most of the soldiers here, being removed from the front lines of combat was no reward for her.

…Am I of no further use to you?

"You're overthinking it, Maha."

Am I, though? She clearly prefers the homunculus over me, her real daughter.

An eddy of unpleasant emotions swirled within Maha. They were sourced from the deep rift between her and her own mother, but it was likely even Maha herself didn't realize that. At any rate, there were a dozen things she wanted to say. But instead, she simply said, "...All right."

"Yes! Thank you! Miss Maha!" Ruri excitedly said. She was all smiles, meanwhile Maha hung her head. I looked between them both and felt like sighing.

Maha was a soldier. To her, an order was absolute. Even if it came from her own mother, and even if she thought it was unreasonable, so long as it was an order, she would follow it.

"That should do it for today," Ney said. "Moving forward, we shall plan our engagements around these homunculi. We'll call this Plan Homunculus. You'll have to forgive me for not coming up with something catchier."

Ney brought the meeting to a close. Reactions to the news were mixed. Some had hope in their eyes, some were clearly doubtful, and others were unsure what to think. Only Maha's reaction was different from the rest.

"...What worth do I have if I can't even fight...?" She sighed for the third time today and murmured to no one in particular. Although I'm sure she wished someone would overhear her, her murmur went underheard by all.

◆◇◆◇◆

"Nnnooooooooooo!"

"Oh boy..."

The next day came, and, well...I'm not sure where to begin. Maha watched, aghast. Ney, standing at her side and not having expected this turn of events, smiled wryly. They were at Al-kimiya's training grounds trying to teach Ruri.

To test just how strong Ruri currently was, Maha had synthesized a massive humanoid golem from some loose boulders

near the Base. Golems differed from homunculi in that they lacked a will of their own. They couldn't make decisions, leaving them only good for carrying out pre-given orders.

As they were just testing the waters, Maha had made sure to keep the golem fairly weak, but Ruri had chickened out and ran away within seconds.

"Dammit, Ruri! Take this seriously!" Standing on the opposite side of Ney was Diriyah. She shouted, but Ruri was preoccupied with running away and didn't seem to hear her.

"What should we do, Maha?"

"Good question. This is a bigger problem than anyone could have anticipated," Maha said with a groan. She then sighed for, by her count, the sixth time that day.

With an annoyed look on her face, she dashed forward and stepped between the golem and Ruri. The golem swung its fist down at her without delay. She responded by pulling out a vial and breaking it. The distilled water inside scattered through the air.

"That which cuts, glistening blade of water. Slash apart my prey—*Sword of Ice*."

The scattered water instantly solidified into a blade of ice. With it, Maha lopped off the golem's approaching arm, then used the opening to cut its joints and render it immobile.

"I-I'm saved!" Ruri stammered pathetically, falling to her knees.

"Like hell you are..." Maha pressed against her own forehead like she had a headache. "Get up and face the golem."

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me. You're going to do it properly this time." Saying that, Maha used some nearby boulders to resynthesize the golem's legs. Its body audibly creaked as it stood up once more.

"Nnnooooooooooo!"

Ruri ran in circles fleeing from the golem yet again.

"Maha..."

“Don’t say it. I know.” Maha grimaced, trying to hide her frustration. There was no point sending Ruri to battle as she was. Even the weakest of demons would make quick work of her.

Maha ordered the golem to stop. Ruri fell to her knees again, breathing heavily. With an icy glare, Maha asked, “Do you intend to fight at all or are you just here to mess around?”

This crucial point alone needed to be made clear. Ruri’s strength was of secondary importance, for if she didn’t even have the will to fight, she would never become a soldier.

“If you don’t want to fight, then just say so and stop wasting our time,” Maha said with finality. Her gaze was cold, likely because fighting was her whole identity. It was all others wanted from her, and although she had mixed feelings about that, she still took pride in her ability.

“Miss Maha… I’m sorry. I want to fight. But it’s scary…” Ruri hung her head like a child that had been scolded, making Maha look like an older girl unfairly hounding her much younger sister.

“…You mean it? You really do want to fight?”

“Yes. Really.” Ruri lifted her face and met Maha’s eyes.

Maha sized her up for a few moments. There was some fear in Ruri’s expression, but her eyes held an honest willingness to fight. She really was a homunculus, Maha thought. Dryly, she said, “…All right. Fine.”

She returned the golem to earth and instead made a target dummy out of stone.

“Working with moving, attacking targets is still too much for you. Let’s start by having you hit this.” Maha’s plan was to have Ruri at least grow accustomed to attacking.

Away from the girls, Ney voiced her skepticism. “Diriyah, will this homunculus of yours really be any use to us?” Her voice reached Maha’s sharp ears, but Ruri was too focused on wielding her wooden sword to hear.

“Without a doubt. Like I said at the meeting, her specs are high. She just lacks experience.” Full of confidence, Diriyah pointed

at Ruri, as though to say, *'Just watch.'* The girl was raising her sword to swing at the target dummy.

"H-haaiyah…" With something too weak to be called a battle cry, Ruri swung and cleanly sliced the target dummy in two.

"Wha…"

"Oh ho…"

"What'd I tell you?"

Maha doubted her eyes. All Ruri had was a wooden sword with a dull edge. Maha had hardened it slightly with her alchemy, but that hadn't sharpened it any. And yet Ruri had cloven the stone target dummy clean in two. Her strength was to be feared.

"Ahhh! No! No! No! I broke it!"

Ruri herself didn't seem to realize how incredible what she did was, even asking if she needed to pay to fix it. Maha watched her with ambivalence.

"She has some potential after all, huh?"

"…Seems like it."

"You don't seem all too happy about that. What's wrong? Did you get rejected by a girl you like or something?"

"Just be quiet."

Maha tried playing tough, but I could see right through her. I was sure she felt a kind of jealousy toward Ruri. Maha was the second-strongest in Al-kimiya, only losing out to the captain, Ney, but it took her a considerable amount of time and experience to reach where she was. Ruri was only born a day ago, but she had what Maha spent all her life struggling to obtain. Who could blame Maha for feeling the way she did?

Of course, there was more to her jealousy than just that.

"That wasn't half-bad, Ruri."

"Huh? Not in trouble?"

Maha watched with cold eyes as Diriyah walked over and roughly tousled Ruri's hair. She brought her hand up and adjusted

her glasses, then sighed for the seventh time that day.

◆◇◆◇◆

Maha had but one hobby: painting. She only did watercolors though, not the more impressive oil painting. Still, she enjoyed it. Whenever she was bothered by something or felt down, she would pick up the brush to relax.

After training Ruri, Maha returned to her room, set up the easel, and began painting away. The wooden folding easel was something Ney had bought for her on a whim and was what started her painting journey in the first place. It was well-worn and dirty, but it was made to be sturdy and would last a good while longer yet.

Maha drew portraits. Not of herself, but of her comrades. Her memory of her comrades was precious to her, and that was precisely what made them such good offerings to me. She painted her comrades while she could, never certain which memories she'd lose next.

Maha has been painting for a while now and has grown fairly skilled. It was fair to say she had talent. However...

“You have no sense for color, Maha.”

“I know. You don’t have to keep pointing it out every time.”

Her picture had the accuracy of a preliminary sketch, and the composition wasn’t bad. But the use of color was just awful. She seemed aware of that fact herself, but no matter how she went about things, her painting always came off as dark and gloomy.

“...Just what am I doing wrong?”

“Well... Your paintings lack a sort of...flavor, I suppose? I’m not sure how to explain it.”

“Is that so...”

The two of us were talking when there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me, Miss Maha?” Ruri’s voice called out. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you.” She entered the room with a smile, then looked quizzically at Maha. “What you doing?”

“What’s it look like? I’m painting.”

“Oh. Painting. May I look?”

“I guess…”

“Thank you.” She curiously ran her eyes up and down Maha’s painting. “Miss Maha. You’re very good.”

“…Thanks.”

“I want to paint too!”

“Huh?” Maha froze out of the suddenness of what Ruri said.

“Not allowed?”

“No, it’s fine, but… Why do you want to paint?”

“Miss Maha’s painting is wonderful. I want to paint like you.”

So she was just curious, it seemed. Children tended to imitate what adults did, and it seemed Ruri was no exception. Maha decided to just let her do as she pleased. “…Sure. I don’t care.”

“Thank you!” Ruri beamed, making Maha freeze up again. The girl hadn’t the slightest idea of how Maha felt about her. She accepted a notebook from Maha, opened it, and began to paint with it in her lap.

Maha tried to ignore her presence at first, but as an artist, she couldn’t help but grow curious about her painting. She glanced over and snuck a look at what Ruri was making.

…It’s beautiful, Maha thought. The words came from the heart. Ruri’s painting was by no means good. The quality was all over the place, and the composition was childish. But it was full of

color. The world in her painting was animated and brimming with life.

“Did you learn to paint from somebody?” Maha couldn’t help herself from asking. Ruri looked up and shook her head.

“No, this is first time. I tried to copy Miss Maha. But it’s hard for me.” She smiled sheepishly.

“That’s not true. I think your painting is great.”

“Really?!”

“Sure.”

“Thank you very much!” Ruri began painting with even more vigor, thrilled to receive praise. She laid color atop color, making her little world shine all the brighter with each layer.

“How vivid.”

Yeah. This must be how the world looks through her eyes…

Maha looked at Ruri’s blindingly colorful painting, then looked back at her own. Maha’s own painting was lifelike but depicted a sad world with faded colors. She had a feeling the difference between their art wasn’t just a difference of subject matter.

…I don’t think I could ever see the world the way she does.

To Maha, the world constantly denied her a place within it. She was brought into the world for the sole purpose of fighting and had to constantly struggle just to exist. Her circumstances shouldn’t be much different from Ruri, a homunculus made for war. But the world Ruri saw was just…

“Miss Maha? Is something wrong?”

Ruri’s voice brought Maha back to her senses. Only then did she realize her mind had become lost in a mental labyrinth of her own making.

“…No, I’m fine.”

She pulled herself together and returned to her painting. This time, she made a conscious effort to use more color. But no matter how much she layered, no matter how much she tried to

imitate Ruri, her painting resembled reality too greatly and looked drained of color.

Her eighth sigh that day was tinged with despair.

◆◇◆◇◆

“Thank you for coming, Captain Ney.”

“Hello. ‘Tis been a while, Sister.”

Ney returned the smiling nun’s greeting. The two of them seemed like friends despite their height difference making them look like mother and child.

Maha, Ruri, and Ney had arrived at a convent near the Base. This one belonged to the same Spiritual Church that ran the soup kitchen and was full of nuns who spent their time praying. The alchemists occasionally used their skills to make food for institutions like these. The three of them were here for just such a delivery, pulling along a two-wheeled cart laden with provisions.

The convent wasn’t particularly big; the plot it occupied wasn’t even a quarter as expansive as the Base was. Although they somehow still ran the soup kitchen, the Spiritual Church looked to be going through financial difficulties as everything down to the hinges of the convent’s doors needed repair.

Maha and the others met the nun at the gate of the convent. Upon entering, they saw a number of children playing in the small courtyard.

“Thank you for coming as well, Miss Maha,” said the nun. “We appreciate you always fighting for everyone.”

“It’s nothing.” Maha kept her reply curt.

The nun smiled wryly, then noticed the small girl at Maha’s side. “I don’t believe I’ve met you before. Hello, dear. Are you an alchemist as well?”

“Y-yes. My name is Ruri. Nice to meet you.”

“Ruri, is it? It’s nice to meet you too.” The nun dropped her formality for Ruri and flashed a heartwarming smile.

“I have some business with this nun here. You two can kill time however you like,” Ney said.

“I’d love it if you played with the children,” the nun said.

“Sure.”

“O-okay.”

Maha and Ruri left Ney and the nun to their discussions and entered the courtyard. The eyes of the children all immediately gathered on Maha. She was a familiar face, but none of them dared approach her. For the fourth time that day, Maha sighed.

“Still not good with kids, huh?”

“So what? They’re scared of me. I’m doing them a favor by staying away.”

“You should try smiling more. You’re cute enough already, you’ve just got to do something about that stony face of yours. Come on, smile, smile.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Maha and I were having one of our usual exchanges when…

“Hello!” Without the slightest bit of hesitation, Ruri called out to the children. Her cheerfulness seemed to stun them. “Everyone! What you playing? Can I play? I’m Ruri!”

All smiles, she ran over to the children. They regarded her curiously.

“Huh? Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Who are you?”

“Who? I’m Ruri.”

“Are you here with Miss Maha?”

“You know Miss Maha? Yes. Miss Maha is my instructor.”

In no time at all, she became part of the children’s little group.

“What you playing? Can I play too?”

“We were playing tag.”

“Okay! Who’s ‘it’?”

“Um… That would be Yac. The boy in the green shirt there.”

“Okay. Sorry for interrupting. Let’s play! Ready. Go!”

On Ruri’s signal, their game of tag resumed. Yac quickly caught Ruri, and she became the one to chase everyone else.

“She has a talent for working with children.”

“…I guess.”

Though wary of her at first, the children quickly understood that Ruri was harmless and started to let their walls down around her.

“Why not join them?”

“No thanks.”

“I don’t think you have a choice.”

“What?” Before Maha could ask what that meant, Ruri appeared before her.

“Miss Maha! You play too!” She pulled at Maha’s sleeve.

“…Thanks, but the children are scared of me.”

“It’s fine! Everyone! Come here!” She clapped her hands to signal the children to gather, and the children quickly shuffled over.

“What’re we playing next?”

“Ruri, you suck at tag!”

From the way they spoke, it was clear they weren’t wary of Ruri in the slightest anymore. Maha was astonished by how quickly she got them to warm up to her.

“Next is special tag game. Everybody must catch Miss Maha!”

“What?” Maha gave Ruri a look. Surely the children wouldn’t like that, she thought.

“That’ll be too easy!” one child complained.

“Yeah! We caught you super fast, Ruri!”

“No! Miss Maha different! Catch her and I give you present!” Ruri pulled out a leather bag from one of her pockets. “Hand-made biscuit. Yummy!”

“Yay! I’ll play, I’ll play!”

“This’ll be easy!”

“I’ll be the one to catch Miss Maha!”

Ruri’s promise of a reward got the children quite motivated.

“Okay! Miss Maha! Run! Ten second head start!” Ruri said.

“Uh, are we really doing this?”

“Yes!”

“…All right.” Maha made distance from the children, winding up near the middle of the courtyard.

Ruri counted off. “Three. Two. One. Go!”

“Get her!”

“Go, go!”

The dozen-or-so children rushed toward Maha all at once. It would be easy to just outrun them, but she decided against that as it wouldn’t be any fun for the children.

“Huh?”

“What?”

“No way!”

Instead, she dodged around the children using footwork alone, remaining in the center of the courtyard as much as possible.

“Everyone! Work together to catch her!” Ruri called out.

“All right, I’ll cover this side!”

“I’ve got over here!”

“I’ll come from behind!”

The children formed a ring around Maha.

“Ready? One, two!”

Matching their timing as best as they could, they rushed at her, like ants that had found sugar. She evaded them as nimbly as a feather danced through air. After dodging the last one, she let out a deep exhale, sighing for the fifth time that day. “...You all almost had me there.”

She was older and had a better physique, but evading all dozen-or-so of the children was still quite impressive. They say even masters of martial arts could only fight up to three people at once. Perhaps Maha’s fighting experience was just that abnormally high.

“My, my, how disappointing. Not even all of you working together could catch her?” Having finished her discussion with the nun, Ney approached the scene.

“I had her! I had her, but...then I didn’t.”

“Miss Maha must have cheated!”

“...I did not.”

The children looked baffled by what happened, unable to comprehend the level of martial prowess Maha displayed. Ney decided to tease the children.

“Shall I show you all how it’s done?” she suggested.

“Urk.”

The children cleared the way. Maha gave Ney a look of displeasure, but that only made her laugh.

“Let’s see just how much you’ve improved.”

“Don’t think you’ll be stronger than me forever, shortstack.”

“Who’re you calling a loli?!”

As they traded banter, Maha took a low, defensive stance. Meanwhile, Ney just stood there nonchalantly. Maha wouldn’t let her guard down, though. She paid full attention to Ney’s each and every move.

“Ready?” Ney took a step forward.

“…Huh?!” Ruri expressed surprise, which was understandable given two copies of Ney had suddenly appeared. With another step forward, Ney split into four copies of herself. “Wh-wh-wh-what?!”

“…That’s new.”

“Ha ha ha! Do you think you can avoid us all?” The copies of Ney spoke in unison. They charged at Maha, doubling further with every step. This wouldn’t go the same way it did with the children earlier. Maha would have had difficulties evading Ney one-on-one as it was. Maha tried to use all her footwork and speed to flee for as long as she could, but she didn’t last long at all.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow!” Before she knew it, she was being squeezed from behind around her midriff. The dozens of Ney copies had become one, and she now hugged Maha from behind.

“You talked big, but you weren’t hard to catch at all. You lack training!”

“I give up! I give up, so let me go already! I’m going to hurl!” Maha floundered like a caught insect, making the children roll with laughter. Satisfied with this response, Ney finally let her go.

“…That was awful,” Maha groaned.

“Captain Ney! That was amazing!” said Ruri.

“This much is nothing, dear.”

The nun came over then. “All right, everyone, it’s time to eat. Let’s say thank you to the alchemists and bid them goodbye, okay?”

“Awwww!” The children started to complain.

“I want to play more!”

“I’m going to catch Miss Maha too!”

“Ruri still hasn’t given us her biscuits!”

“Yes, yes. Let’s save that all for next time.” The nun’s experience with children showed in how she handled them.

Ruri gave out her biscuits to the children as a consolation prize. After they all said their thanks, they went inside.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen the children enjoy themselves to such a degree. Thank you all so very much,” the nun said.

“Not at all. It was a good experience for Maha and Ruri too,” Ney said.

“I had fun!” Ruri said.

Maha wasn’t sure what to say. After they left the convent and were on their way back, she murmured, “How can they smile like that?”

“Hm? What do you mean, Maha?” Ney asked.

Maha was just talking to herself, but her words came out louder than she expected, prompting looks from Ney and Ruri. She continued with, “Well… The kids come from difficult backgrounds. They were all either abandoned, abused, or had their family killed by demons, and yet they can still smile like nothing bad has happened… How?”

Her words made it sound like she was calling the children heartless, but her expression showed her question came from genuine wonder.

“Hm, well… Ruri, what do you think?” Ney asked.

“Me?” Ruri was a bit surprised to be asked but began to ponder it. She eventually sorted out her thoughts and said, “I’ve only been alive for short time. But I think it’s because those children had fun.”

“…Fun?” Maha said.

“Yes. Fun is powerful. Even if bad things happen and you cry in past. If you have fun you can smile again.”

Maha wasn’t sure what to say to that. To her, life was one hardship after another. She typically felt a strong affinity to the children of the orphanage, but seeing them smile and play without a care in the world today made them feel so different from her.

“Miss Maha? Are you not having fun now?”

“...Huh?” Once again, she didn't know what to say. She couldn’t recall ever thinking about whether or not she was having fun. She’d spent her whole life struggling, going through one fight after another, ad nauseam. It had gotten to the point where she even felt weary of her own life. She’d long forgotten what it was like to experience fun.

“Maha, you might be much older than Ruri, but it’s starting to look like she knows more about life than you!” Ney’s teasing lasted a moment, but her words remained with Maha for a long time.

CHAPTER TWO: TRAINING

“...You’re sure about this?”

“I am.”

On the floor of the large room in the deepest portion of the Base was a massive magic circle. A woman stood in its center with her hands together as though in prayer. It was just the two of us here. I asked yet again if she was certain, not because I doubted her will, but because there would be no going back once it was done. Perhaps I simply wanted to absolve myself of the guilt I felt. At any rate, she returned a faultless smile and said, “Our battle against the demons grows worse by the day. Humanity may be winning now, but it won’t be long before that changes. Not unless someone does something.”

“Perhaps, but that doesn’t mean you need to be the one to sacrifice yourself,” I said, still lacking the resolve to go through with the plan.

