

Restaurant to Another World



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3

NOVEL

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Restaurant to Another World 3



Once every
seven days...

It could be
on the beach
or perhaps in
the middle of
town. Maybe
in the woods
or among the
rubble of an
abandoned
ruin.

The wooden
door to an-
other world
appeared
without
warning.

WRITTEN BY

Junpei Inuzuka

ILLUSTRATED BY

Katsumi Enami



**“Is this
all right?”**

**“Black” asked
the master, after
changing into
a pitch-black
waitress outfit.**

Black was shell-shocked by the taste of the “chicken curry,” something she’d never eaten in her entire life. Both her tongue and curiosity hadn’t the slightest clue what had hit them.

“...It’s delicious.”





“Sorry to keep
you waiting!
Here’s your
birthday
cake.”

Aletta held the
large cake in both
of her hands.
It was a special
item that had to
be ordered well
in advance at the
Restaurant to
Another World.



“You see, that **cream puff** contains both white whipped cream and **yellow custard!**”

Adelheid
explained the true
nature of the treat
to *Hannah*.

A detailed illustration of a busy dining table. In the center, a man with a large nose and a dark beard looks towards the viewer. To his right, a young man with dark hair and a surprised expression looks up. Above him, a woman with blonde hair is eating a corn cob. To the left, a man with a green headband and a grey beard is also eating. The background is a warm, pinkish-orange glow with floating light particles. Several speech bubbles and descriptive text blocks are overlaid on the scene.

"I'd love
some
meat,
please."

The dwarven artisans,
Gard and Guilhem.
The ogre couple more
than three times their size,
Tatsuji and Otora.
The priestess with the
silver seal, *Carlotta.*

"Six apiece,
would ya?"

"Keep it
comin'!"

Orders came from every-
one sitting at the table.



Introduction

RESTAURANT TO ANOTHER WORLD

It might be in the mountains, or in the town square, or even in the middle of the sea. But once every seven days, the magical wooden door to another world would appear.

Western Cuisine Nekoya

Every customer was served equally at Nekoya, regardless of social status. This had been the case for the 30 years that the restaurant had opened its arms to visitors from the other side.

Now that whimsical door had found its way to a brand-new location, far beyond the skies of the world: the surface of the moon itself.

On that moon lived but a single creature, one of the Ancient Six. After defeating a tremendously dangerous being with her comrades, the creature had spent tens of thousands of years alone on the moon. She was the Lord of Black. When Black made her way beyond the door only to be reunited with an old friend, Nekoya was changed forever, if only in some small way. But as always, things gradually returned to normal. Customers came and went.

Each and every one of these people, through their individual travails, visited the restaurant in hopes of eating a great meal.

Indeed, in spite of their differences, they all sought that same little taste of happiness.



Restaurant to Another World

VOLUME 3

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Seven Seas Entertainment

ISEKAI SHOKUDO 3

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Restaurant to Another World

VOLUME 3

Nekoya's Menu

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Prologue:

Faraway Days

In the midst of my deep, endless solitude, I once again think back on a past time.

I think back on the fierce, painful, thousand year battle against “it.”

It began without warning. From deep within the planet, deeper even than the deepest depths that “Green” knew all too well, “it” appeared.

“It” was a strange being made up of all sorts of colors yet lacked a single true form. This being melted down and absorbed all the living creatures it touched, becoming one with them.

Long, long ago, “it” arose from deep within the planet, devoured all living things, and promptly gave birth to brand new ones before vanishing once more.

Everything that exists on the planet exists to serve as food for “it.”

“Gold” told me that is the truth of this cursed world we live upon.

“It” has no sentience, no consciousness to speak of. It simply eats and sleeps, almost like a slime or some kind of lesser being.

“I guess the most powerful creature on this planet doesn’t need true intelligence.”

Gold had managed to survive the world’s previous destruction, fleeing to the ends of the sky and biding their time until all had been devoured.