She looked at me softly. “I’m sorry for giving you the more difficult role. But you’re the only one who can do this for me.”

“...Still.” Out of the many alchemists, I alone specialized in transmutation between matter and energy. What we were about to attempt—basically channeling the divine—fell within those bounds. “You may be the best of us, but we’re working with an unfathomable, great power here—essentially God itself. There’s no way you’ll come out of this unscathed.”

“I’m sure. But if not me, then who?”

I couldn’t answer. I knew there was nobody else who had a shot.

“Come on, let’s start. The two of us will manage it. Who knows, maybe it won’t be that bad.” She made herself sound as cheerful as possible for me. I was left with no other choice.

“All right. I’ll do it.”

“Thank you.”

The two of us began our plan to call down the great power of the Akashic Record, of God itself, in our fight against the demons. Though I wasn’t without hesitation, we were both certain this was necessary. We believed this would bless humanity.

This was the moment everything started to go wrong.

◆◇◆◇◆

“Hello? Earth to Maha? ‘Tis not like you to space out.” Ney’s voice snapped Maha back to reality.

Ney sat in front of her, smiling warmly like she always did. Ruri sat to Maha’s side and leaned in, looking curiously at Maha’s face.

They were in Al-kimiya’s mess hall, which had about twenty tables with chairs set out. In the back was the kitchen and the serving counter. Other members of the group filled the room, chatting spiritedly over their meals. Maha was joined by Ruri and Ney for her lunch.

“Sorry. I’m fine.”

“Is that so? Well, all right then.” Ney returned to her meal, taking a bite of her bread.

What was that, Metako?

“What was what?”

You know what. That ‘channeling the divine’ stuff.

“Oh, you saw that? Apologies.”

The visions Maha saw were my past memories. I’ve been reminiscing more lately; it seemed Maha would catch a glimpse every now and then because our minds were connected.

Maha counted out another sigh and returned to her meal, seeming a bit more distracted than before. After some time, her

red eyes drifted over toward the homunculus sitting next to her.

Ruri was weighing on her mind more and more ever since they'd painted together. I was curious what it was about her that caught Maha's interest, but it seemed like Maha didn't even know herself.

"Miss Maha? Is something on my face?" Ruri asked, noticing Maha's stare.

"...Yeah. Eyes, a nose, and a mouth."

"I-I'd hope so?!"

Ruri kindly played along with Maha's weak attempt to change the topic. What a good girl she was, honestly.

"Captain Ney, Captain Ney," Ruri said.

"Hm? Yes?"

"I have question. Mother Diriyah taught me many basic things. But there is still one thing I don't understand."

Diriyah didn't go into detail about her process, but she was somehow able to instill basic knowledge into her homunculi when she made them. That knowledge apparently didn't feel all that real or whole to Ruri though. Experience remained the best teacher, it seemed.

"I don't mind answering, but where would be the fun in that?" Ney said. "Maha, you answer her question."

"Me? ...All right, I guess."

"Thank you, Miss Maha!" Ruri beamed at Maha. Maha felt soothed by the girl's innocent smile, but you wouldn't guess it from her stony expression. "Um. First question. Why are humans and demons fighting each other?"

"Because of a gap in how life is perceived."

"Huh? M-meaning...?"

Maha's explanation was too concise for Ruri to understand.

"Maha, you're summarizing too much. To answer Ruri's question, you need to start with the difference in values between

man and demon.” Ney grinned wryly. She tore off a piece of her bread and dipped it in her salty soup before continuing, “The main difference between man and demon is their attitude toward life. Humans celebrate birth, value living, and fear death. Demons are the exact opposite. Maha, explain the rest.”

Thinking Ney was going to explain everything for her, Maha had started eating and was caught with a mouthful of hamburger steak. She took a moment to chew before picking up where Ney left off. “Demons despise birth, loathe living, and seek death. Their goal is to return all of existence to nothingness.”

“Hmmmm…?” Ruri pulled off the leafy bits of her strawberries as she listened intently. Confused, she cocked her head to the side. “I don’t get ‘return to nothingness.’ They want to kill all humans?”

“No. They want to wipe out everything forever, including themselves,” Maha flatly said.

A bit shocked, Ruri replied, “Wh-why? And that’s impossible. If you burn something, ash remains. If you heat water, it becomes vapor.”

“You know the basics of alchemy?”

“Yes. Mother Diriyah taught me.”

“I see. You’re right, but the demons still believe they can pull it off. And a certain legend among alchemists says they really can. It’s believed they have a magic spell called the Song of the End.” Magic was the source of the demons’ abnormal power, the counterpart to humanity’s alchemy.

Ney spread butter onto her bread and added onto what Maha said. “They say the Song of the End can end the world. A long, long time ago powerful demons tried to use it, but the alchemists of the time put a stop to them…just barely.”

“A close one,” Ruri said with a serious look.

“Right,” Maha agreed. “Anyway, the seal to the Song of the End is here in the Base. That’s why the demons keep launching attacks, and why an anti-demon barrier is erected around the town.”

“Base had such secret?” Ruri mused.

“We alchemists have a duty to protect the Song of the End from the demons. To prevent the world from ending.” Maha brought the topic to a close, then looked at Ney, who nodded satisfactorily. Maha sighed, secretly counting it off as the fifth for the day.

“That about does it for the fight between man and demon. Any other questions?” Ney asked.

“Yes. I want to know about Akashic Record, and who this Miss Metako is that Miss Maha is always talking to.”

“Me? Am I starting to get popular?”

“Those are some difficult questions. Ney, if you would.” Maha flatly ignored my comment and passed the burden of explaining to Ney, then began cutting into her beef patty.

“It looks like classroom teaching isn’t for you, huh? Hopefully combat instruction goes over better,” Ney said wryly. She swallowed down a piece of bread before continuing. “What do you know of the Akashic Record, Ruri? It should be fairly foundational-level alchemical knowledge.”

“I know it’s a record of everything in the world and a source of power.”

To be more precise, the Akashic Record was a record of all of the world’s past, present, and future phenomena.

“Good. Humanity’s alchemy and demonkind’s magic both source their power from the Akashic Record. It’s what allows us to alter reality. As for Maha’s friend Metako, she’s an interface that allows people to control the Akashic Record’s power, as well as a seal.”

“Inter...face?”

“A point of contact between two things. In short, she’s like a facilitator for people to work with the Akashic Record,” Maha added. Having finished her patty, she brushed the carrots that came with it to the side.

“Miss Maha, you need to eat your carrots. …Wait. But Mother Diriyah said only few people can connect with Akashic Record. How do most people use alchemy then?”

“That’s a great question, Ruri. The answer is the very reason Metako herself exists.” Ney nodded encouragingly. “People have varying degrees of connectivity to the Akashic Record. But that’s rather inconvenient, right? That’s why a super-important alchemist sacrificed themselves a long time ago to create a link to the Akashic Record. That’s Metako. From then on, humanity’s alchemists became able to use alchemy with her acting as an intermediary.”

“That’s me. Resident super-important alchemist here,” I joked. Only Maha could hear me, sadly. But at least there was a silver lining. Seeing such lovely ladies talk about me like this was a treat in itself. *“Though I would prefer some love gossip instead.”*

“Be quiet.” Maha brushed aside my request.

“Okay. I understand interface part now,” Ruri said. “What’s seal part?”

“The seal to the Song of the End is also Metako,” Maha answered as she begrudgingly lifted a carrot to her mouth. She grimaced upon tasting it.

The seal, as she mentioned earlier, was located in the Base. More accurately, it was located where the world and I were connected. The part of me talking to Maha through the alchemy tome was only a piece of the whole. My main job was to keep the Song of the End disconnected from the world.

“She’s just a pervert who keeps trying to talk about other’s love lives, though,” Maha said.

“P-pervert?” Surprised, Ruri dropped a strawberry. Maha stopped it as it rolled on the table and returned it to Ruri’s tray.

“How rude. I just want a little stimulus to dispel the boredom of eternity,” I protested.

“I can only take Maha’s word for it, but apparently Metako tries to pair her up with other girls every chance she gets,” Ney said to Ruri.

“She’s nothing but an annoyance,” Maha grumbled.

“I see…?” Ruri made a face that showed she didn’t really get it, but after popping a strawberry into her mouth, she was all smiles.

“Incidentally, Maha, what about Ruri here? Just look at the way she relishes her food. That has to score a few points.”

“…There she goes again,” Maha groaned.

“What’s wrong?” Ruri asked.

“Aha ha. Metako has probably moved on to toying with you, Ruri,” Ney said. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

How rude. I wasn’t toying with anyone, just keeping an eye out for Maha’s sake. So what if I’m also getting a little personal amusement out of it?

“…We’ve strayed off topic,” Maha said.

“Right. Let me summarize what we discussed then,” Ney said. “One, the demons seek a spell called the Song of the End to bring about nonexistence. Two, the biggest duty we alchemists have is protecting the Song of the End from demons. Three, the Akashic Record is a record of the world and a source of power. Four, Metako is an interface for controlling the Akashic Record as well as the seal to the Song of the End. I think that’s about it?”

“Okay. I understand now,” Ruri said. Ney’s lecture was thorough and covered all the important points, unlike Maha’s overly concise ‘explanation’ earlier.

“Ney makes a good teacher.”

“She isn’t old for nothing, I suppose.”

“Did you say something, Maha dear?”

“…I said your appearance belies your worldliness.”

“Who’re you calling a loli?!”

Maha coolly took off her glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief, ignoring Ney’s outburst. The three were about done with their meal.

“Ahem, anyway. Next is combat training. Teach her well, Maha.”

“I know.”

“D-don’t go too hard on me please…”

Afterwards, the three made for the training grounds for Ruri’s combat training. Hoping to prove she *could* teach, Maha was utterly relentless. Ruri’s screams could be heard for miles.

◆◇◆◇◆

“That’s enough. Go ahead and rest.”

“Okay…”

With a clap of her hands, Maha returned the golem to the earth. Ruri fell onto her back and sprawled her arms out, her chest rising with every breath.

The two were at the usual rocky training grounds. A week had passed since Ruri’s training began. Her skills were progressing well; she could put up a decent fight against the golems now.

“Well done, both of you,” said Ney, handing the two towels. “How is Ruri looking?”

“Not bad,” Maha answered. “She’s not as craven anymore, at least.”

“I work hard!”

“Good, good.”

Maha’s harsh training regimen had raised Ruri up to the point where she could even fight the stronger golems. As she was, she should be able to handle weak demons.

“It’s about time we put the girl to the test for real then, huh?” Ney said.

“I still think it’s too early for live combat. She may be better now, but she still shows signs of being afraid of fighting.”

“There isn’t a soul in the world that’s not a little afraid of fighting, dear. Besides, there’s no better practice than the real thing.”

“That’s…true, but still.” Maha understood where Ney was coming from, but she still thought it was premature.

Ruri stood up and wiped her sweat off with the towel as she said, “Miss Maha. I’ll be okay. I want to try fighting.”

“You realize that if you fail you’ll die, right?”

“…I know. I am scared. But even so.”

Maha hesitated over the decision.

“You’re being too overprotective, Maha.”

“You think so?”

“Remember how things went your first time?”

“…That was different.” Maha’s first deployment had been a walk in the park. Ney was around to protect her, so she basically threw herself at the demons and just did as she had trained. “I was practically cheating as I had you, Metako, but Ruri can’t even use alchemy yet. We should at least wait—”

“Oh, Miss Maha! Mother Diriyah is teaching me basics!” Ruri looked to the side and held her hand out. “That which takes the shape of man, speechless clod of earth. Come forth and serve my will!”

She chanted smoothly, the usual awkwardness in her words gone. Maha watched with wide eyes.

“Earth Golem!”

A golem the same height as Maha sprouted from the ground.

“That which pierces, spear of beautiful poison. Come forth and tear through my prey—Spear of Mercury!” Ruri continued with another chant, this time using the same attack Maha used to strike down single targets. Her spear shot forth, lacking nothing in accuracy and power, and bore through the golem, returning it to earth. She didn’t have my support, so her attack wasn’t as

powerful as Maha's, but it was more than enough for her to be ready for real combat. She looked for approval. "Good?"

"Wonderful," Ney said. "She should be ready to fight, right, Maha?"

"...Yeah." Maha nodded, but her expression was clouded.

"Feeling jealous?"

"...No."

"I recall it took you three years to reach that level, and everyone praised you for it."

"My own feelings on the matter are irrelevant. All that matters is that humanity has a better fighting chance."

So she said, but I could tell she was conflicted on the inside. The faster Ruri was trained, the faster Maha would be retired from the battlefield. Ruri likely didn't bear any ill will, but for Maha, who had spent her life being valued for just her strength, being told she didn't need to fight anymore was the same as being told she wasn't needed.

"Let's take our training outside the town then. I'll go prepare some things. Wait for me." Ney left to return to the Base, likely to call for some more people to come with them.

An awkward silence formed between Maha and Ruri. The one to break it was Ruri. "Miss Maha... Do you not like me?"

"Huh?" Maha was stunned for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"You always have sad look on your face when you look at me. Am I hated?" Ruri hung her head sadly.

Flustered, Maha hurriedly said, "Not at all. I have nothing against you."

"Liar."

"I'm not lying."

"Then why won't you use my name?"

“What? I…” She didn’t even realize it herself, but looking back, Maha couldn’t recall a single instance where she had used Ruri’s name. Ruri had noticed the wall Maha put between them. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t intentional.”

“Oh. N-no. It’s okay. I’m overthinking, maybe. But I want to get along if I can.”

“Because we’re fighting on the same side?”

“Yes. But also because you are Mother Diriyah’s daughter. That makes you my big sister. Kind of?”

“…I see.” Maha felt a dull pain in her chest. She was indeed Diriyah’s daughter, but she had hardly ever been treated like such by her. It was at the point where Maha wondered if Ruri was more of a daughter to Diriyah than she was. Dark emotions swirled within her, raging like a storm and threatening to spill out, but Maha fought to keep them down. “You’re right. Let’s get along, *Ruri*.”

“Miss Maha!”

Maha offered out her right hand, causing Ruri to break into a smile and grab Maha’s hand. She shook it up and down, likely clueless to Maha’s inner turmoil.

“What a farce,” a voice suddenly said.

Maha reacted instantly. She stepped forward and pulled Ruri behind her, reaching for a vial as she did so.

She glared in the direction of the voice and saw a clump of darkness. Before her eyes, it shifted into the shape of a voluptuous woman bearing bat-like wings along her back and horns sprouting from her head. As she appeared, she said, “I’ve come for the homunculus girl.”

◆◇◆◇◆

“…How? We’re within the barrier,” Maha said.

As mentioned before, the town was covered by a barrier that demons weren't supposed to be able to get past. It would be one thing if the alchemic devices maintaining the barrier had been destroyed, but Maha could still feel them working.

"Your kind's barriers have no effect on me." The demon sneered, her voice bewitching and coquettish. "How very human of you, though, to think you would be safe in your little bubble forever."

"Miss Maha..."

"It's fine. We just need to buy time until others come. It doesn't matter how strong this demon is, she can't fight many of us at once."

"Naive." The demon raised her right hand into the air. "*This* is how you make a proper barrier."

A dome around twenty meters in radius formed centered around the demon. Maha felt the space alter with magic.

"Time works differently in my barrier. No allies of yours will come no matter how long you wait."

Maha made a rare show of expression, scowling for once. The stronger a demon was, the more intelligent they were. She didn't know this demon's strength, but the fact she could speak human tongue showed she would be no weak foe.

"Ruri, find an opening and slip out of the barrier. I need you to call for Ney and the others."

"No! I'll fight too!"

"An opponent like this is still too much for you. Not even I'm confident I can take her."

"B-but..."

"We'll have a fighting chance as long as Ney can get here. Please."

"...Okay." After some convincing, Ruri relented.

"Are you done strategizing? It's not going to do you any good," the demon said. She stood with her arms crossed,

completely unguarded. Maha remained wary, understanding the demon was just that confident in her victory.

"What's your name?" Maha asked.

"My name? Why would you want to know?"

"No particular reason. But I figured I'd ask now since it'll be too late once I've defeated you."

"You talk big. Very well. I'll tell you out of respect for your bravado." The demon lifted her right hand Maha's way. "My name is Tao. Remember it—the name of your killer."

The moment those words left her mouth, Tao's hand extended at an incredible speed. Her target, however, was not Maha, but Ruri.

"Preset 1!"

"On it!"

On Maha's request, I instantly summoned a Spear of Mercury and fired it off, meeting Tao's approaching arm. Some alchemy, like this one, could be used without the full chant. The spear collided with the arm but didn't pierce, merely glancing off. It was enough to divert the arm's trajectory, however. Maha felt something disappear from inside her again.

"Hm. You have some decent reflexes about you."

"I'm your opponent. Leave Ruri alone."

"No can do. The homunculus is the only thing I need. You just happen to be here." Tao's extended hand returned to her. Her grin was sinister, with the glee of a little child tormenting ants.

...She's after Ruri? Maha wondered why as she pulled out a vial filled with shiny crystals. "Metako, I need some crystal spears."

"And the compensation?"

"My memory of the fear I felt against this demon."

"How efficient."

"That which tears to pieces, spear of radiant stone. Come forth and eviscerate my prey." Maha popped the cork off and

horizontally scattered the crystals. Five crystal spears formed where they showered, catching the light. “Spears of Crystal!”

The spears shot forth one by one, rushing at Tao. Each of the five traveled a different trajectory; dodging this should be near impossible.

“Child’s play.” Tao made no move to dodge, however. With only some casual flicks of her arms, she knocked away the spears.

“Haah!”

“...Hm?” Her expression soon clouded slightly, however. Maha had used the blind spot created by the spears to run alongside them, getting close without being seen. Of course, her movements had been enhanced with alchemy. Once in range, she used her dagger to swing at Tao’s neck. “Well, you’re not half-bad.”

“...Dammit! Too shallow.” Maha’s dagger connected directly but only managed a meager scratch. Tao’s neck proved too hard to cut. Maha backed off for the time being, keeping her dagger at the ready.

“Homunculus,” Tao began. “You don’t want to see this one hurt, do you? Why not surrender yourself?”

“Don’t listen to her, Ruri.”

“No, Miss Maha. Let me talk to demon. Just little bit.”

“What? Ruri!”

Ruri gave Maha an apologetic look and addressed the demon. “Miss Tao. I heard demon’s plan to bring ruin to whole world. Even demons. Is that true?”

“That’s not exactly how I’d put it, but you’re basically there,” Tao said.

“Why? What thinking makes you want to do that? Is living not good?”

“Ruri, stop,” Maha warned. “Demons love nothing more than to lead people astray. Their words are poison.”

“Let me ask you two then: do you really see a merit to life? Is this world worth being born into?” Tao asked.

“Huh?” Ruri looked confused.

“Living guarantees suffering. If only one were never born, they wouldn’t have to suffer. Haven't you ever felt such a way?”

“Shut up!” Unable to bear listening any further, Maha attacked. The things Tao said resonated with a part of her, and she couldn’t stand that.

“I see. Perhaps you’d understand better than—”

“I said shut up!”

Tao tried to fly back to create distance, but Maha followed and kept attacking.

“You like close combat. How rare for an alchemist.”

“Just stop talking already!” Maha entered a low stance and slashed, making a wide sweep at Tao’s legs. No matter which leg she tried to move away, Maha would take the other. Or at least, that had been the idea.

“You underestimate me.”

“Wha—”

Maha’s attack was one few could anticipate. Reacting to it having never seen it before should be nearly impossible. But Tao did just that, stomping on the blade and catching it against the ground. Maha was left defenseless.

“Maha!”

“Too slow.”

“Gah…!” Maha let go of her dagger and leapt back, but she couldn’t avoid Tao’s kick in time. She was hit squarely and soared into the air.

“It’s over.” With Maha unable to avoid the strike, Tao pierced her body straight through with her sharp claws.

“Miss Maha!” Ruri shrieked with terror. But the fight wasn’t over.

“What?!”

Maha's body burst into flames the moment Tao pierced her through. This wasn't Tao's doing, however. She took the brunt of the blast, temporarily losing her stability and her vision.

"Playing dirty is my forte." Maha, now behind Tao, stabbed her dagger into Tao's back.

"An illusion?" With admiration in her voice, Tao coughed up blood and turned to look at Maha.

Back when Maha's strike at Tao's legs failed, she had created a decoy double to leap back while she filtered the light to disguise herself and move flat across the ground. Winding up behind her, she had waited for Tao to show an opening and struck.

"Hm. Perhaps I was the one that underestimated you. I don't see the homunculus around. How long has she been gone?"

"Are you still talking?" Icily, Maha dismissed Tao's question. Her grip was still firmly on her dagger. "Metako, Chaining Blaze."

"What will the compensation be?"

"My memory of this moment of victory."

"Very well."

I connected her to the Akashic Record as she asked. She took a hand off her dagger, reached for a vial of sulfur, and broke it against her dagger. "That which burns away, raging otherworldly flames. Come forth and incinerate my prey."

Tao reached for the dagger and tried to pull it out, but it stayed lodged in her body like it had a will of its own. "...A shame."

"Chaining Blaze!"

Flames burst forth from where the dagger was stuck, crawling farther along Tao's body until she was engulfed completely.

"...Well done. But I haven't given up on the homunculus just yet."

"Suit yourself. You're dying here regardless." Maha watched with cold eyes as Tao turned to ash. "...I doubt you'll answer, but I might as well ask: why were you after Ruri?"

“Ha ha. Curious, are we?”

“A little.”

“Hm. I suppose I could tell you as a little reward for your victory. The homunculus will lead me to the Song of the End.”

“What?!”

Tao was almost completely burned away by this point, but she left behind a few more words. “The moment I obtain the homunculus is the moment this world meets its end. Go ahead and struggle all you can.”

With that, she was gone for good. Her barrier vanished at the same moment.

“...What did she mean? Ruri will lead to the Song of the End?”

“Should I look into this, Maha?”

“...Let’s report to Ney first.”

“All right.”

The reinforcements Ruri called for eventually arrived, but news of this event caused a stir. The fact a demon was able to slip past the town’s barrier was cause for concern enough, but the fact homunculi might somehow be the key to the Song of the End shook the foundations of Plan Homunculus. Ney, Diriyah, and the rest of the brains of the force quickly gathered to deliberate countermeasures and a course of action moving forward.

CHAPTER THREE: CHANGE

“The Song of the End?”

“Yeah. It’s something the demons are all frantically trying to put together.”

Several years have passed since we successfully channeled the divine. Battles still raged not far from the town, but humanity was still far in the lead thanks to…*her*. Mankind was taking more territory from the demons by the day.

We sat in her room discussing the state of things. I paid no mind to the messy state of the place; what she told me held all of my attention. “A magic spell that will end the world? That can’t be real…”

“It will be. Having connected to the great power of the Akashic Record, I can tell. The demons haven’t reached the point of being able to cast it yet, but they absolutely will one day. And once they do, the world will meet its end.” She had a grim look on her face.

“Can’t we stop the spell somehow?”

“No. We’ve been in checkmate from the first move.”

“…Its existence in the Record means it must eventually be completed in our world.”

“Right.” She nodded deeply, then made a big stretch. “Even with power equal to a god, some things remain impossible. Makes you wonder what the point of channeling the Akashic Record even was.”

It wasn’t like her to be so negative. “Why not look into the Record for something we could do?” I suggested.

“Impossible. You said it yourself when we first set upon this path. The human form can’t handle the strain of searching the

Record that deeply.”

“I have an idea for that.”

“Denied.”

“…I haven’t even told you what it is yet.”

“It’s written on your face. I can tell you’ve come up with something insane.”

“It’s what mankind needs.”

“…Fine. I’ll be gracious and at least hear you out.” She fixed her posture and sat up in her chair.

“If it’s too much for the human form to bear, then we simply need to abandon the human form.”

“…By reducing an individual to pure concept?”

“Right.”

“I see. If one were nothing but energy, they would be able to search the Akashic Record without a problem. It’s not a bad move.” She was surprisingly on board with the idea.

“You’re not against it?” I asked.

“Why would I be? It’s a good plan. I didn’t think you of all people would suggest it, though.”

“I-I see. I thought you would be at least a little against it… I’m kind of disappointed to be honest.”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

The two of us exchanged looks, clearly misunderstanding something. Eventually we wizened up and realized where we weren’t seeing eye to eye.

“…Just to be sure,” she began, “but the one to undergo this process would be me, right?”

“What are you saying? It would be me.”

“Don’t be stupid!”

“There’s nothing stupid about it.”

The two of us argued afterward, neither budging an inch. One of us had to go through with this, but neither of us wanted it to be the other. In the end, we failed to reach a consensus.

“...This is a waste of time,” she said.

“I concur.”

Things were dicey between us for a while thereafter. The others at the Base thought we were just having another one of our lovers’ spats, but it was serious. We both knew the fate of humanity and the world lay upon our shoulders.

...Although, looking back on it, it might have really just been an ordinary lovers’ spat.

◆◇◆◇◆

“You’re scrapping Plan Homunculus?!” Maha exclaimed, surprisingly raising her voice. Several days had passed since we fought the demon Tao, and we were gathered in the meeting room.

“That’s right,” Diriyah said dryly. Ney watched the two without saying a word.

After the fight with Tao, the brains of Al-kimiya gathered to discuss their course of action moving forward. They finally reached a conclusion and were going to make an announcement today. As Maha was Ruri’s instructor, she was being told ahead of time, but the inhumanity of their decision infuriated her.

Metako, your memories are leaking out again.

“Oh? I apologize.”

It’s fine, but now really isn’t a good time. After communicating such to me, Maha returned to questioning Diriyah, her voice slightly emotional. “Why? I don’t understand.”

“You of all people should know why. You reported it yourself. The demons want Ruri as the key to the Song of the End.”

Diriyah's voice remained calm. She didn't sound particularly apologetic, however. "Remind me, what was Metako's analysis?"

"...The existence of a homunculus has opened something resembling a hole in the world, connecting Ruri to the Akashic Record. But Metako's seal doesn't cover her, meaning the demons have a high possibility of obtaining the Song of the End if they can get their hands on Ruri."

This analysis came about after Ney and the others had Maha ask me to look into this issue. As I was an interface for the Akashic Record, I could access any and every piece of information there was to know in this world. But the scope of the Akashic Record was too great for my formerly human self to grasp at once, so I needed a specific query to look into anything. That was why I couldn't tell anyone this information sooner.

"Right. Not realizing that was possibly a mistake on my part. But that doesn't mean it isn't too late to fix things by scrapping the plan," Diriyah said.

"But you don't have to go as far as disposing of Ruri! She's alive, just like the rest of us." That point alone was what Maha couldn't accept. She could barely get behind just the plan being scrapped, but she drew the line at Ruri being scrapped with it.

"The matter is already decided," Diriyah said with a tone of finality.

"Don't give me that. Ruri has had a right to live from the moment she came into this world. It doesn't matter if she's a homunculus. It's not up to us to decide whether she should live or die."

"Have you got any brighter ideas then? It's not like we can leave a hole to the end of the world lying around."

"Isn't coming up with brighter ideas your job?"

Diriyah kept trying to bring the topic to a close, but Maha wouldn't back down. The desperation in Maha's expression made it seem like she was arguing for more than ethical reasons, so Diriyah changed her tone and asked, "What're you so worked up about? I thought you would welcome this decision."

"...What?"

"You were against Project Homunculus, weren't you? You should be overjoyed that we're terminating it." Diriyah scoffed. Maha finally lost her patience at that.

"Those you bring into this world are not tools or toys you can do with as you please!" she shouted, dropping her mask of calm. Diriyah's eyes shot wide. "It'd be one thing if it were a non-thinking, inorganic creature like a golem, but she's not. She has a heart. You can't just order something with a heart, something that feels pain and fears death, to die when it suits you!"

"...Are you talking about yourself here?" Diriyah thought she finally understood why Maha was kicking up such a fuss. But Maha shook her head.

"This isn't about me. I've already accepted that I have no choice but to fight. But has Ruri been given a chance to accept her fate? Does she even know you all want to dispose of her?"

That question seemed to hit a nerve for Diriyah, causing her to grimace.

Maha continued. "Even if she's not human, you have a responsibility as the one who brought her into this world. And while I might not know what that responsibility entails, I know it can't possibly include ignoring her thoughts and feelings and deciding her future for her."

"...You've certainly got a lot to say," Diriyah said, perhaps as her final act of resistance.

Maha was unfazed. "Anyone would if you came to them with this nonsense."

"All right. I understand what you mean to say," Diriyah said. "But it's not like I made this decision lightly. Preventing the Song of the End is humanity's greatest priority. What are we supposed to do about that?"

"Can't we just put another seal on it?"

"It's not that easy. Your friend Metako had to offer up her entire existence just to create the one we have now."

I was being treated like a bigger deal than I really was, but what Diriyah said was about correct. In the past, there was an urgent need to sever the connection between the demons and the Song of the End. I just so happened to be experienced in converting things, so I turned myself into raw energy, became an interface between the Akashic Record and the world, and successfully sealed away the spell.

“If we know how to do it, then I don’t mind being the one,” Maha offered.

“No.” Diriyah refused immediately as though she knew Maha would say just that.

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

“That’s not a reason.”

“Just forget it. That’s an order.”

“I refuse.”

This was probably the first time Maha had ever disobeyed an order. She has treated orders as absolute her whole life. She hadn’t refused once, not even when she was ordered by her own mother to go to war, to fight battles with no hope of return, to burn her comrades with her own hand—she obeyed it all. Now, for the first time in her life, she was acting out of her own will.

“That’s enough, you two. Goodness… How can you both be such poor communicators?” Ney finally stepped in between the two, looking exasperated by them both. “Maha, my dear. I understand how you feel. But do you really not understand why Diriyah made the decision to scrap Plan Homunculus?”

“I do not,” Maha answered.

“…I suppose that’s partially Diriyah’s fault. But for you to not even have the slightest inkling…” Ney sighed.

“What are you getting at?” Maha questioned, growing irritated with how Ney was beating around the bush. It didn’t help that it sounded like Ney was faulting her for something too. Her irritation peaking, Maha said, “Spell it out for me already.”

“Miss Maha. Mother Diriyah not want to lose you.” A cute, clear voice calmed Maha down at once.

“Ruri…?”

“You are Mother Diriyah’s only daughter, her own flesh and blood. It makes sense to end Plan Homunculus when only other option is sacrificing you. Any mother would make same choice.” Ruri smiled sweetly.

Maha recoiled. “Do you have any idea what you’re saying?”

“Of course. Mother Diriyah chose you over me. And I think her choice correct.” She said it like it was nothing and didn’t seem to be putting on a brave front. She genuinely believed this was what was right. “I am homunculus. Made to be useful to humans. It would be backwards for you to die.”

“You can’t be serious… You’re fine with this? Being brought into this world, then disposed of, all for the selfish reasons of others…is that not insane?!” Maha practically shouted her question, as though it were her own existence on the line. But Ruri remained calm.

“I am sad. But I don’t think it’s insane. This is what I was made for.” She even smiled. “I haven’t lived long. But I know living is good. Demons must be stopped for people to live. That is why I don’t mind dying.”

Her words pierced Maha’s heart.

“…Are you satisfied, Maha? She’s come to a decision herself. What right do you have to object?” Diriyah said. She seemed to not expect this development, looking a bit put off. But she was right. If Ruri herself accepted her fate, then nothing Maha said from this point mattered.

“…No.”

“What?” Diriyah said.

“I don’t accept it.”

“You… What?”

“Maha…” Ney said with worry.

“Miss Maha?” Ruri said.

Maha looked determined, like she had resolved herself to do something. “If you’re going to get rid of Ruri, then I’ll relinquish my usage rights of Metako.”

“You’ll *what*?!”

“Miss Maha?!”

Diriyah and Ruri paled. Maha giving up her usage rights of me was no different than humanity losing one of its strongest fighters.

“You don’t think a threat like that will go unpunished, do you?” Diriyah warned.

“I’ve fought for humanity all these years. My accomplishments aren’t few. I’m sure some strong-armed dealmaking can be overlooked.”

“...Hmph.”

“Just give me some time, Mother.” With a serious look, Maha approached Ruri and took her hand.

“Miss Maha?”

“Metako, I want you to search the Akashic Record for me.”

“I can do that. What information do you need?”

“A way to reseal the Song of the End that doesn’t involve disposing of Ruri.”

“Understood. I’m sure you’re aware, but searching for a specific solution requires a hefty price.”

“Of course. I’ll offer up the memories of all the food I’ve ever enjoyed.”

“Very well then.”

After receiving the compensation, I began sifting through the massive ocean of information that was the Akashic Record. It was a herculean task, like scouring a desert for a single grain of sand, but if anyone could do it, it was I, Metako.

“…Search complete. To summarize, I believe expanding my seal is our best option.”

“Elaborate.”

“While I function as an interface for humanity, I am also sealing access to the Song of the End, apart from the hole made by the existence of a homunculus.”

“Right.”

“We could expand my sealing range to cover this hole.”

Maha relayed my explanation to Diriyah, Ney, and Ruri.

“Is that even possible?” Diriyah asked.

“It is. For me.”

“…So she says,” Maha conveyed.

“Hmm. Well, if Metako says so,” Ney said.

“You’re willing to trust her just like that?” Diriyah questioned.

“She’s an alchemist who’s drawn closer to the almighty power than any of us. I believe her words carry weight.”

“…Hmph.” Diriyah seemed dissatisfied and scoffed, but for the time being it seemed everyone was on board. Disaster was averted.

“But I won’t be able to do anything right away. Some preparations are in order.”

“Just say the word. We’ll get what you need,” Maha said.

“The preparation I have in mind isn’t a physical ‘thing.’ I need you to raise Ruri’s abilities.”

“Ruri’s abilities?”

“Me?”

Maha and Ruri both looked puzzled. Their matching baffled faces showed how alike they looked.

“I’ll need Ruri to act as a beacon when I attempt to seal the hole. For this, she’ll have to strengthen her spirit. At present, her spirit

is too weak for me to find the path to homunculi within the Akashic Record."

"So, what do we need to do?"

"Nothing special. Just the same thing you've been doing."

"Meaning?"

"Please continue to work Ruri to the bone."

"Ah. All right." Maha eagerly accepted, figuring that sounded simple enough. If anything, the one who had her work cut out for her was Ruri.

"That's it?" asked the girl. Even she seemed to have no problem with it.

"Hold on, you can't just decide these things unilaterally." Diriyah found her chance to cut in then. As vice-captain, she was right about there being a chain of command, but...

"I see no problem with it. Let them try." Ney, the captain, had the final say.

"Ney! You can't be serious about taking a risk this big!"

"Who says there's a risk? At any rate, your daughters seem to have already made up their mind."

Maha and Ruri returned a nod. For Maha, this was the only way forward without having to deal with the insanity the one who brought her into this world proposed. For Ruri, this was simply the only way she didn't die...even if it meant some hard toiling in her near future.

Diriyah made a grandiose sigh. "...Ugh. All right, do what you want. But don't forget to make periodic reports. We'll do what we can to help out too."

"...Huh?" Maha said.

"It's not like we adults want to just twiddle our thumbs and watch you kids do all the work. Who do you think we are?"

"...Mother..."

"Thank you Mother Diriyah!"

With that, Plan Homunculus was temporarily suspended, and the new Operation Super Ruri (coined by yours truly!) commenced.

◆◇◆◇◆

“Damn… Three slipped through!”

“All yours, Ruri.”

“Yes! On it!”

Outside of town, on a plain bordering demon territory, Maha, Ney, and Ruri engaged in combat with around fifteen demons. Maha took the front with Ruri in the rear while Ney watched and helped where she was needed. This too was part of Ruri’s training.

Fifteen wasn’t a small band, but they couldn’t all attack at once. Maha dexterously positioned herself on the battlefield, dipping in and out of range, fighting no more than a few enemies at a time. However, limiting herself like that meant some would occasionally get past. Three demons circumvented her now and charged for Ruri. The girl took a deep breath and raised an arm toward them.

“That which crushes, ferocious fangs of the dragon. Come forth and devour my prey—Dragon’s Maw!”

Ruri’s chant brought forth a great mouth of stone from the ground that clamped down on the demons, crushing them. This was an alchemy that utilized earth, similar to golems.

“My! Not bad, Ruri,” Ney said.

“Thank you. Miss Maha! Using wide-range alchemy next!”

“Go for it!” Maha replied without looking back, but she seemed to understand what Ruri was up to.

“You’re basically on the same wavelength now. Since when did you two get so close?” I teased.

“I’m busy right now, so be quiet.”

“Aww. Don’t be such a wet blanket.”

Work-mode Maha was too serious to poke any fun at. Begrudgingly, I let her focus and watched on quietly. She cut down another demon, then moved to tangle with the remaining dozen, dancing around them with light steps. While they were kept busy, Ruri, standing in the rear, grabbed a vial from her hip and threw it forward.

“That which is hollow inside, vessel of black rot. Come forth and putrefy my prey!”

The vial traced an arc in the air before smashing against the ground, releasing powdered rust. A pitch black ring began to form around Maha and the demons. Maha was waiting for this moment and charged, tackling a few demons further into the center of the ring before quickly retreating herself.

“Ruri, now!”

“Jar of Decay!”

The pitch black ring around the demons began to shrink towards the center. As it passed through them, their bodies began to crumble like they were turning to rust. The ring eventually shrunk to a point, leaving only piles of unidentifiable organic mass in its wake.

“Splendid. Well done to you both.” Ney clapped her hands and praised the two. She was brought along for insurance but wasn’t even needed for this pack of demons.

“This isn’t anything worth celebrating. You would’ve been able to annihilate them yourself in half the time, Ney,” said Maha with her customary low self-esteem.

“Wooow! Captain Ney must be strong! Like that time we played tag.” Ruri, on the other hand, was simply impressed by how strong Ney sounded.

“Want to find out just how strong I am? Let’s have ourselves a little mock battle,” Ney said.

“Wait, what?”

“With you? Captain Ney?”

“Why not?” From empty space, she drew out a crude, massive blade resembling a hunk of metal. The sight of such a petite woman wielding that massive weapon would never not be jarring, but I definitely saw the appeal. Every woman would love nothing more than to swing around a giant sword at least once in their life, I’m sure. It’s just cool, you know?

“How about it, Ruri?” Ney asked.

“I want to try fighting you. To test myself, yes. But to see how strong you are, too.”

“Well said. How about you then, Maha?”

“I don’t know…” Maha didn’t seem nearly as enthused as Ruri.

“How about I throw a prize in the mix?” Ney suggested. “If you two win, I’ll make dinner tonight.”

“Let’s do it.”

“No hesitation?!” Ruri exclaimed.

“Ney’s cooking is…sensational.”

“Th-that good?”

Though you wouldn’t guess it from how cold and aloof she acted, Maha was a bit of a chowhound and was crazy about Ney’s food. She recently offered up her memories of all the food she’d ever enjoyed, so she was probably ravenous for some good food right around now.

“In exchange,” Ney continued. “If I win, you’ll have to do one thing I ask.”

“…Ugh.” Maha sighed for the third time that day. It was understandable; she had an idea of what Ney’s request was likely to be.

“Is something wrong, Miss Maha?” Ruri asked.

“It’s nothing. Let’s do this.”

“Okay!”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll take you both on at once. Don’t hold back on me now.” Ney spun around and darted off.

“Whoa…” They hadn’t even begun and Ruri was already in awe. She thought to attack while Ney had her back turned—audacious little thing, that homunculus—but Ney showed no openings even from behind.

“This should be far enough. Let’s begin.” Ney stood with her massive blade resting on her shoulder and rooted herself. As for the two girls…

“Let’s go with the same positioning as before. I’ll take the front, you’ll stay back,” Maha said, her gaze fixed on Ney as she adjusted her glasses.

“Okay!”