The beings stronger than Gold were unable to defeat the endlessly regenerating existence, and eventually either fled to a different world altogether or were devoured by “it.”

“In order to truly defeat ‘it,’ I realized that someone like you, death itself, would need to work together with powerful beings like ourselves.”

This was the answer that Gold had arrived upon. So after “it” reappeared, they traveled the world and gathered us together.

“Red,” a fighter braver than all others, capable of burning the world down with their flames.

“Blue,” the very opposite of Red. Calm and collected, capable of manipulating both water and ice. The very form of the ocean itself.

“Gold,” the cunning being that feared death more than any other and managed to survive, and master of the skies.

“Green,” the being that had planted its very roots into the planet itself, capable of drawing out its power.

“White,” my polar opposite, and a being capable of controlling the growth of all living things as well as the power of light itself.

...And then me, a being capable of granting death to all.

Together, we were the Ancient Six, and in order to prevent ourselves from being devoured, we combined our powers and fought against “it.”

It was a terrible battle.

Countless times we found ourselves on the edge of defeat, nearly eaten alive. Countless times we fled from the battlefield. It took us 1,000 years to finally destroy “it.”

After having burned it, frozen it, electrocuted it, showered it in light, and bound it to the earth over and over again, “it” had finally been weakened. It was my “death” that ended “it.”

After repeating this process 384,692 times, we confirmed that each and every piece of “it” had ceased functioning. We had won.

That was 34,684 years ago.

With the battle against “it” over, the world changed.

All the creatures born after “its” destruction were significantly weaker than those born before.

“‘It’ was simultaneously a creature that existed to devour the world and a creature that existed to breathe new life into it. By destroying ‘it,’ the world has

lost its ability to give birth to new, strong beings.”

That was Gold’s hypothesis. It didn’t take very long for us to understand the truth of their words.

The creatures born following the death of “it” were all incredibly weak. The weak particles of death I dispersed just by being present were enough to kill them.

If they happened to be my enemy, I thought nothing of it. Enemies existed to be killed in battle.

But I couldn’t stand the idea of killing innocent living creatures just by simply being.

...What I hated most of all was that it felt like I had become the same kind of existence that “it” was.

And so not long after our battle concluded, when we were deciding upon our own personal territories, I chose the end of the sky filled with naught but magical energies. If there were no living beings present, there could be no death.

I was used to keeping to myself, after all.

And so today I do just that, lost in thought...as I have and will continue to do for all eternity.

Chapter 41:

Curry Rice, Once More

Around her, the surface of the moon rumbled, and “Black” was torn away from the deep sea of her thoughts.

Again?

The moon, that vast wilderness floating in the sky, was filled with all manner of magical energies. Apart from Black, who had made it her home, it was barren of life. And that suited her. She quite liked solitude and silence. But on occasion, the solitude was interrupted: large stones would fall from the sky without warning.

Unlike on the surface world, there was no sound on the moon. When the giant stones crashed into the surface, they released their tremendous energies in total silence.

One of these giant stones had once landed directly on Black herself. And while it had no magical power to speak of, the impact alone was such that it had actually crushed her scales, leaving a light wound.

And so Black had learned to cast protective magic around her body. Yet even with those spells in place, she still found herself torn away from her deep thoughts whenever a stone made impact with the surface.

Hm?

Black was already beginning to drift back into her thoughts when she noticed it.

Sitting there on the white surface of the moon, illuminated by the sun above, was a single black shadow that had never been there before. She imagined it was caused by the distortion of magical energies created by the stone’s collision.

And then, something filled with magical power began to manifest where the shadow once stood.

Is this the magic of those so-called elves...?

Just by approaching the strange object, Black was able to sense its nature. She might have technically been the weakest of the Ancient Six, but she was still one of them.

Long ago, when Black and her comrades were fighting *it* on the surface of the planet, there had been an extremely weak race of beings, capable only of running away. Yet over time they learned to use the magical arts, and 1,368 years ago, they had appeared on the moon. This made them the only living creatures other than Black to have set foot on this land. These were the elves, a tremendously weak species.