“I would normally say play it safe here…but that probably won’t be enough against Ney.”

“What you mean?”

“She can read minds.”

“What?!” Ruri exclaimed. “Th-then how we beat her?”

“Do you know chess?”

“I do.”

“It’s kind of like that. We’ll checkmate her. Attack her in a way she can’t avoid.”

“O-oh… I’ll try my best.”

With their discussion over, Maha and Ruri readied themselves. The first to move was Maha. Warily, she inched forward at a crawl.

“…You’re taking too long. I’ll start,” Ney said.

The flow of time seemed to stop for a moment. Even Ruri, watching from behind, couldn’t believe her eyes. Ney had been several meters in front of Maha, when suddenly she was swinging her massive blade down. Maha narrowly managed to keep sight of her and tried to meet the sword’s trajectory with her dagger. However, the sword was too heavy; blocking normally would only

cause the dagger to shatter. So instead, Maha didn't fully block the blade, but instead deflected its path to the side just enough.

"Hmph. I'll give you eighty points out of a hundred for that," Ney said, taking a step back to get some distance.

"Your speed is as ridiculous as ever." Maha stepped in, following Ney's retreat.

"How will you deal with this?" Ney used her sword's length to bat at Maha's legs—the same move Maha had used against Tao. This technique was something Maha had learned from Ney to begin with. Tao had stopped this technique by stepping on the blade and pressing it against the ground, but Maha wasn't heavy enough to attempt the same here. Instead, she dropped low and stuck her dagger into the ground to block the attack fully.

"Not bad. Seventy points."

"I've known you long enough to know all your moves," Maha said coldly. She pulled her dagger from the ground and slashed upwards.

"Sorry, but that's zero points. Too obvious." Ney ducked under the slash and swung at Maha's abdomen, taking advantage of Maha's vulnerability after attacking.

"Spear of Mercury!"

"Ah, indeed. There were two of you, weren't there?" A spear came flying in to cover Maha's opening. Ney slashed it apart with her sword and grinned. "I take it back. Seventy points."

"Well, ain't that kind of you!" Maha stepped in close again, stabbing with her dagger. This attack from up close with little wind up was aimed squarely at Ney's center; dodging it should prove difficult.

"Thirty points. To aim for my core leaves your follow-up moves hard to read. You make things difficult for your support." Ney brought her sword up and narrowly blocked the tip of Maha's dagger, repelling it. Maha's dagger should've looked like nothing more than an approaching point from Ney's perspective. For her to block it, and with the edge of her blade, not the flat, was absurdity.

“You sure can talk.”

“Well, ‘tis training for you two. Come now, you can try a little harder than that.”

“Oh, we’re just getting started!” Maha leapt back and slid low against the ground. A good deal of space opened up between her and Ney.

“Blast Wave!” Ruri shouted. There was a burst from between Maha and Ney. Air rushed past them both, causing Ney to stagger. But the low center of gravity afforded her by her stance helped Maha remain stable.

“We’ve got you!” Maha shouted as she attacked.

“Naive.”

Instead of trying to right herself, Ney allowed herself to fall backward, kicking a leg up as she did so and blocking Maha’s all-out attack with a foot. There was a sharp *clank* as Maha’s dagger made contact with something hard in Ney’s shoes. Ney let her momentum roll her backwards, then stood upright and brushed the dust off her clothes.

“Your teamwork still needs work. Let me show you what it really means to put someone in checkmate, as you so elegantly put it.” She smiled sweetly as she pulled her massive sword back. “Ruri, I’m about to attack Maha from overhead.”



“Huh?” Ruri said. Maha’s eyes shot wide.

“React accordingly or she might get hurt, okay? Maha, you just stand there and brace yourself.” Without waiting for a reply, Ney vanished.

“Activating automatic defenses. Diamond Shield.”

The next instant, Ney appeared behind Maha already swinging down her sword. Maha felt the impact a second later.

“Gah…!”

Before she knew it, Maha was flying through the air. Most of the force was blocked by me, but the bit I couldn’t prevent blew her away. Her trajectory had her flying right towards Ruri.

“Huh? U-ummmm?!” Greatly flustered and without any time to think, Ruri held her arms out to try and catch Maha.

“And that’s the match.” Ney caught Maha easily with one hand and flicked Ruri on the forehead with the other. Ruri stared blankly into space, still not sure what happened.

“…You win,” Maha reluctantly resigned.

“…Aww.” Ruri hung her head.

“Ha ha! You’re both still too green to be a threat to me!” In contrast to the losers, Ney was in high spirits. “It wasn’t the worst performance, but your teamwork is still crude in many areas.”

“That can’t be helped. Ruri and I haven’t been fighting together for very long,” said Maha.

“Perhaps, but the demons won’t be so generous as to wait around for you two to be ready.”

“Um, are there really demons so strong we need to worry?” Ruri asked.

“‘Tis possible. A demon that could slip through the town’s barrier existed, did it not?” Ney had the two sit down. “Your plan to ‘checkmate’ me was decent. But you need a sure-kill technique to pull that off.”

“A sure-kill technique…?”

“Like what?”

Maha and Ruri cocked their heads to the side. Ney cackled over how similar they were and continued. “My overhead swing just now is one of my sure-kill techniques. Something trained and polished to the point of becoming a fight ender. A finisher, you could say. That’s what you two need.”

“Hmm…”

“Okay…”

The two girls began to rack their brains.

“Well, unlike me, you two are a team. You should come up with a technique you can do together.” Bringing things to a close there, Ney returned her massive sword to the empty space she pulled it from. “Now then. Let us discuss my prize for winning.”

“Ugh… All right. A deal’s a deal.” Maha sighed for the fourth time that day, a defeated look on her face.

“What do you want?” Ruri asked with pure curiosity. Come to think of it, this would be a first for her.

“Well, there’s nothing like a good bath after working out.”

◆◇◆◇◆

“Don’t just stand there, you two. Get in before you catch a cold.”

Maha and Ruri stood in a daze at the entrance, bath towels wrapped around their bodies. Ney had entered before them and was already washing away. The two girls shared a look and sighed, then reluctantly entered the bathing area.

This was Al-kimiya’s exclusive shared bath. It had two large bath areas with different temperatures, both meant for relaxation, and a body-washing area. Soap was provided, and an alchemically-run shower dispensed hot water.

Maha had left her glasses in her room as they would just fog up. Those with very poor eyesight generally took their glasses with them into the baths, but Maha had no need.

“Ruri, you already know how the baths work, right?” Maha asked.

“Yes. Wash body first. Then shared baths.”

“Right. Let’s wash up then.”

“Yes!”

They sat on either side of Ney, foamed up the soap, and began scrubbing their bodies. They say you can glean some things about someone’s character from where they start washing themselves; Maha began with her arms, and Ruri with her hair.

“Hm. Your bodies are awfully…meager, huh?” Ney muttered. Having finished washing herself, she began sizing the two girls up.

“I could say the same about you,” Maha said.

“Yeah.” Ruri nodded.

“Who’re you calling a loli?!” It was a fact that Ney’s body was scrawnier than even Ruri’s.

“…I’m still growing, anyway,” Maha said. “My mother has a good figure too. So I have nothing to be worried about.”

“Oh. Then me too,” Ruri said.

The two sounded boastful, but they were only joking with Ney, of course. Honestly, the three of them were fine as they were. Although they were not particularly well-endowed, their skin was fair, and they had more than enough womanly charm. I would even venture to say they were a treat for the eyes… Eheh, heh heh… Ah—ahem. Pardon.

“Is that so?” Ney asked. “From what I recall, Diriyah was already as filled out as she is now by the time she was your age.”

Maha froze stiff, her expression flat.

“M-Miss Maha. I-It’s okay! Everyone grow different rate!” said Ruri encouragingly.

“Must be nice, Ruri… To still have all that potential…” Maha said, her expression even more vacant than usual.

“Ahhhh! Miss Maha in despair!” Ruri shouted.

“Why not use alchemy to cheat a little?” I suggested.

“…I’m not paying compensation for something so meaningless.”

“Did you perhaps hesitate just now?”

“Shut up.”

By now, you might be starting to wonder just how I’m here in the baths. The answer is fairly simple: The alchemy tome I communicate through is waterproofed. How about that!

After washing their bodies, all three got in one of the big baths. Ruri took a big sigh as she sank in, then asked, “Captain Ney. Why choose come to baths with everyone for reward?”

“Ney likes going to big baths like these,” Maha answered. “Especially with cute girls.”

“Are you implying that you think you’re cute?” joked Ney.

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Aha ha ha!”

Ruri smiled wryly at their exchange. “You two are very close. Have you known each other long?”

“Oh, we’ve been a couple for years and years,” Ney said.

“Huh?! Really?!” Ruri exclaimed.

“Don’t believe everything she says,” Maha chided. “But yes, we have known each other for a long time.”

“Indeed. You were born and raised here at the Base, after all,” said Ney.

“There’s also the fact my mother didn’t bother to raise me, so you were more like my actual mother.”

Ney’s expression turned nostalgic, as though recalling the past. In contrast, Maha’s turned glum. Ruri looked between them both, confused why there was such a difference between them. Noticing that, Ney smiled wryly and explained, “Diriyah devoted everything she had to her alchemy research. She even went as far as to use Maha, her own daughter, as a test subject. The reason

Maha can interface at all with Metako is because the experiments conducted on her changed her to the point of making them compatible."

"Oh… I see," Ruri said. For the first time I'd seen, her expression seemed angry as she thought about Diriyah. It was a bit of a surprise considering she had smiled even when hearing she was to be disposed of.

"I can't say whether the things Diriyah did and didn't do are right or wrong, but 'tis a fact that Maha is stronger because of it. She's the ace of Al-kimiya," Ney said.

"Not that I wanted to be."

"Miss Maha…"

I couldn't see Maha's expression as she hung her head, but her voice was becoming flatter and more dispirited by the minute. Ruri looked at her with worry.

"'Tis true. But if you weren't so strong, the Base would have long been lost to the demons," said Ney. "The world would be over as well at that point. I understand how you feel, but Diriyah's way of doing things is not wholly wrong."

"I know," said Maha weakly. Irritation could faintly be heard in her voice.

"Miss Maha, do you hate Mother Diriyah?" Ruri asked. Ney and Maha had been dancing around that exact question, but Ruri brought it up like it was nothing. Her child-like innocence was cruel at times.

"…I don't know. I used to, I think. But now I just don't know."

"Perhaps you've grown up then, Maha," Ney said.

"I don't think it's that. I think I'm just…fed up thinking about it. Hating my mother isn't going to help me kill any demons."

"M-Miss Maha?" Ruri said, a bit worried.

"Killing demons has become my only reason for being. I was born for it, live to keep doing it…and I'll likely keep doing it for as long as I breathe." Maha brought her hand up from under the

water and stared at it. It was rough and balled up tight. But something soft moved to hold it. “...Ruri?”

Gently wrapping Maha’s hands was both of Ruri’s own, warmed by the bath. Ruri said, “You tried best. But I feel you regret how you lived.”

“...I don’t regret anything,” Maha said, quickly averting her gaze. Ruri’s sincere eyes were too much for her to bear.

Earnestly, Ruri continued, “No. Killing demons can’t be everything. What you really want? Please. Tell me.”

Something that had been dormant for a long time in the depths of Maha’s heart began to stir. Though she tried to shut out everything, Ruri wouldn’t let her, her strong reasoning shining through. Maha stood up and moved to leave. “...The heat’s getting to me. I’ll head out first.”

“Miss Maha...”

“Go on ahead. The two of us will linger a little longer. We’ll wash Metako for you while we’re at it,” Ney said. She and Ruri watched as Maha disappeared behind the steam. “Forgive her, Ruri. She didn’t mean to snub you.”

“N-no, it’s okay. But... Oh... Maybe I said too much.”

“...You know, there was a time Maha told me that living just wasn’t worth it and that she wished she had never been brought into this world.” Just recalling the event seemed to pain Ney.

“Oh no...” Ruri seemed speechless.

“It’s hard to blame her given her circumstances. There are her troubles with her mother for starters, and then the fact that everybody only wants her to fight. She’s since found a reason to live through being a soldier, but put another way, you could say she’s come to see the rest of herself as worthless.”

“But there’s more to Miss Maha than fighting! Miss Maha kind! It’s cute how she eats a lot! She paints really well!” Ruri uncharacteristically raised her voice in protest.

Ney nodded proudly. “You’ve been seeing her for who she truly is. Thank you. I feel the same way, of course. The problem is

Maha doesn’t see herself that way.”

“…Oh.”

“Nobody is born into this world by choice. That’s why we all have to find our own meaning for our existence. But Maha hasn't been given the time to search for her own meaning. That’s why your arrival has shaken her so much.”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yes, my dear. For better or worse, your presence has had a big effect on Maha. You threaten to rob her of the only identity she clung to, but you’re too sweet a girl for her to hate.”

“I wouldn’t—”

“I know. You don’t mean to do anything bad. But your arrival spells something for Maha that she can neither fully acknowledge nor ignore.”

After learning about how Maha felt from the very one that raised her, Ruri frowned. “I’m not very smart. I can’t understand difficult things.”

“…I see.”

“But…”

Ney looked over, sensing a spark of determination in the small girl.

“But I want to see Miss Maha smile. Not fake smile or cold smile she make while fighting. I want to see her smile from heart.”

“…Is that so? Who knows, you might just be the one to do it.”

“I will try!”

Maha knew nothing of this conversation. She would probably get angry and tell them to mind their own business if she heard about it. But this conversation was the beginning of a change within Ruri. Her vague image of Maha as someone resembling an older sister began to shift into a more concrete image of someone she wanted to see smile.

◆◇◆◇◆

“...You want us to do odd jobs?”

“That’s right.”

After another day of Maha training Ruri, Ney called for the two of them. Apparently the town the Base was situated in had a dire labor shortage, and they needed anyone they could get to help out.

“I thought fighting demons was our only duty,” said Maha.

“Well, it is, but we rely on the town to provide for us, so we must do our fair share as well.”

“...Fine. What needs to be done?”

“Quite a bit. Picking up trash in the slum, repairing the fields ruined by demons, helping deliver a baby at the convent—”

Maha figured she would just go with picking up trash, but then Ruri blurted, “Baby?!”

“What’s this? Are you interested in helping with childbirth, Ruri?” Ney asked.

“Yes. I haven’t seen baby before.” Her eyes shone with curiosity. Maha had a feeling this was going to be a hassle.

According to Ney, a sister had sent over the request for help as an expectant mother was going into labor.

Maha said, “But Ney, I have no idea how to deliver—”

“I never said you would have to do the delivery itself. The convent just needs extra hands around while the nuns are busy.”

“Miss Maha. I want to see baby,” Ruri said.

“Childbirth is difficult. There’s no guarantee you’ll see one.”

“But there is chance!”

“Sounds like it’s settled. Ask the nuns what to do when you get there.” Saying that, Ney practically chased the two out of the

Base, seeing them off at the entrance. Maha was still in a daze when she and Ruri arrived at the convent.

Nuns hurried this way and that, too busy to attend to the pair. Eventually one finally noticed their presence and called out to them. “Thank you for coming. I hate to put you two to work so soon, but we need all the help we can get. Could you prepare some clean towels and hot water? As much as you can if possible.”

“Sure,” Maha said.

“Once that’s done, please attend to the children. I’m sure they’re worried.”

“Understood!” said Ruri.

Preparing the hot water was relatively easy. Maha and Ruri were alchemists, and creating distilled water was the most basic of the basics. They had no trouble at all heating up the water. For the towels, they were able to synthesize the plants growing in the courtyard.

The real problem came afterward.

“You think everything will be okay?”

“Sure sounds painful…”

The convent was by no means large. Even though the delivery was happening behind closed doors, the anguished wailing of the mother still reached the children gathered in the common room. Childbirth was difficult, and a single mishap could mean death. It was natural that the children should worry.

“It’ll be okay. Don’t worry.” Maha tried her best to reassure the children, but she wasn’t accomplishing much. The intermittent wails continued to make them tense.

“Everyone. Let’s pray,” Ruri suddenly suggested. She got on one knee and brought her hands together, closing her eyes. “Let’s pray for baby to be born safe. I’m sure things be okay if we all do together.”

The children looked at one another for a few moments, unsure, but one by one they lined up on Ruri’s sides and joined her.

“You can do it…”

“Just a little more…”

“May your child be born safely.”

Their expressions turned focused. Having them attempt something positive in this situation proved to be more helpful than just insisting things would be okay. It definitely helped that prayer was a daily ritual in their lives, although I wondered if Ruri had even considered that fact.

After a moment’s hesitation, Maha knelt and joined them. She was unsure if she had a right to pray with them. She was someone who wished she hadn’t been born herself, and she had doubts about whether another life being introduced into this terrible world was even a good thing. But right now, in this moment, her personal beliefs seemed small in the face of the pain the mother was enduring to bear her child, and of the wholehearted prayers of so many children wishing them well.

They prayed for what felt like forever.

“…Aahh. Waaah…”

Eventually they heard the faint but firm cry of a baby.

“It’s born!”

“The baby was born safely!”

“It’s here! It’s here!”

The children joined hands and rejoiced. Ruri celebrated with them as well, as did Maha.

A nun appeared and called out to the children, her habit slightly dirty with blood from delivery. “Everyone, please wash your hands, gargle, then come over here.” It seemed she wanted to show them all the newborn, so Maha and Ruri joined as well.

The smell of blood was thick in the delivery room. It was a smell Maha had long grown accustomed to, but this time it was not the smell of death, but of life. A strange feeling came over her. Just then, the nun approached, holding something wrapped in a cloth.

It was the baby. Its eyes lay closed, its umbilical cord freshly cut. It dozed peacefully, swaddled tightly in its cloth. The children looked at it in awe.

“Want to try holding her?” the nun said, looking at Maha.

“Huh?”

“She can’t hold her neck up yet, so be sure to support it.”

“Huh? Uh. What?”

Still flustered, Maha was handed the baby. She took great care though, holding the baby just as the nun instructed to ensure she didn’t drop her.

“Oh…” It hit her hard then: There was a life, one born only moments ago, in her arms. The baby was still a weak little thing, unable to even open her eyes, but she already had nails grown on her tiny, little hands and was unmistakably, undeniably alive. She couldn’t have been more than a few kilograms, but Maha felt the great weight of the baby’s small life clearly.

The baby suddenly began to cry, her voice strong and vigorous.

“Ah…” Maha only then realized tears were streaming down her own face. She didn’t know why she was crying. But her spirit did not feel dejected.

“It’s cute.” From Maha’s side, Ruri looked at the baby as well. She must have noticed Maha’s tears, but she said nothing of them and simply smiled.

Unable to speak, Maha could only nod in reply. In her arms, a new life continued to loudly cry.

CHAPTER FOUR: BETRAYAL

Our little spat over which of us would sacrifice our material form continued longer than expected. Today we were being sent to the front lines to fight demons again. The battle was to be heavily in our favor, yet I still couldn't help but worry about her. The same seemed to be true for her, as our eyes met by chance again and again. We would quickly avert our gazes each time, then after a while catch our eyes meeting again, look away, and so on.

What am I even doing... I wasn't a child anymore. In fact, I was at an age people once used to consider *having* a child, though that was long ago. But there was something about her that always managed to draw out the more childish side of me.

It's not that I don't understand how she feels. Having channeled the Akashic Record, she was already fairly removed from humanity as is. She probably thought it would only be a small step further to convert herself to energy. But I believed that to be a poor move.

She was needed to lead humanity hereafter and stop the advance of the demons. If she were converted into energy, if she left the physical world, the blow to humanity's forces would be significant. It made more sense for me to be the one to handle things in the immaterial world.

Ugh. But she's so stubborn, that girl. She probably understood what needed to happen. I was the only logical choice. But her heart wouldn't accept it. I guess that was something I should be happy about.

...She's starting to lose her humanity. How much time is left? It was probably a side effect of her channeling the Akashic Record. Though her body was still human, she was close to being omnipotent and omniscient. I could see the equilibrium of her

spirit slipping. She was becoming apathetic to the world around her.

Being all-capable and all-knowing meant there didn't need to be a distinction between the self and the other. She probably felt an unimaginable loneliness right about now. She hadn't grown tired of others. The concept of "others" had simply stopped applying to her.

She still treated me as an "other," however. I felt a little proud to know I was special to her, but I was more afraid than anything, afraid of the moment that would no longer be the case.

To use an example she would love, it's like losing opponents to play chess with. I glanced her way and saw her face pale. I wondered what was wrong and—

"[redacted]!"

I heard someone call my name in the distance. Coming to my senses, I found myself on the ground. Only then, far too late to matter, did I understand I had been hit by a demon.

◆◇◆◇◆

"Hmm… Was there anything else we needed to buy, dears?"

"I'm pretty sure we have everything on the shopping list."

"Miss Maha, I can still hold more."

Three weeks had passed since Ruri's training began. Her growth had been rapid; she could already beat the strongest of Maha's golems fairly reliably. They had to take a break from training eventually, however, so today Ney, Maha, and Ruri were in town to do some shopping.

The town was left weary by the ongoing war against the demons, but the marketplace remained as lively as ever. It would be evening soon, so many people buying food for dinner could be seen, as well as hawkers aiming to flag those same people down.

Metako…

“I apologize. My control over my memories hasn’t been the best as of late.”

Get it together. Maha put her shopping list away with a frown as she complained. “Ah.”

The paper bag in her arms bumped her glasses, causing them to fall. She couldn’t bend over and pick them up as her arms were full.

“Oh no! Here, Miss Maha,” Ruri said.

“Thank you.” Maha took the glasses and put them back on.

“My, how devoted. What a good wife she makes.”

“She’s not my wife.”

“Oh, come on. You like her, don’t you.”

“She is a junior work colleague of mine. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I found her reply a bit interesting. *“Oh? So you view her as a person?”*

“Why not? Just because she’s a homunculus doesn’t mean she isn’t a person.”

Apparently Ruri was as good as human to Maha. I wondered just what her criteria for being human were.

“Miss Maha…”

“Yeah? …Wh-whoa. What’s wrong, Ruri?” Maha turned to look at Ruri, seeing her overwhelmed with emotion and with tears forming in her eyes.

“I’m happy. You don’t think of me as disposable tool.”

“Ah…”

She seemed to have overheard Maha’s side of our conversation. Maha felt deeply embarrassed but kept up her act of calm indifference. “I didn’t mean anything in particular by what I said.”

“Still. I’m happy. Can I call you Big Sister?”

“...That’s a bit much.”

“Aww.”

Despite shooting Ruri’s request down, Maha looked a bit happy she had made it.

“I’m sure it’ll only be a matter of time before we have a new couple.”

“Metako, be quiet.”

“What did Miss Metako say this time?”

“Nothing you need to know, Ruri.”

“She probably wants Maha to try a pickup line on Ruri or something,” Ney said with a hearty laugh. Maha sighed for the fourth time that day.

“Miss Maha. Your glasses look pretty old. Why not buy new ones?”

“...Nah.” Maha’s voice grew low. “I’m fine with these.”

“A-ah! D-d-did I say something I shouldn’t have again?!” Ruri said with worry.

“No, it’s fine,” Maha replied. But she sure didn’t sound fine.

“Why not just tell her, dear? ‘Tis no big deal,” Ney said.

“...It’s not a story worth telling.”

“Did something happen?” Ruri’s eyes shone with curiosity. Maha took one look at her and relented.

“You want to know that badly?”

“Yes. I want to know everything about you!”

“I-is that so...”

Unlike Maha, Ruri knew little about suppressing or disguising her emotions. Knowing Ruri’s fondness for her was just that genuine was a bit hard for Maha to get used to. No one had ever fawned over her like that before.

“Well, all right. It’s really nothing interesting, though.” Maha sighed and began telling the story behind her glasses. “It

happened when I was still a young child, only just becoming aware of the world around me."

"Oooh."

"I didn't wear glasses yet then. Didn't even know what they were. But I found these in my mother's workshop."

"Your eyes weren't bad yet?" Ruri asked.

"Maha's eyes have always been just fine," Ney said.

"Huh? Really?"

"They have, but that's not important right now. Anyway, I asked my mother what the glasses were." Maha continued her explanation, recalling the old memories. Despite mentioning Diriyah, her expression looked peaceful for once. "By that point, she was already treating me like a soldier and hardly ever talked to me like a mother. But she was in a good mood for once. Normally she would get angry at me just for entering her workshop without asking, but she didn't say a thing about it that day. She even stopped working when I asked my question. She lifted me up onto her knees and said, 'These here are magic glasses.'"

"Magic glasses...?" Ruri cocked her head, but Maha continued along.

"Do you know where your name comes from, Ruri?"

"Huh? No. I don't. I didn't even know it come from something."

"That so? Well, when my mother was telling me about these glasses, she said, 'These here are magic glasses. Really. They have a fairy in them that will show whoever puts them on something very nice.' And that fairy's name was Ruri."

"Wow... I had no idea." Ruri had likely never even thought to wonder where her name came from, but she seemed happy to learn its provenance anyway.

"Yes, well... I'm pretty sure my mother made it all up, anyway."

"Huh? Really?"

“Yeah. These glasses don’t make you see anything special. The lenses aren’t even prescription.” Maha pointed at the lenses. “I told my mother these glasses must be broken, but she just smiled and said, ‘They’re not broken. You’ll understand one day.’ I still don’t get what she meant, though.”

Even so, her memory of that moment was important to Maha. It was one of her few happy memories with her mother. Diriyah might’ve said what she did on a whim, but Maha still kept the memory tucked dearly away in her heart.

“What a strange story.”

“I *did* tell you it wasn’t worth telling.”

“No. I found it very interesting. Magic glasses… A fairy…” Ruri murmured to herself, seeming to consider something indistinct.

“Can you believe Maha has such a cute side to her?” Ney teased. “She continues to wear those glasses all because of that one small event.”

“Not at all. I wear these as part of my calming ritual.”

“Calming ritual…?” Ruri parroted, confused by the unfamiliar term.

“Something an alchemist does to calm their mind.”

“…Could you elaborate?”

Since Maha’s explanations were too succinct, Ney took over. “Imagine you were surrounded by many, many powerful demons and all your allies were wiped out.”

“Oh no.”

“How would you feel in such a moment?”

“Um… I’ve never had that happen to me. But I imagine I would be very scared.”

“Naturally.” Ney nodded upon hearing Ruri’s honest thoughts. “Alchemists regularly practice performing certain actions to control their emotions, so they can fight without falling victim to panic.”

“But I haven’t practiced that.”

“You will soon. Diriyah said your mind needs to mature a bit more first.”

“Oh.”

Hearing that, Maha felt a sharp pain in her heart.

“Are you feeling bitter about how they had you practicing from the start?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know you can’t hide anything from me.”

“If you already know then don’t ask.” Maha suppressed the grievances she held towards her mother and turned her attention back to what Ruri and Ney were discussing.

“But what do you do? Isn’t fear instinct?” Ruri asked.

“Indeed it is. But that doesn’t mean nothing can be done about it. Do you know what ‘discomposure’ and ‘composure’ mean?”

“Yes. The first is panicked reaction to something unexpected. The other is opposite. To be calm.”

“Good. Discomposure comes when one’s heart wavers, and one’s heart wavers when it is weak.”

“Hearts can be weak?” mused Ruri, like she had made a new discovery.

“Well, ‘tis just a metaphor. But we don’t want weak hearts, so we seek composure. We cool our hearts. We turn them from water to ice.”

“Oooh.”

“Ice doesn’t stir like water does, right? So we train ourselves to consciously freeze our hearts whenever we want.”

“That sounds hard…” Ruri said dispiritedly.

“Well, it isn’t easy. That’s why there’s a trick to it.”

“Teach me! Please!”

“Attach it to a ritual. Practice some specific action while you calm yourself, and eventually the composure will come naturally when you perform the ritual,” said Ney, finishing her explanation. “Maha’s is readjusting her glasses.”

“I see. So I need some physical ritual I can repeat. Is anything okay?”

“You should avoid anything too complicated since combat can be so unpredictable. In fact, Maha’s choice is pretty risky as glasses can easily fall off during a battle.”

“I keep them affixed with alchemy while fighting,” Maha said.

“What a waste of good alchemy!” Ney chided.

“Ha ha…”

The topic naturally met its end there, and the three started to make their way back to the Base. Abruptly, Ney’s face clouded. Maha’s own expression tensed a moment later.

“Put your things down, dears.”

“Ugh… What a pain.”

“Huh?”

Ney and Maha turned, prompting Ruri to hurriedly turn around as well, where she was met with the sight of at least thirty demons.

“Quite a few of them. We’ll be fighting without preparation; can you two manage?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Me too!”

“Very well. Let’s go!”

Maha and Ruri followed with Ney leading the charge. The battle lasted for more than three hours, but the three of them cleaned up without issue. Afterwards, Ney praised Ruri for her growth, and the two girls together for their improved teamwork.

◆◇◆◇◆

“Knock knock!” came Ruri’s voice from beyond the door.

“Come in.”

“Pardon me,” said the girl as she stepped inside.

Maha was lounging in her room on a day off when Ruri decided to pay a visit.

“You are painting again?”

“Yeah. Got to kill time somehow.”

“I think it’s wonderful way to kill time.” She moved up next to where Maha was sitting and stared at the painting.

A silence fell between the two. Maha wasn’t particularly good at reading the room, but even she could tell Ruri was restless. She considered asking what was wrong, when instead Ruri broke the silence first.

“M-Miss Maha!” she suddenly cried out.

“Y-yeah?” Maha felt a bit intimidated by the girl’s sudden energy.

“You like eating. Yes?”

“Um, I guess?” Maha put herself on guard, thinking Ney put some strange idea into Ruri’s head again.

With some difficulty, Ruri stammered out, “Th-then please let me make you lunch!”

“…What?” Maha was caught off guard by that, having expected something more serious from how Ruri was acting. “You want to make me…lunch?”

“Y-yes!”

“Well, I don’t particularly mind, I suppose… Can you even cook?”

“More or less. What do you want to eat?”

“Whatever is—”

“Maha,” I cut in, *“you can’t just say ‘Whatever is fine’ in moments like these.”*

“Why?”

“That’s just the way it is. Give her a proper idea of something to make, even if it’s something a little difficult.”

“Well, all right…” Maha frowned, unconvinced. Still, she played along. “How about something with meat then? Like a beef patty.”

“Beef? Understood. I’ll make beef patties!” Ruri immediately moved to leave the room.

Maha called out and stopped her. “Uh, Ruri?”

“Yes?”

“Um…”

“Yes?” Ruri cocked her head.

Now Maha was the one having difficulties speaking.

“You mind if I come watch?”

“No! Please come.”

And so, the two of them went to the mess hall together. Upon entering the kitchen, two elderly women greeted Ruri.

“Oh my, look who's here!”

“You haven’t grown one bit, Ruri dear. Are you sure you’re eating properly?”

“Hello, hello. Thank you for always making everyone’s food,” Ruri said. She seemed to be a familiar face here.

“What brings you here today? More cooking practice?”

“I want to borrow part of kitchen.”

“That’s fine, but…” The cooks finally noticed Maha’s presence then. She squirmed under their gaze as they looked between her and Ruri. “…Oh my, oh my.”

“To think spring would finally come for little Miss Maha,” the other teased with a mean grin.

“It’s not what you think!” Maha said. “I’m just here because I was bored. That’s all.”

“What's going on?” Ruri asked, confused.

“How heartwarming.”

“Oh, to be young.”

“I said it’s *not* what you think!” Maha continued to protest. Realizing it was hopeless, she sighed and quickly gave up. “… Whatever. Ruri, just start cooking.”

“Roger.” Ruri nodded and made for the freezer. “Excuse me. Can I use beef?”

Food supplies were a precious commodity given the current state of the world. High-nutrient foods were prioritized for soldiers, yes, but that didn’t mean there was plenty to go around, even for them. What food was available and how much of it everyone got was strictly controlled, so it wouldn’t be a surprise if Ruri’s request was turned down.

“Go ahead, dear. Make something that’ll snag her heart!” The cook readily allowed it, however. It could be that they had a surplus of meat, but Maha felt it was more likely they were just fond of Ruri.

“Thank you very much. Yes! I will…grab her heart?”

“…That’s an image I can do without.” Maha still looked uncomfortable to be here, but she was the one who asked to come, so she withstood the prying gazes of the old women and watched as Ruri cooked.

Ruri began by mincing an onion. Maha was surprised to see how competent her knifework was.

“She’s practiced, and quite a bit at that.”

“You think so?”

“I do. You can’t reach this level of skill without putting in some effort.”

From what the cooks had said, it sounded as though Ruri had visited here at least a few times to practice cooking. These

culinary veterans had probably taught her a few things while she was at it, so Maha hoped she might actually be in for a real treat.

Ruri took out a mixing bowl next, put in ground meat, and added salt, pepper, and nutmeg before stirring it all together.

“She’s pretty good.”

“How would you know? You can’t cook.”

“Rude! I made food for my partner all the time back when I was a human.”

“That so?”

Maha showed no interest whatsoever in my mention of a partner. Her red eyes looked back at Ruri and watched attentively.

After kneading the ground meat a bit, she added the onions and kneaded some more, then added breadcrumbs that had soaked in milk and kneaded even further.

“That should be good,” she eventually said. With the meat done and split into two oval-shaped patties, she grabbed a frying pan, added some butter, and turned on the heat. Once the pan was hot, she added the patties. A fragrant smell began to waft through the kitchen.

“That’s a nice smell.”

“Seems she knows how to fry pretty well too.”

“That so?”

“Meat tastes best just before it’s a little burnt. She’s taking good care to give it a thorough sear.”

Ruri worked the frying pan with great focus. Her eyes, the same color as Maha’s, watched the pan’s contents attentively as she adjusted the heat. Once the patties were cooked, she moved them to a plate and began making a sauce with the remaining juices in the pan. She added some seasoning, then some butter, then boiled away the excess fluid. Finally, she was left with a viscous brown sauce. She scooped it up with a spoon and carefully poured it over the patties. “All done!”



“...It looks good.”

Ruri’s beef patties had a delicious-looking, well-browned color and were plump with juices oozing down their sides.

“Go ahead and try,” she said.

“Sure. Let's move to a table first, though.”

“Thank you for letting me use kitchen!”

“You’re welcome, dear. Enjoy yourselves now.”

“Mh-hmm.”

The two ladies’ gazes remained prying to the end, but Maha was beyond caring at this point.

“What a nosy bunch.”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Maha’s attention was wholly focused on the beef patties made for her, her grip firm on the plate. She and Ruri sat down side by side in the mess hall’s chairs.

“Go ahead,” said Ruri eagerly.

Maha nervously dug her knife into the meat. She picked up a slice with her fork and carefully brought it to her mouth. “...It’s good.”

“Thank goodness,” said Ruri with a sigh of relief as she collapsed forward onto the table.

“Like, really good. I can’t actually remember, of course, but I’m pretty sure this is even better than Ney’s food.”

“You flatter me.”

“No, I mean it. It’s cooked perfectly, and the sauce is just amazing.” Maha must have really liked it as her knife and fork wouldn’t stop moving. She praised Ruri freely, showing none of her usual curtness.

Ruri giggled. “I’m glad you like it.”

“You’re a great cook, Ruri.”

“...I finally beat Captain Ney at something,” she whispered.

“What was that?”

“Nooothing.”

Maha ate her plate clean, despite the two decently-sized patties. “That was great. Honestly, I could eat another.”

“I’ll make it again for you sometime.”

“Please do.” Her eyes shone with eager anticipation. Her facial muscles were as dead as ever, but at least the glutton’s eyes were honest. “...Life might be worth living if it means eating things like this.”

“I-I don’t think my food is *that* good.”

“I’m kidding.”

It wasn’t like Maha to joke much, but Ruri played along. Maha stared at her face.

“You should wife her up and have her make food for you every day.”

“Be quiet.”

“Huh?” Ruri said, confused.

“Nothing. Metako is just being dumb. More importantly, I need to thank you somehow.”

“No! No need for that! This was already my thanks to you.”

“Huh? For what?” Maha cocked her head.

“You always training me.”

“That? That’s...for the good of all humanity. It doesn’t count, does it?”

“I think it does.”

“You do, huh...” Maha didn’t seem convinced.

“How about you teach me to paint? Then we call it even.”

“You want to learn painting?”

“Yes. I want to paint beautiful things like you.” Ruri’s eyes seemed full of unadulterated respect for Maha.

“…I’m not that good, though.”

“That’s not true. Captain Ney and kitchen ladies say you are the best painter in town.”

“…Really?”

“Yes.”

Maha found that unexpected. She thought people only saw her for her ability to fight. She didn’t think anyone even knew she painted.

“Miss Maha, everybody like you more than you think.” Ruri made a lovely smile, making Maha’s heart skip a beat.

“Oh?”

“Shut up, Metako.”

“I haven’t said anything yet.”

“I already know what kind of nonsense you’d say.”

“Is it going to be official soon?”

“Nothing’s going to be nothing.”

So she said, but she seemed pretty shaken by Ruri’s smile.

“…Painting’s whatever. I can teach you anytime.”

“Yay!” Ruri cheered.

Maha felt her chest warm. But the moment didn’t last long. “…What was that?”

An explosion sounded from not too far away. Footsteps pounding against the ground could be heard shortly after with one pair approaching the mess hall. A soldier entered and, upon finding the two, yelled, “Maha! Ruri! We’re under attack!”

◆◇◆◇◆

“How many of them are there?!”

“We can’t be sure, but we believe it’s just one demon. However…”

“Yes?”

“…It’s probably faster for you to see for yourself.”

Maha and Ruri followed the soldier to the entrance of the Base. The sturdy front gate was destroyed, and a dozen or so alchemists were launching their attacks from behind a makeshift barricade. But the demon appeared unfazed.

“Finally, you arrive,” said the demon.

“Huh? How? Miss Maha should have killed you!” Ruri exclaimed. The demon was the very same one that had slipped through the town’s barrier before, only for Maha to defeat her—Tao.

“As if that would be enough to stop me,” Tao said. She smiled wickedly as she continued to take the attacks unflinchingly. “I told you I hadn’t given up on the homunculus, didn’t I?”

“How is she still standing?!” someone yelled.

“We need to prepare something more powerful!”

“Enough. Pesky little cretins,” said Tao.

“Everyone, take cover!” yelled Maha, but her warning came too late. A blast of energy from where Tao stood swept back the barricade and the alchemists along with it. Maha and Ruri were protected by their automatic defenses, but the soldier that led them and the others were tossed back.

“Ngh…”

“Guh…”

“Everyone!”

“Should you be wasting your time worrying about others?” Tao closed the distance in one quick motion and swung her sharp claws at Maha.

Maha instantly drew her dagger in response and thought to dodge—before realizing Ruri was right behind her. Left with no choice, she blocked the attack fully. “Damn…!”

“How about this?!” cried Tao with a laugh as she began attacking with both arms, even working kicks in as well.

Maha would normally have let her opponent make an attack, then tried to dodge and counter, but she was put completely on the defensive now.

“Ruri! Get back!”

“Ah… O-okay.”

“Not so fast!” Tao’s eyes glowed, then a tough-looking wall that towered over Ruri appeared right behind her.

“Break it!”

“Quickchant, Spear of Mercury!” Given the urgency of the situation, Ruri chose what seemed like the best option she had. But it turned out to be ineffectual as the wall proved harder than expected, resisting even the powerful force of the mercury spear.

“I know you’re at least capable of that much. It’ll take more than that to break my wall,” Tao taunted.

Maha clicked her tongue, showing just how problematic Tao’s move was. If Ruri couldn’t get away, then Maha’s options were greatly limited in her close-range fight with Tao. Ruri herself still hadn’t learned anything other than how to fight from the back line, so asking her to get involved was just too much.

What do I do…? Maha thought as hard as she could while trying to withstand Tao’s fierce attacks. But the longer things went on, the worse her situation became. Diriyah had said before that alchemists were individually stronger than demons, but Tao was not only powerful enough to overwhelm multiple alchemists all by herself, she was even backing Maha, one of the strongest alchemists, into a corner.

“Miss Maha! It’s okay,” Ruri suddenly said.

“What? Ruri…?” Maha had a bad feeling and wanted to turn around but couldn’t with Tao in front of her.

“What’s this then? Are you surrendering?” Tao asked, amused.

“No. My life is not only my own. Being captured would mean world would end. So…”

“Ruri, no!”

Tao froze out of disbelief while Maha ignored any thought of danger and spun around to look at Ruri. Ruri uneasily held the still-unfamiliar grip of her dagger and aimed the tip at the base of her throat, drawing it close.

“Miss Maha… Goodbye.”

“Don’t!” Maha desperately reached out, but she was a step too far away. Ruri smiled weakly and—

“Just what do you think you’re doing, you fool?” a voice said. In the same moment, a powerful shockwave from behind Maha washed over her and Ruri, and rattled the wall Tao made.

“…Captain Ney,” Ruri said.

“Sorry for arriving late. …Looks like the demon got away.” Ney carried her large sword and stood with her right hand directed toward Ruri and Maha. Her expression was a mix of anger and exasperation. “I apologize for having to be a little rough, but what in the world were you thinking?”

The shockwave she made left Ruri with scratches here and there, but it didn’t seem like there was any danger to her life.

Maha pushed some rubble aside and stood up. She had some injuries as well, but nothing serious.

“Miss Maha. Are you all ri—” Ruri rushed over to Maha, only for Maha to slap her across the face. For a moment she was bewildered and didn’t understand what Maha had done. “Miss… Maha?”

“How could you?” Maha said in a low voice before briskly walking off. Ruri could only stare blankly as she left.

“…I’d say she’s in the right this time,” Ney said.

Ruri hung her head and looked at her feet.

◆◇◆◇◆

“Come on, Maha. There’s no need to sulk this much.”

The aftermath of the battle had the Base in an uproar. Ney’s arrival had forced Tao to retreat, but the fact she was able to not just invade the town, but the fortress itself was of grave concern. The great damage the Base had sustained and the casualties Al-kimiya’s forces had suffered didn’t help either.

Ney and Diriyah were meeting to discuss how to prepare for the next attack. Ruri was probably with them as well. Maha skipped the meeting, however, and instead holed up in her room underneath the sheets of her bed.

“I understand how you feel, but Ruri’s decision in that moment wasn’t necessarily wrong.”

No response, again. I’d repeatedly called out to her like this to try and cheer her up, but she was ignoring me completely. What Ruri had tried to do seemed to have hit a particularly sore spot for Maha. Goodness…

Just then, there were three knocks at the door. Since Maha didn’t respond, a voice trepidatiously said, “…Miss Maha. It’s Ruri. Can I come in?”

“No.” Maha coldly refused.

“Okay. Then I’ll talk from here.”

“No, go away. I don’t want to listen to whatever you have to say.” Maha didn’t give Ruri an inch.

“…Miss Maha. I understand why you angry. But I don’t think I did anything wrong.”

“What?!” Maha threw off her sheets and stomped her way over to the door. Without opening it, she shouted, “Do you have any idea what you tried to do?!”

“Yes. I believed it to be best decision at time.”

“You would be dead if Ney didn’t show up!”

“I understand.” In contrast to Maha’s terribly emotional voice, Ruri’s own voice was calm.

“No! No, you don’t understand a thing! There are people who would be sad if you died! Ney! Mother! The kitchen ladies! … Me!”

“Even so. There was no other choice.”

The further Ruri insisted, the more Maha grew enraged. “That isn’t for you to decide! I could still fight! There was no reason to just give in!”

“But there was chance you lose. Then you would die. And world would end.”

“I don’t want to hear your what-ifs! I saw you try to *kill* yourself! How could you ever think of doing something so stupid?!”

“Do you really not understand?”

“No!”

“Oh…”

Ruri sounded genuinely disappointed, sending Maha even further into a rage. She violently undid the lock, threw the door open, came face to face with Ruri, and…lost all words. “…Ruri.”

“I thought you of all people would understand.” Ruri was crying. Big teardrops spilled from her round, childish eyes. “I am tool made to fight. Made to help humanity. But me being here created hole connecting to Akashic Record. My existence causes nothing but problems for everyone.”

“Th-that’s not…” Maha reflexively began to deny Ruri’s words, but she quickly realized there was nothing meaningful she could say. Ruri’s words made too much sense. There were no platitudes Maha could offer to break cruel logic.

“You said you were born to fight too,” Ruri continued. “Captain Ney even told me you said you didn’t think life was worth living. That you wish you weren’t born into this world. Did you not?”

“I-I…” There was no argument Maha could make. It was the truth.

“I feel same way,” Ruri continued. “I don’t understand why I was made. Created only to fight. Then asked to die. Why me? I never asked to be born.”

Maha saw her own self reflected in the defeated Ruri. She saw the Maha who had been tormented by her search for answers before giving up completely and falling to despair.

“You of all people should understand how I feel. It would’ve been fine for me to die there. So why don’t you understand? Was I wrong about you?”

Ruri pleaded to her in tears, but Maha couldn’t find the words to reply with. She wanted nothing more than to tell her, right this instant, that it was her *beliefs* that were wrong and that she deserved to live. But she just couldn’t find even a single argument or pretext to deny what Ruri said.

“...I see. So I was wrong.”

“No, Ruri. I just—”

“I’m sorry. Ignore what I said. I’ll leave you alone.” Ruri turned to leave.

“Ruri, wa—!”

“Oh! Right!” As Maha called out to stop her, Ruri interrupted in an out-of-place, cheerful voice. “Captain Ney wanted to discuss something with you. You should go.”

“Ruri...”

“I’ll go now.” She closed the door on Maha and left in earnest this time.

“...Maha.”

“Damn it!” Irritated by how spineless she was, Maha punched the door with everything she had. Her fist ached and even bled a little, but it was likely nothing in comparison to what Ruri carried in her heart. “...Just what the hell was I supposed to say?”

Not a soul was around to answer her pained question.

◆◇◆◇◆

Maha was despondent for some time after her conversation with Ruri, but she eventually got up and trudged over to Ney's room to answer her summons. Everyone had tacitly allowed it when she skipped the meeting, sulking in her bed until Ruri came, but now she was needed for something. Having been a soldier for so long, Maha couldn't bring herself to keep wallowing and ignore the summons.

Devoid of enthusiasm, she knocked on the door to the captain's room.

"Come in," said a voice from within.

Maha entered. The room could not possibly be described as orderly by any stretch of the imagination. Clothes, stripped off and haphazardly tossed aside, covered the floor, and thick, half-read books were scattered everywhere. Ney sat on her bed, the only area that seemed free of clutter.

"...You seem down. Did something happen after the fight?"

Maha didn't reply.

"Seems I hit the mark. What happened?"

"...Nothing. I just couldn't find the right words to say while Ruri cried in front of me. Now, what did you want?"

"I wanted to talk about you two, actually. So go ahead and tell me what happened in detail."

Maha frowned, not being all that eager to open up. But Ney had this strange ability to lower the walls people put up around their hearts. I suppose you could say she just had this air of reliability about her. But in any event, she could still read minds, so Maha ultimately decided there was no point in holding back and explained what happened bit by bit.

"Hm, I see..." Ney crossed her arms and pondered.

"...What do you think I was supposed to say to her?" Maha asked with high hopes.

“That’s for you to think about. The most I can do is offer advice.”

“…You’re a strict mentor.”

“Have I ever not been?”

“Ha. I guess not.”

“Come, sit with me.” Ney patted the spot next to her on the bed. Maha obliged and sat down. Bluntly, Ney asked, “First thing’s first: do you want Ruri to live or die?”

“I want her to live, obviously,” Maha answered.

“Good,” Ney nodded. “You should start off by telling her that.”

“I already did. But she didn’t listen at all.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s probably because it was me. Maybe if you were the one to—”

“Fool.” Ney flicked Maha on the forehead with her finger. “Ruri hasn’t opened her heart to anybody but you.”

“That’s not true.”

“But it is. Think about it, child.” Ney continued as if she were teaching a struggling pupil. “Don’t you recall what she said when she first heard she would be disposed of?”

“…She said she was fine with it. But that was—”

“Empty bravado, yes. She’s been hiding how she really feels with a smile this whole time,” Ney explained. “But she revealed the truth to you. Not me, and not anybody else. Isn’t that proof you’re the only one she trusts?”

“…Oh.” Maha made a face that showed the thought hadn’t even crossed her mind.

“She wanted you to understand her. Only you, who shares her circumstances, could sympathize with her grief. Do you get it now?”

“I…I think I do. But I still don’t know what I should have said to her.” Maha felt as though she could still hear Ruri’s sad voice in her mind.

“That’s because you keep thinking you need to fix her problems.”

Maha’s eyes went wide as she finally began to understand.

Ney continued. “Right. Was she looking for a solution, or something else?”

Perhaps all Ruri wanted was someone to sympathize with her, someone she could lick her wounds with until she discovered her own way forward.

“Feeling any better now?” Ney asked.

“Yeah. I think I know what to say to her now.”

“I see.”

“Thank you, Ney.”

“No need to thank me. ‘Tis all too late to be of any real meaning.”

Maha questioned with her gaze.

Ney stood up from the bed, walked forward a bit, then turned to face Maha again. “It didn’t feel right to end it all without you knowing the truth.”

“…Ney?”

“So I’ve decided to reveal it all while I still can.”

“…What do you mean?” Warning bells were going off in Maha’s head. But she just couldn’t make sense of any of it. Not of what Ney said…

“Do you still not understand? This is what I mean.”

Nor of what was happening.

Maha watched in horror as darkness enveloped Ney’s body. Her small figure began to change shape. Her chest grew bigger, her waist narrowed, bat-like wings appeared on her back, and horns appeared on her head.

“No… That can’t be.”

“I’m sorry, but ‘tis the truth, Maha.” Ney’s expression seemed to be almost pitying. “I am Tao.”

◆◇◆◇◆

“Why… Why, Ney?!” Maha let out a blood-curdling scream as she reached for a vial on her hip. Her ‘Why’ asked many things: Why was Ney a demon, why did she betray her, why was she doing this, and so much more.

Ney grinned wryly and answered, “Isn’t it obvious? To return everything to nothingness.”

That alone seemed meant to answer all of Maha’s questions.

“You were a demon?”

“No, I’m human. …Or at least I once was, long ago. This form is temporary. You’ve only fought my clones so far.” Ney had a distant look in her eyes. Maha didn’t know it, but the long ago Ney spoke of was before she channeled the divine.

“Maha. You remember the memories of mine you’ve seen?”

“Now’s not the time, Metako!”

“The girl I knew is probably Ney—though her name has changed since then.”

“What…?”

“Indeed. You’re still there, aren’t you, Metako? Or should I call you Metalia?” Ney smiled softly. Her gaze was nostalgic, as if she were looking at an old friend.

“I don’t understand,” Maha said. “Metako, you knew Ney?”

“I had an inkling who she might be, yes. But the girl she used to be would never have wished for the world’s end. She was unmistakably human and stood directly against what the demons believed in. That’s why her betrayal is a surprise, even to me.”

“How? Aren’t you supposed to be connected to the Akashic Record?” Maha’s voice had an accusatory tone to it. I didn’t blame her. It must seem almost willful that someone able to know anything, like me, didn’t notice something as important as Ney’s betrayal.

“I cannot look into the Akashic Record for information concerning her.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s cut me out, dear.” Ney smiled self-deprecatingly. I felt my heart ache. “I don’t know why. But when she sacrificed and reduced herself to pure concept, she severed the connection between not only the world and the Song of the End, but also between her and me.”

Indeed. A normal human would have to rely on their raw ability to use alchemy if they lost the ability to interface with the Akashic Record through me, but Ney could use the power of the Akashic Record herself, so cutting her off wouldn’t hurt her ability to fight demons. But it would make it impossible for us to directly communicate. Even with her god-like powers, she could not talk to me like Maha could. I failed to notice the change in her as a result, but I didn’t do this without reason.

“Maha, tell Ney something for me. The reason why I severed our connection was—”

“Enough. I do not care to know. ‘Tis beyond mattering now.” Ney read Maha’s mind and stopped me before I could finish my words. “I shall take Ruri. You’re free to try and stop me…if you truly believe you have a chance.”

Maha frowned. She knew how strong Ney was better than anyone. Stopping her by force would be next to impossible. “…Can I ask one thing?”

“Of course, dear.”

“You could’ve run off with Ruri whenever you pleased. Why wait until now?”

“Because she’s only just become willing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I desire the Song of the End, and she’s now willing to give it to me.”

Her words shook Maha. “You’re lying! Ruri would never!”

“She has already agreed to it, my dear. Do you really not understand after she spilled her heart out to you? How she questions her own existence, how she’s filled with doubt?”

“I-I…”

Ruri had said, quoting Maha’s own words, that life wasn’t worth living and that she wished she hadn’t been born into the world. Such words closely resembled the beliefs of the demons and of Ney.

“N-no! She would never!” Maha insisted.

“Goodness… You’ve grown strong, but your mind is as naive as ever. The truth remains the truth no matter what you wish to believe.”

“Shut up!”

“But then again, perhaps I seem like no more than a madwoman to you, in which case I could understand why you would doubt my words. But I’ve told no lies. I truly cared about you and Ruri, so I chose to wait until she was willing.”

“Just shut up, you traitor!”

“Hm. There’s nothing I can say to that.” Indifferently, Ney shrugged and stopped talking.

“…Do you really mean to use the Song of the End?” Maha asked.

“I do.”

“Even if it means using Ruri like a tool?”

“Shouldn’t you be more worried about yourself and the world?”

“I won’t let you!”

“…Hm.” Ney nodded, then raised her right hand.

Just as Maha sensed danger, I reacted. *“Activating automatic defenses. Diamond Shield.”*

“Gah…!”

But my defenses weren’t enough, and Maha’s body bent backwards. I couldn’t tell what happened. Some unseen force had hit her.

“Justice without force is powerless. If you want to stop me, show me you have what it takes.” Ney returned to her human form, scoffed with disinterest, and began to leave.

“W-wait…!”

“Come after me if you wish. I will neither run nor hide.” She reached out into what seemed to be empty space, then lifted up Ruri’s small, unconscious body. She must have altered the light to camouflage her.

Maha watched as Ney slowly walked away before losing consciousness herself.

CHAPTER FIVE: LAMENT

“Metalia!”

I watched as she ran over screaming my name. A wave of relief washed over me once I saw how pale she was. If she could still make such a face, then surely that meant she was still human?

“Don’t move. This wound is nothing. I can heal you in—”

“Excuse me! I have an urgent report to make!” someone said.

“Save it for later!”

“I’m afraid it can’t wait! We’ve detected a high energy reaction occurring from the demons!”

Her face paled even further. Despite being nearly all-powerful, both my injury and the report happening at the same time overwhelmed her. Inadvertently, she asked, “...Is it the Song of the End?” She immediately realized her mistake and looked at me. “No, wait!”

“The demons... Are they trying to activate the Song of the End?” Barely conscious, I wrung out the last of my strength to use my alchemy.

“Don’t do it! There has to be another way!”

“It’s all right... It was fate for things to end this way.”

It would all be too late if I lost consciousness here. While I still could, I used my body as a reagent and began the process of alchemizing myself into raw energy.

“No... You can’t leave me!”

“It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere. I’m just...doing what I must to forever stay a stranger to you.”

“…What are you even saying?” Not comprehending, she gave me a look. I didn’t blame her. She could read minds, but as the last person she still saw as separate from herself, as ‘other,’ she refused to read mine. Without her knowing, I had made my choice.

“You’ll understand soon. But don’t worry. I’ll make sure to seal the Song of the End.”

“Metalia!”

She held my hand. I wondered how long I would remember her warmth as I spoke the last activation phrase of my alchemy. “… Render my whole being to concept.”

And just like that, I became Metako.

◆◇◆◇◆

“…Ngh…”

Maha found herself in the infirmary when she came to. The peculiar smell of disinfectant filled the mostly-white room. Her abdomen was wrapped in dressing and still ached, but she sat herself up and looked around to see she was in a bed.

“You’re awake.”

“…Mother.”

Diriyah entered the infirmary with a cigarette between her lips. She crudely pulled out a nearby chair with her leg, then sat next to Maha’s bed.

“How’re you feeling?”

“…Fine.”

“Good. So what happened?” After showing Maha only the slightest bit of concern, Diriyah began questioning her. That was nothing unusual at this point, of course. Maha felt something between resignation and relief.

Maha kept her report concise. “Ney betrayed us. She took Ruri and vanished. Her goal is to activate the Song of the End.”

“…I see. I knew it.” Diriyah didn’t seem surprised in the least.

“You knew she would betray us?”

“No, nothing like that. I just had the feeling she was getting fed up with living.”

“Did you know about her being tapped into the Akashic Record’s power?”

“I did. Every vice-captain is told.” Diriyah took a drag of her cigarette, then stubbed it out and stowed it away in her portable ashtray. “Damn. To think she was after the Song of the End of all things. But she’s been fighting for humanity for a long, long time. I don’t get why she’d choose now to betray us.”

I was curious about that myself.

“…Perhaps your genius is to blame,” Maha suggested without elaboration.

“What do you mean?” Diriyah returned her a dubious look.

“Ruri’s creation might have pushed Ney over the edge. With a way to obtain the Song of the End suddenly presented to her, she might not have been able to hold back the desires she had been suppressing.”

“Ah. So I’m the one who pulled the trigger on the world’s demise, huh? That’s one hell of a screw up.” Diriyah laughed at herself, then looked at Maha. “Hey. You hate me, right?”

“Where did that come from?”

“I figured we might as well talk about my other screw ups while we’re at it.” She took out a second cigarette. “I brought you into this world and raised you to fight. I haven’t done a single motherly thing for you. You have every right to hate me. That’s my cross to bear.”

Maha didn’t say a word.

“This is no more than me making excuses, but I really did think you had a better shot in this world if you could fight.”

Diriyah was being oddly talkative for once. Blankly, Maha gazed at her mother’s face.

“But, again, that’s really just an excuse. It’s a fact that I made research my priority and left most of your rearing to Ney. I ain’t gonna deny that.” With a light chuckle, she puffed her cigarette.

“What made you so devoted to your research?” Maha asked.

“Huh? What good would knowing do you?”

“Nothing. It’s just…I’ve only now realized I hardly know a thing about you.”

“…That so? My reasons aren’t anything worth hearing, though.”

“That’s fine.”

Diriyah showed some hesitation, but eventually she put out the cigarette she’d barely touched and stuffed it into her portable ashtray. Her words came gradually, bit by bit. “…There was a time when even I managed to fall in love. I suppose it’s been fifteen years now. Since your other mother died.”

“…I hardly know anything about my other mother.”

“That’s because I’ve never told you about her.” Diriyah tried to take a drag off her cigarette, only to frown and remember she had just put it out. “She was a good woman. Had patience even for someone as difficult as me. She came from money. I got close to her to try and secure funds for my research, but before I knew it, I was so smitten I couldn’t envision a life without her.”

“That’s…hard to imagine.”

“Right? Can hardly believe it myself.” Her gaze softened with rare tenderness before she continued. “…She was killed by demons, though. So I decided I would make them pay, and that became my only reason for living.”

Maha listened carefully, her eyes wide. This was all news to her.

“I already did alchemy research for a living, but after her death, it became my everything. I sacrificed many things for my research… Even you. So I don’t blame you for hating me. You have every right.” After saying her piece, Diriyah made a face like she had been released from whatever was possessing her. Perhaps

she too had been struggling with her own troubles. Perhaps she felt guilt over treating her own daughter as a weapon.

"...I don't hate you," Maha said.

"What?"

"I said I don't hate you. Not anymore."

Diriyah looked bewildered. "You're lying. I've seen the way you've looked at me."

"Like I said, 'not anymore.' I hated you in the past. But I think I understand you now." Maha took Diriyah's hand, causing the latter surprise. "You loved me in your own way, but your priorities placed me second. My other mother and your research came first. That's all." She grinned wryly, as though a burden had lifted off her own shoulders too. "I won't lie and say I'm not a bit sad that I couldn't come first. But it is what it is. If anything, I feel envious that you could love someone else to such an extent."

"Maha..." Diriyah blinked a few times, emotionally moved. She must have never expected to hear such words.

"I wonder if I'll ever be able to do the same."

"The same what?"

Maha's voice grew quiet and reflective. "Love someone more than family."

Hearing that, Diriyah reached out and violently tousled Maha's hair. "The heck are you saying?"

"...Mother?"

"There's someone you already care about more than me, isn't there?" she said with a smile.

"Who?"

"Ruri, of course. I've seen the way you look at her recently. Don't try and tell me you don't have some one-sided feelings for her." She spoke in a teasing tone and disheveled Maha's hair even more roughly.

"...You might be right."

“Oh? That’s awfully honest for you.”

“Mother. If my first love is ever to come true, I need your help.”

“You want *my* help? I’m probably the last person you’d want romantic advice from.”

“Not that.” Maha shook her head. “I need your intellect.”

“Ah. That’s more my speed. What do you need?”

“A way to stop Ney.”

“…That’s quite the challenge.” Diriyah pulled her unfinished cigarette back out of the ashtray and lit it, taking a drag. “Ney is basically a medium channeling the Akashic Record. Her power is comparable to a god’s. Stopping her won’t be easy.”

“Of course.”

“But we have one saving grace: the fact that she understands words. The ideal move would be to persuade her… But if I’m being honest, I’m not so sure anything we say could reach her at this point.”

“So if words don’t work, what do we do?”

“Use force, I guess. That’s what she told you to do anyway, right?” Diriyah gave a wry laugh, remarking how like Ney that was.

“Can we beat her?”

“Probably not. But we’re not totally screwed.” Diriyah finished her cigarette and put the stub back in her ashtray. She brought a finger up and said, “Metako will be our key.”

◆◇◆◇◆

Located underground in the deepest and most secure part of the Base—in other words, where I had connected the Akashic Record to the world—was the place where the Song of the End was sealed away. It was the most spacious room in all of the Base, roughly the size of the Spiritual Church convent’s courtyard. It

contained not a single piece of furnishing, being almost entirely empty save for a magic circle drawn in the far back in white alchemical paint. Kneeling on the magic circle and standing right before it were two people Maha recognized.

“You’ve come.” With her massive blade resting on her shoulder, Ney turned around and greeted Maha. Past her, Ruri was kneeled on the magic circle with her eyes closed and her hands clasped together.

“Give Ruri back,” Maha demanded. She came fully equipped for a battle—a war even. There were more vials than usual on her hip, and she brought a backup dagger for good measure. Her clothes were no different than her usual combat wear, but Diriyah had used her alchemy to make it extra cut-resistant.

“Oh? You’ve come to take her back, not save the world? Is she more important to you than the world?” Ney teased.

“Cut it out. I’m not here to play games.”

“I take it you haven’t come to try and persuade me either then?”

“No, I’ll make you see reason one way or another. But before we start, tell me one thing: why do you want to end the world?” This was the thing that had bothered Maha the most since Ney’s betrayal. Ending the world was something the demons were after. As a former human, Ney should want anything but that.

“When you live as long as I, there are many things you come to learn. Things both good and bad.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I shall get there, dear. You’ve always been too eager to get to the conclusion. Didn’t I tell you some things can’t be understood unless you break them down piece by piece?”

“...Go ahead then.” Maha urged Ney to continue as she warily scanned the room, then Ney and Ruri.

“At first blush, it might seem as though the values of demons are incompatible with those of humans. But over time, I’ve come to think their belief system is the truly correct one.”

“Impossible.”

“There you go again, rushing to conclusions.” Ney smiled wryly. “I’ve had many worries since I gained the power of a god. I’ve faced all of them as sincerely as I can, and I’ve solved many, but there’s one thing I can do nothing about. Not even my great power is of any aid… This never-ending war. Poverty. Hunger. Disease. I’ve borne witness to too much suffering to name and have realized that no matter what star one is born under, one cannot avoid suffering in life. Though the suffering one experiences may vary, no life can ever be without suffering.”

“…Why?”

“Happiness and suffering are relative concepts. One defines the other. Put another way, without happiness there is no suffering, and without suffering there is no happiness. A life of only happiness is a logical impossibility.”

Just as “left” presupposes the existence of “right,” for happiness to exist, so too must suffering.

Ney continued. “But despite the guarantee of suffering, people continue to bring new life into this world. To that, I ask ‘why?’ It was once said ‘tis because what is in store for a life is unknown, so we must bring our children into this world for it to be known—but is that not the same as gambling with their lives? We cannot know if our children will come to deem their lives good or bad. Who are we to roll the dice and make that gamble for them when *they* will have to bear any debt incurred?”

Ney was essentially saying creating life could be seen as an act of harm due to the fact that one could not know if the born would have wished to live.

“So what are you suggesting people do then?” Maha asked.

“Not bring life into this world to begin with. The never-was cannot know suffering. ‘Tis the most simple and ideal solution there is. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“No. One can’t know happiness either if they’re never born.”

“An absence of happiness is only a problem for the living; the unborn cannot be inconvenienced by the same. Or do you

believe people should be born precisely because they're deprived of happiness before existence? Does that make sense to you?"

"Well..." Maha faltered. She wanted to argue against what Ney was saying, but she couldn't find any counter to her logic. It didn't help that Maha even found herself swayed a little bit by Ney's words, as she had previously wished she wasn't alive herself.

"Once logically thought out, 'tis clear that life isn't to be desired. Better to never be born to begin with. Rather than cling to what happiness one has to forget the suffering, it is better to become nothing and do away with suffering altogether. And the Song of the End can make that possible."

"I thought the Song of the End was a spell to bring ruin to the world."

"No. Human beings named and decided what the Song of the End did on their own. The spell's true purpose is to return everything to oblivion."

"...It's the same thing."

"To you humans, perhaps. But 'tis all the difference to me. You've wished yourself you were never born, haven't you? Returning everything to nothingness will grant just that."

"Only you believe that," Maha said coldly. "You've grown twisted from living too long."

Ney just smiled and said, "That's not true. Ruri understands me. Isn't that right, dear?"

"...Yes." Ruri nodded from behind Ney. She opened her eyes. None of the cheerfulness they once held could be seen. Instead, her eyes only held a deep despair.

"Ruri, come back to your senses," Maha pleaded. "There's no way you could agree with Ney."

"Miss Maha. I have my senses. I just... I had no idea this world was so sad..." She made a pained look as she muttered her words out. She claimed to be of sound mind, but no matter how you cut it, she seemed to be under some kind of mental control.

"Ney... What have you done to Ruri?" Maha questioned.

“Nothing, really. Nothing except show her the constant cries of grief echoing all around the world.” A dangerous glint filled Ney’s eyes. “Shall I show you as well? All the suffering I’ve witnessed thus far?”

“Wha—”

In an instant, Ney connected to Maha’s heart, and a torrent of emotions flooded in. Maha felt the lived misfortune of countless others as though they were her own, experiencing everything with all five senses.

She felt the hunger of a man from an impoverished nation who cried as he ate the body of a friend who had starved to death; the agony of a woman whose leg was blown off by magic, leaving her to writhe in pain unable to receive proper care on the battlefield; the despair of a girl whose body was sold to strangers by her own parents; and the suffering of myriad more.

All of the world’s grief and suffering that Ney had felt through her ability to read minds reached Maha, raging and coursing within her.

“Well? Do you still believe living to be worth it?” Ney asked.

“You…you showed Ruri this?!” Though unsteady, Maha managed to stay on her feet. The lamentations of the world still rushed about within her, but she felt an even stronger emotion now. Acting on it, she stepped forward. “Ruri, wake up. There’s more to the world than just these sad voices.”

With uneasy steps, Maha drew closer to Ruri. Ney watched her pass by but made no move to stop her. Maha’s feet rose and fell one step at a time, her progress slow but steady. A sliver of doubt began to appear on Ruri’s face.

“Everyone is suffering… I have to save them…”

“There’s no salvation in oblivion, Ruri.”

“But Miss Maha… Don’t you hear them? Everyone is crying.” She covered her ears with her hands. “They keep telling me. Stop the sadness. It’s too much. Help us.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s okay to end the world.”

“What else is there to do? Miss Maha. Please. Tell me.” Ruri pleaded desperately.

“Ruri, you loved people, living, seeing new life—all of it, more than anyone. Are you going to deny that all now?”

“If this world…!” For an instant, clear will returned to Ruri’s eyes. “If this world is going to be so full of sadness, then I’d rather not have been born into it at all!”

That was unmistakably the cry of her soul. No tears streamed down her face, but none could doubt this gentle homunculus was full of lament for the world’s pain. Maha stopped in her tracks for a moment. But she soon began walking forward once more.

“…You want to bring an end to all suffering?”

“Yes…”

“Even if that means there will be no more happiness?”

“Yes…”

“Is life not worth living?”

“Yes…”

Maha was almost before Ruri.

“You don’t really mean any of that.”

“…How can you say that?”

“Because why else would you be crying?”

Confusion appeared on Ruri’s face. She touched her cheeks and found them dry. “But I’m not—”

“No. You are. Listen to me, Ruri.” Maha spoke with all her heart. “You and Ney might be right. If the world and everything in it became nothing, and all the suffering disappeared, we just might be better off.” She paused to look Ruri in the eyes. “But you know…” She smiled awkwardly. “I can tell you’re waiting for someone to tell you such a sad truth can’t be.”

Ruri’s red eyes shot wide. Tears began to well up and trickle down her face, like her wounded heart was finally allowing itself to

bleed.

“I once wished I hadn’t been born too,” Maha continued. “So I understand what you and Ney mean to say. But no matter how painful, or miserable, or difficult things become—I don’t for a moment want to give up this precious life I have with you.”

That was, in Maha’s own way, an admission of her feelings for Ruri.

“Do we wish we weren’t born because that’s what we really want? Or are we just blinded by the difficulty of living in the moment?”

That had been Maha’s case. She had falsely believed she wasn’t loved by her mother, been bogged down by her constant battles, and wound up wishing she had never been born.

“I don’t believe it’s what we really want. I believe we all want to live, to cry out with all our heart that we were glad to be born. We shouldn’t hate the lives we were given but look to overcome our troubles and suffering.”

Maha saw her words as something akin to a prayer. An earnest prayer for herself to be able to live the way she described, and for Ruri to do the same.

“It’s better that we be born for the wrong reasons and live than to let such a sad truth be the answer. Just because something is logical, doesn't mean it can’t be wrong. But deep down, you know that already, don’t you?”

The return to nothingness Ney and the demons wanted might be the most logical thing to do, but Maha’s words resonated deeper with Ruri’s heart. They reached past Ruri’s superficial wish of never having been born and called out her true wish hidden deeper within. Ruri felt that flame within her, the one that had almost gone out, ignite once more.

“Even if there’s sadness, even if there’s contradiction, that’s not all life has to offer. You should know that yourself, Ruri. You were the one to teach me that, after all.” Maha finally stood before Ruri.

Still on her knees, Ruri looked up at her. The light was gradually returning to her eyes.

“I saw how you saw beauty in the world, how you had fun playing with children, how you smiled at that baby. You were the one who made me think that life wasn’t so bad if you were in it.”

“…Miss Maha.”

“Come back to me, Ruri.” Maha reached her hand out. Ruri tried to grab hold of it, but before their hands could touch—



“That’s far enough.”

A crude slab of metal wedged itself in between them.

“Such a shame. I had hoped I would have humanity’s approval as I returned everything to the void.”

The one blocking the two was, naturally, Ney. She had brought her massive sword down, a look of sad disappointment on her face.

“Even if you did somehow get our approval, that wouldn’t mean you had humanity’s,” Maha said.

“Wouldn’t it? Ruri was made for the continued existence of humanity. She essentially represents their collective will. If she of all people were to wish for humanity’s end, then wouldn’t that be the opinion of humanity?”

“That doesn’t make a bit of sense.”

“Hm. Perhaps that was too much for you to understand. No matter.” Ney lifted her sword and rested it on her shoulder. She dropped to a knee and reached her other hand out to the magic circle on the floor. “You’ve left me with no other choice. I’ll do things by force.”

The instant she made contact with the magic circle, its complex pattern began to glow. No, perhaps glow isn’t the word. A dark light, perhaps nothingness itself, began to rise from the magic circle.

“Ruri, run!”

“I-I can’t! I can’t move!”

Maha looked down and saw Ruri’s legs were caught in the magic circle from where she kneeled. She tried to pull her out, but the circle held onto Ruri as though it had a will of its own.

“Ney! End this foolishness already!”

“There’s nothing foolish about granting salvation to the world.”

“...Is there nothing I can say to persuade you?”

“No. If you want to stop me, then show me your strength. Life or nothingness. Let’s decide here what path the world will

choose.”

◆◇◆◇◆

Maha knew better than anyone how absurdly strong Ney was. Trying to parry the first strike and counterattack like she usually did wouldn’t work here. Even the simplest of Ney’s many moves—an overhead swing—would be lethal. So instead, Maha seized the initiative for once, taking one of the vials from her hip and smashing it.

“That which embodies alchemy, the ultimate catalyst we seek. Bring change to my prey!” Inside the vial was a valuable reagent Maha had received from Diriyah, unofficially known as philosopher’s stone. “Gold!”

The philosopher’s stone shattered, and an energy invisible to the naked eye poured out. The wave of energy washed over Ney and enveloped her, slowly turning her into solid gold.

“It worked!” Ruri exclaimed.

“No, it’s not enough!”

Looking closely, one could see Ney’s fingers and feet were already reverting from gold back to flesh. It would only be a matter of time before she regained full movement. Maha followed up by reaching for two vials this time, breaking them both.

“That which tears and pierces, spears of stone and poison. Come forth and destroy my prey!” Maha simultaneously cast two alchemies of similar qualities. This was a difficult feat afforded to her by her high connectivity to the Akashic Record. “Spears of Crystal and Mercury!”

From the scattered contents of the vials formed about a dozen spears. Fast as lightning, they charged at Ney, who was still partly gold, and skewered her small body to pin it against the ground.

“I’m not done yet!” Maha closed the distance and thrust her dagger into Ney while reaching for another vial and scattering its

contents. “That which burns away, raging otherworldly flames. Come forth and incinerate my prey!” For good measure, she used sulfur as a reagent to activate the same alchemy she used against Tao. “Chaining Blaze!”

Flames rose from the dagger she had thrust into her foe, spreading and engulfing her body whole.

“Haah… Haah… Not even you should be able to survive that…” Maha panted heavily, her shoulders heaving. It wasn’t so much the physical strain, but the mental strain that took a toll on her. This was the best chain of moves she could come up with for the situation. If this didn’t work…

“Hm. Not bad. I’ll give you ninety-five points out of a hundred.”

“What…?”

Despite being in the process of burning to ash, Ney’s voice could be heard, utterly calm.

“You can’t be serious…”

As though time were being rewound, the ashes gathered into the shape of a person, and the flames subsided like the ocean tide drawing back. The spears of crystal and mercury came out one by one. At last, the final traces of the golden transformation left Ney’s body. She stood up, completely unscathed. It was as though nothing had happened.

“I’ve been immortal ever since I first began channeling the Akashic Record. I cannot die no matter what I do. Not a soul—human, demon, or otherwise—can kill me.” Saying that, she gave a hearty laugh.

“Damn…!”

“How…how can we defeat someone so powerful?” Ruri asked.

“Hm. You two seem to be misunderstanding,” Ney said with a frown. “I can kill you two whenever I please. But I don’t, because my goal isn’t to kill you two, but to bring salvation to the world.”

“What you’re trying to do isn’t salvation, it’s madness!”

“I’ll say it again: justice without force is powerless. Prove your justice is right through your own strength. If life, the very thing you once denied yourself, is worth living for, then prove it to me!”

Maha sprung forward. The recklessness with which she moved made this look unplanned, as though she were rushing ahead by reflex alone. Was she unable to bear her painful past? Or was she trying to overcome it? Either way, she answered Ney’s call by swinging her dagger down with everything she had. Ney blocked the blow cleanly, but she did nothing more.

“...Why won’t you fight back?”

“My goal is near completion. All I need to do is wait for the Song of the End to complete and activate it, and I’ll have won. What need have I to strike at you?”

“...Hmph.”

“Of course, if you tried to kill Ruri, I would have no choice but to stop you. But you wouldn’t do that, would you?”

Ney spoke with total confidence. She was right, of course, leaving Maha with nothing to say or do but grit her teeth in frustration.

“Miss Maha,” Ruri began. “Perhaps I should—”

“No! Don’t even think about it.”

“Why?! The world will end if I don’t!”

“Even if the world is saved, there’s no meaning if you’re not in it!” The tension of the battle must have made Maha’s lips looser than usual. But what she said was how she genuinely felt.

“Miss Maha...”

“Believe in me, Ruri. I’ll save you and the world both. I promise.” Saying that, she turned to face Ney once more.

“You sure can talk. But what can you do? Is the difference in power between us not clear?”

Maha hadn’t beaten Ney even once in her life. Defeating someone all-powerful and immortal was impossible. At least, it

would be under normal circumstances.

“I didn’t come here without a plan,” Maha said.

“Oh? What’s that plan then?”

“I don’t know yet. But I have full faith it’ll work.”

“...Do you hear yourself right now?”

“You’re strong, Ney. But you let your guard down. You were too eager to conclude there was nothing I could do to defeat you.”

“Is that not the case?”

“It is and it isn’t. You’re right about there being nothing I can do alone. But I’m not alone.”

Indeed. *“Preparations are complete, Maha.”*

“No... So that’s what you were after!” Ney hurriedly released a wave of energy, but I was a moment faster.

“Now severing the connection between the Akashic Record and Ney.”

◆◇◆◇◆

“We’ll have Metako separate Ney from the Akashic Record,” Diriyah said. That was her secret plan to defeat Ney. It wasn’t a terrible plan. I had been the one to channel the Akashic Record into Ney in the first place, so it stood to reason that I was also capable of undoing the process. My connection to Ney was already severed, so I couldn’t interfere with her directly, but her connection to the Akashic Record was another matter.

I needed two things to happen for this plan to work. The first was for Ney to expend herself slightly before pouring energy into the Song of the End. This would buy me time by delaying the activation process. The second was for me to act without Ney’s ability to read minds giving everything away. This sounded impossible, but, thankfully, Maha had an easy solution on hand.

“Metako, take my memories of what we just discussed from me as advance payment for the coming fight.”

Just like that, Maha was able to fight without knowing our strategy, only buying time like we asked of her. She must have been uneasy fighting without knowing what our plan was, but she had still put her faith in Diriyah and me and bought the time I needed.

“It’s all me from here.”

I temporarily turned my attention away from everyone and focused on my consciousness in the immaterial world. The passage of time felt different here, as did the very sensation of existence itself. I became thought and began severing the pathway connecting Ney and the massive ocean of information that was the Akashic Record.

“But of course. You wouldn't let it be that easy, would you?”

I sensed many protective layers of information surrounding the pathway’s core: 666 layers in all. She must have set this up beforehand as a safety measure.

“And you had to go and make them reactive barriers too. How very like you.”

As I tried to sever the pathway, the barriers reacted and attacked with information. I felt a sensation similar to but not quite pain. Physical attacks were ineffectual in this world, but information was dangerous. The information attacks from her reactive barriers were trying to overwrite my own information and alter my existence.

“It’ll take more than that.”

The passage—no, the very concept of time was different in the immaterial world, but I’d spent what felt like an eternity here. Naturally, I’d picked up more than just a few tricks in that time. Unlike Ney, who was fettered to the material world, my body was pure concept. I was confident I wouldn’t be losing a battle of information anytime soon.

“That’s the four-hundredth layer down. About a third left.”

The barriers grew stronger and more complexly woven the further I went. Though I had an advantage as a being of pure concept, these were still the defenses of someone able to use the full power of the Akashic Record—divinity itself. I lost bits of my information here and there as I went—essentially the equivalent of losing an arm.

“Layer five hundred down. Just a little more.”

I couldn’t let my guard down for even a moment. I was reminded of Maha’s life and death battles in the material world, where one mistake would spell the end. Just as I had that thought, one of Ney’s traps, a blade of data, found purchase on me. I felt the searing sensation of my information being altered and blacked out for a moment.

“…You took quite a chunk of me. But I can still fight.”

I thought of the girls. Maha had been forced to fight difficult battles all her life. Ruri had to stare the cruelty of her existence in the eye from the moment she was born. I did this for them both. But above all else, I wanted to save Ney from whatever madness gripped her. I could not give up here.

“Layer six hundred. Almost there.”

With my existence threatening to crumble apart, I broke through the last sixty-six layers. A solid, but paper-thin strand of information appeared before my eyes. This was the pathway. The journey here had been rough, but with this it was done. With the last of my strength, I severed it.

And with that, my job was over.

“Whew… You gave me quite the challenge, [redacted]. Maha, the rest is up to you.”

◆◇◆◇◆

“…You really went and did it.”

I returned to the material world only a moment after I left. Ney glared at Maha, half with indignation and half with pride. This

was probably the first time she'd been outwitted so.

"This is the power of the love between Maha and me. I'm sure it'll only be a matter of time before we get hitched."

"No chance of that. But you did good, Metako." Maha must have been fairly pleased as she didn't rebuke me for once. Gosh, she was just smitten with me, wasn't she?

Ney was no longer all-powerful with her divine power gone. Finally, she and Maha were on a level playing field.

"Don't think you've won with this," said Ney grimly. "I'm still giving energy to the Song of the End. You'll have to incapacitate me to stop the spell, and I'm quite strong even without my divine powers."

"I'm well aware," Maha said, "but at least you can be beaten now. This will be the day I finally win against you, Ney."

Maha braced herself, dagger in her right hand and her left hand lowered, ready to grab a vial at a moment's notice. Ney brandished her massive sword, taller than she was, with ease and rested it on her shoulder. The two of them stared one another down for no more than a few seconds. The first to make a move was Maha.

"That which—"

"Too slow."

The instant Maha tried to chant alchemy, Ney stepped in at a blinding speed and swung her sword down. She didn't have the time to do a full wind-up, so this wasn't quite the sure-kill technique she was so proud of, but it was still a powerful strike regardless. Maha reacted quickly, but she made no attempt to block. Instead, she remained calm and drew a step back as Ney closed in. Her chant had been bait to lure Ney in all along.

"Do you really believe you can dodge me?" Ney reacted in kind, however, bringing her sword up and swinging it horizontally at Maha as she retreated. It was a powerful attack, with a great centrifugal force behind it.

Maha was on her back foot throughout their exchange so far, but her expression showed no discomposure. She calmly observed Ney's movements and reacted as needed. She brought her dagger up and blocked Ney's massive blade, but instead of parrying it aside like she usually would, she let its force send her flying diagonally back to where Ruri was.

"Ruri, listen up." Maha quickly whispered something into Ruri's ear. Ruri gave her a reassuring nod, after which Maha stood up next to her and faced Ney once more. "Let's stop this, Ney."

"...Excuse me?"

"You have no chance of winning this fight," Maha said with utter confidence.

"How amusing. You genuinely believe you can defeat me?" Ney scoffed, thinking Maha had lost her wits.

"You had your ability to read minds to carry you through your fights up until now. But you no longer have it, do you?"

"I do not. But I am not so pathetic that I'd lose just because of that."

"Is that so? Tell me, do you remember how you told us we needed our own sure-kill techniques?"

"...What're you getting at?"

"I finally have one. A technique I've trained and polished to perfection that is sure to take you down."

"Interesting. Let's see it then." Ney took Maha's challenge, holding her sword aloft over her head to prepare her own sure-kill technique—an overhead swing. "Your sure-kill technique versus my sure-kill technique. Let's see whose is truly lethal."

"I accept." Maha readied her dagger and steadied her breathing. She focused on the point below her belly button—known as the dantian, the center of energy—and made her blood rush to every corner of her body. She slowly expanded her focus outward, beyond her own body, until even Ruri and Ney were within her mental field.

“Hmph…” Ney’s expression shifted. Her body wanted to do nothing more than to leap forward right this instant, but she felt she was being goaded into attacking and stopped herself. Her dark-brown eyes were full of caution.

Maha continued to control her breathing. She grasped every minute thing happening around her and felt almighty. She gripped her dagger lightly and—

“Hah!”

“Foo…”

The first to move was Ney. She broke away from the straight-forward, linear attacks she used up until now and unleashed a feint with complicated footwork woven in. Her massive blade then bore down, aimed at Maha’s shoulder. “Wha—”

Maha took a single step to the side, timed just right for Ney to consider the possibility of her strike missing and hurting Ruri if it continued along its trajectory. Ney hesitated, her feet coming to a halt.

“Foo!”

“Haaah!”

Capitalizing on the opportunity, Maha slashed. Undaunted, Ney drew her sword back. A dash of blood sprayed through the air.

“…To think you would use Ruri in such a way.” The blood was Ney’s. She was left with a deep gash starting at her left shoulder and ending across her chest. In disbelief, she fell to her knees.

“My little trick wouldn’t have worked if you could still read minds.” Maha wasn’t unscathed herself. A not-insignificant wound was left on her shoulder. She kept pressure on it with her free hand.

“In what world is that a sure-kill technique?”

“That was all a bluff. I needed you to use your overhead swing, to limit your moves to what I was most familiar with.”

Ney made a look of exasperation upon hearing Maha’s overly-succinct explanation. “I see. I was caught up playing chess,

but you were playing a different game altogether.”

“Yeah. You had grown too reliant on your ability to read minds. That’s why you lost. Your godly power made you forget how much effort people need to put into every little thing they do. You lost the need to struggle.”

“...Indeed.”

“Your philosophy has the same problem. You viewed things from too high of a vantage point. No normal person thinks to stop all suffering by ending the world.”

“Mm...” Ney was starting to lose consciousness due to blood loss. Maha caught her body just before she collapsed.

“I understand why you came to think the way you did. You listened to everyone's voices too much. I pity you for being exposed to such grief for so long.” Before Ney fully lost consciousness, Maha ended with, “Ney. Spend the rest of your life as a human and live searching for your own happiness.”

To think that girl I raised would become someone so reliable and bold, Ney thought to herself with some amusement. *Perhaps humans are stronger than I gave them credit for.*

The former god, having lost to a human she had previously deemed a soul in need of saving, gracefully accepted her defeat.

Epilogue: Together

“So this is the immaterial world? How odd.”

I had become reduced to pure concept, lost all earthly ties, and found myself aimlessly drifting about the immaterial world. There was no concept of light or dark here; the five senses I was accustomed to using were meaningless. I felt as though I were swimming in an endless ocean of information.

The Song of the End was close to activating in the material world, but the concept of time was different here. There was no urgency to stop the Song of the End right this moment, so instead I focused on keeping hold of my personhood. Without a body to define where I began and ended, it would only be a matter of time before the endless current of information made me lose all sense of self. I began fiddling with the information that currently defined me and carefully shaped myself. Everything was information here. Physical limitations didn’t exist, so I could take whatever form I pleased, limited only by imagination.

Once I was secure in my continued personhood, I began setting about sealing the Song of the End. It wasn’t too difficult. I was starting to get used to the immaterial world by this point and finished in no time.

The last thing I did was sever the connection between myself and…her. She had powers equal to those of a god. If she found my coordinates in the immaterial world, she could contact me right away. But I didn’t want that. This would probably devastate her, but I was certain I had to go through with it.

“To be an all-powerful god is a lonely thing…” As I mentioned before, the concept of “other” didn’t exist to someone so powerful. She had managed to not read my mind, to allow me to remain separate from her up until now, but I was in the immaterial world. If she tried to contact me, I would be laid bare, and she would no longer see me as a separate person. I had to act before that happened.

It was only because others were unknown to us that we could fear them, hold interest in them, and encounter new

perspectives. Without anyone she could consider “other” around her anymore, I was sure she would eventually do something extreme. I needed to remain separate from her so I could set her straight when that time came.

“Perhaps you’ll hold a grudge against me… No, I’m almost certain you will. But you know, giving you someone you can still hold a grudge against is half the point, ██.” I felt as though it had been forever since I last used her name. Tenderness swelled up inside me. I wanted to go meet her right this instant, but I refrained and severed the channel that would allow her to reach me. Even if she was all-powerful, she was still human, and I firmly believed every human in this world needed someone other than themselves they could rely on.

“That should do it. Now, let’s see. I wonder what kind of person will finally make contact with me?”

It would take a fair amount of time for someone in the real world to advance their alchemy skills to the point of making use of me, but time in the immaterial world was meaningless. I could contact them right this instant, assuming somebody *would* eventually manage to reach me.

I would hate it if some unkempt man was the one to use me, though. Thinking a cute girl would be nice, I opened a path to my old world.

“…Hello.” Greeting me was a young girl that couldn’t have been more than two or three. Her hair was silver, her eyes red, and she looked delicate as could be. She seemed to think I didn’t hear her and repeated herself, “Hello!”

“Why hello, my dear. I’m… Hm. You can call me Metako. Can I ask what your name is?”

She smiled broadly and answered, “I’m Maha! Hello, Miss Metako!”

◆◇◆◇◆

The sun's heat had grown fierce of late, with the temperature hitting high twenties for several days. At a beach near the Base, a number of young female soldiers enjoyed a dip in the ocean. Their swimsuits all lacked sex appeal, instead prioritizing function, but they were still a treat for the eyes. I made sure to commit the sight to memory and stash it away in the album of my heart.

"Go on. Dip your face under."

"O-okay." At Maha's urging, Ruri held her breath and pressed her face against the surface of the water. "Pwah. How many minutes was that?"

"...Five seconds."

"Aww."

Though her specs as a homunculus were supposed to be high, Ruri sank like a rock when she got in the water. Homunculi had essentially the same body composition as humans, so she wasn't heavier, denser, or anything like that. She was just mystifyingly bad at swimming. She had difficulty even putting her head under the water.

"Come on, you gotta do better than that, Ruri. Just look at Reri go." Diriyah pointed towards a girl that was the spitting image of Ruri, except stony-faced. She swam past them doing a beautiful butterfly stroke. This was Reri, a new homunculus that was based off of Ruri.

"But Miss Reri is good at everything..." Ruri said.

"Perhaps. But let's not give up yet," Maha said, trying to encourage her.

"Right. Get good enough to at least save Maha if she starts to drown," Diriyah teased.

"As if that would ever happen." Maha was an excellent swimmer. In fact, she was just about perfect at everything other than painting. Talk about boring.

"So, what's the deal, anyway? You two a thing yet?" Diriyah asked with a mean grin on her face. Nice one, Mom. I'd give you a

high five if I could.

Maha nearly doubled over out of surprise. “…Wh-where the hell did that come from?”

“What do you mean, where? The two of you have been practically glued to each other,” Diriyah said.

“Yeah, yeah. You guys are totally in your own little world too.”

“And you’re always sneaking glances at one another.”

Other members from the unit started to gather around and tease Maha and Ruri. Everyone seemed to think the two were already a done deal.

“Look…” Maha sighed for the first time that day. “We’re not __”

Before she could get another word in, however, Ruri—still floundering in the water—spoke up. “Miss Maha and I aren’t dating.”

I was a bit surprised she would be the one to deny it first, not Maha. Maha seemed a bit displeased, making a face.

“Oh, really?” one of the girls said.

“Yes. After all…” Ruri made a smile as beautiful as the clear blue sky and declared, “Miss Maha is already my bride!”

The girls excitedly squealed.

“…Ruri. What the heck are you saying,” Maha looked cross.

“Huh? Am I wrong?”

“Of course you are. If anyone’s the bride, it’s you.”

“No, Maha belongs to me.”

“You be quiet, Metako.”

What is this injustice?

Someone clapped to gather everyone’s attention.

“Leave the jokes at that for now. Everyone, come take a break.” It was Ney, wearing her usual smile and acting like some

field trip chaperone. Everyone obeyed and got out of the water.

Ney had been relieved of her position as captain, but her strength was deemed too necessary for the war effort, so she was given an honorary position and allowed to stay with Al-kimiya. As that alone wasn't going to prevent her from trying anything, a geas had been placed on her to keep her from ever attempting to activate the Song of the End again. She seemed to have had a change of heart anyway, and she talked more often with others—most certainly a result of her no longer being able to hear their thoughts.

"It seems she's taking things well."

"Yeah."

Ney's ability to read minds was more of a curse than anything. I genuinely believed she was happier now knowing less about the thoughts of others.

"She has her whole life ahead of her now," Maha said.

"Maha...?" Ruri looked up at her.

"Her argument for using the Song of the End might've been logically infallible, but you could also say she had just stopped trying to challenge her own belief. I want her to take a second shot at life, even if it means there will be struggle and suffering."

Ruri looked down at her feet. She had agreed with Ney's beliefs for a time, even if it was because of what Ney had shown her.

"Ugh. Relax, you two," Diriyah said, sweeping the depressed mood aside. For some reason, she wore her lab coat over her swimsuit. "At the end of the day, Ney's lost her godly powers and has made a binding oath. We can just set her straight again if she gets any funny ideas."

"...Wait, why are you even here, Mother?"

"I'm still testing Reri's swimming capabilities. I wanna be around to fish her out just in case something goes south. Or what, you got a problem with me being here?"

"...No, it's fine." Maha made a face that clearly showed she was embarrassed to be at the beach with her mother.

"Sorry, kid. There are some things in life you just gotta suck up and live with. Being seen at the beach with your mom is one of those things."

Ney came over and said, "Since when did you become such a philosopher?"

"You trying to start something, you flat-chested psycho?"

"Who're you calling a loli?!"

Things started to turn chaotic as Diriyah and Ney butted heads. Leaving the adults to their own devices, Ruri called out to Maha. "Miss Maha."

"Yeah?"

"The truth is...I still wonder sometimes."

"About what?"

"Whether I should've been born. Whether I should be alive."

"Ruri..." Maha felt as though time froze for a moment. During their battle against Ney, she had tried her sincerest to convince Ruri that living was worth it. She began to worry it all hadn't been enough.

Ignorant of Maha's worries, Ruri continued. "I don't agree with what Miss Ney believe before. Really. But sometimes..."

"Yeah?" Her heart racing, Maha urged Ruri to continue.

"Sometimes living...hurts." Such was a fact of life felt by all who lived. Even a homunculus.

Maha thought and thought about what she could possibly say to relieve Ruri of her worries. She racked her brain as hard as she could and, eventually, said, "Ruri. There's likely nothing I can do to take away the hurt you feel. Your pain is yours alone."

"...I see. That's too bad." Ruri smiled weakly and tried to end the conversation there, but Maha continued.

“Even so, I want to understand your pain and be there for you. I want to worry about life side by side with you.”

“Miss Maha…” Ruri felt her chest warm. The fluttery feeling in her was something only the living had the privilege of enjoying.

“So let’s worry together. Until the day comes when you can say you’re glad you came into this world and are living in it.”

“…Okay.” Overwhelmed with emotion, Ruri hugged Maha. Flustered, Maha hugged her back.

“My, my, look at you two showing off,” Ney said. “Quite the picturesque couple. I’m envious, even.”

“You can’t have her!” Ruri said.

“Ha. Looks like you’re popular, Maha.”

“Don’t start, Mother. Jeez.” Maha sighed. She realized then that she hadn’t been keeping track of how often she’d sighed that day. She too had changed.

Hearing the word “picturesque” put an idea in her head, so she let Ruri squabble with Ney and went over to her belongings. She took out a sheet of paper and a watercolor paint set, then began to paint the beach.

“You’ve gotten better.”

“Really?”

“Your painting has more life to it than before.”

“Is that so? I guess I have Ruri to thank for that.” Maha paused for a moment, thinking over what she’d just said. “Ah…”

She recalled what Diriyah had told her a long time ago, about the fairy called Ruri that lived in her magic glasses, and finally felt she understood her mother’s cryptic words.

“Looks like these magic glasses weren’t broken after all.”

The sweet and kind homunculus taught Maha many things, from how to add color to something faded, to the value of life. It was thanks to her that Maha could live looking forward to the future. The world looked different than it did before. Surely that was the work of the fairy’s magic.

“Miss Maha. What you doing?”

“Painting. Wanna join me?”

The two sat side by side and painted the ocean.

Maha would probably face many challenges ahead. She might even stumble and fall at times. But I was certain she would get back up again and find the strength to walk forward as long as Ruri was by her side.

They looked out on the deep-blue ocean. The ebb and flow of the waves caught the light and, in their eyes, seemed to sparkle.

“It’s sure beautiful, Ruri.”

“It is.”

Afterword:

Wandering Yuri author Inori here. Thank you for purchasing *Homunculus Tears: Alchemy for the Brokenhearted*. Did you enjoy Maha and Ruri's story? Maha can be a bit cold at times, but she has a cute side to her as well. Please continue to show her lots of love. As for Ruri, I made her with all the cuteness I could cram into a heroine. I hope she was to your liking.

The theme for this novel was anti-anti-natalism. That's quite the academic-sounding word, but really it just means that this was a story about people who wish they weren't born and want to disappear (or to put it more bluntly, who wish to die) and how they challenge and overcome those thoughts.

The debate over whether or not euthanasia should be legalized in Japan has rapidly intensified as of late. Some other countries have already implemented it, and more and more people seem on board with the idea by the day. Of course, I understand why those in medical pain might choose assisted suicide from a quality of life perspective, and I hope legislation and implementation is as smooth as can be there, but I can't help but think that many of the people of Japan who seek euthanasia seek it for different reasons. It's my belief that those who feel defeated by life and wish for a way out have a truer, more sincere wish deep down that they just can't voice. That's where I drew the inspiration for this novel from. To all those who have the misfortune of wishing they hadn't been brought into this world, I hope the message in this novel could reach you.

This novel involved a number of firsts for me. One of which is the fact we are doing a simultaneous release together with the English, Spanish, and German translation of the novel; another is the fact that I'm self-publishing. Not going through a publisher means losing a lot of advertising potential. The themes in this book are more of the kind of thing you might prefer to keep close to your heart instead of sharing publicly, but if it's all the same to you, it would be of *considerable* help if you could share your thoughts on this book online to help get the word out. Wouldn't it

be amazing if we, together, could make this novel a big hit with word of mouth alone?

I would like to end with some acknowledgements.

To Aonoshimo, who handled the illustrations: Thank you for your work on the manga adaptation of *I'm in Love with the Villainess*. You breathed life into Maha and Ruri and gave them a more defined shape than just descriptions on a page. Thank you so much.

To Hiiragi Ryo, who handled book design: Thank you for being patient with an amateur at book-making like me and creating a most wonderful design. I thank you from the heart.

To Kevin Ishizaka, who handled this novel's English translation: Thank you for your work on the English translation of *I'm in Love with the Villainess*. I'm glad we were able to deliver your wonderful translation out to the English-reading world. Thank you so much.

To SEKAI Editorial, handling the Spanish translation; and Dokico, handling the German translation: Thank you for taking the gamble on this completely unknown work of mine. You have my life-long gratitude. I pray I can repay you both with great sales. Thank you so much.

To my partner Aki: We've finally released *Homunculus Tears*. Let's see what the world thinks of our precious novel together. When release day rolls around, let's go out for some non-alcoholic cocktails again.

Last but not least, to you, who purchased this book: I offer you my deepest gratitude. I pray a part of this book will remain in your heart. Thank you so very much.

The current plan is for this book to be standalone, but depending on reception, it could be expanded into a series with each volume delving into a particular theme. The potential is there. I hope to have your support.

Until next time. This has been Inori.

—Inori, December 2024