Black saw that this mass was similar to the magic they had cast upon themselves all those years ago.

While elves had significantly less magical power than Black, they were still adept. This was likely their doing. Black looked beyond the door and realized that it was a transport device, designed to take people to another world.

This is connected to a place belonging to the elves.

On the other side of the door, she could sense the shapes of multiple elves (their ears were much shorter than she remembered).

I'll go take a look. I had best equip myself.

Black was perfectly content to let her consciousness slip into the sea of thought, the way she had passed the last 34,600 years. But she liked the idea of going to see some other living creatures for a change.

And so she focused the magical energies emerging from her body and transformed herself into a female elf.

An elf had once come to Black's territory, seen her, and immediately died on the spot.

These creatures simply weren't strong enough to withstand the "death particles" that Black unconsciously released from her body.

She assumed the elves on the other side of the door would be no different. But taking on this form would prevent that from happening.

On my way, then.

Black, now in her elven form, stepped up to the door and turned the handle. She could hear the magical bells, ringing out onto the silent moon. With that pleasant sound echoing in her ears, Black stepped through the door.

That day, Alphonse, general of the Duchy army, heard something very interesting from Nekoya's master.

"A new curry rice, you say?" The large man repeated back the newest menu item with interest.

"Yup," replied the master, nodding his head and proceeding to explain further. "Well, the fact is, people have been telling me for a long time that they can't eat pork, so they'd like a curry option without it, you know? So I figured if I was gonna go and make a new curry, I might as well try and make it kinda like the stuff across the pond. I only just finally finished something I'm happy with, so I was thinking of throwing it up on the menu. Trying it out."

When he was operating as proprietor of Western Cuisine Nekoya and not the Restaurant to Another World, it wasn't rare for the master to have foreign diners drop in. So he'd worked on this special curry for folks who came from far out west to work at local companies. Like the curry abroad, this stuff was much spicier than the local fare and quite the hit with the foreigners. Even the handful of Japanese folks who tried it out seemed to like it. So he was adding it to the regular menu.

"Hmph, and so you wanted me to try it?"

Alphonse got the gist of what the master was saying. While he didn't know much about the other world, he could tell from the middle-aged man's wording that this curry rice was something quite different from the usual stuff.

An unknown curry. Alphonse was definitely intrigued.

"Of course I'll have a plate," Alphonse said. "Let's go." It wasn't up for debate.

"Thanks a bunch!"

He watched as the master disappeared into the kitchen and took a sip of his

lemon water, which cleared his throat. Alphonse gently closed his eyes, picturing the spicy, strongly scented hot curry.

“What exactly is he going to bring out...?” The large man whispered to himself, salivating all the while. Whatever it was the master was preparing, Alphonse was sure it would be delicious.

And so it finally arrived.

“Sorry for the wait,” the master said, returning with a steaming plate. “Here’s your order of chicken curry.”

The master placed the new curry and rice in front of Alphonse and set a pitcher filled with lemon water off to the side.

“Take your time and enjoy.” The master smiled. “Oh, and before I forget. It’s quite a bit spicier than the usual stuff, so be careful.”

The master returned to work, leaving Alphonse alone with the unknown curry.

“Mm, here we go,” the man said aloud as he took a silver spoon in hand.

Huh, this is quite different than the usual.

The contents of the deep plate resembled a curry-colored soup of some kind. Floating in the broth were large pieces of skinless chicken meat and little else.

Beside this was white rice, a requirement for all curry dishes, but it was otherwise nothing like the dish he was used to. The plate wasn’t flat, and the curry and rice were kept separate.

It certainly has a strong aroma.

The scent wafting up from the bowl made it clear that all manner of spices had been used in the curry. It was much stronger than what Alphonse normally ate, and the spicy fumes struck his stomach like a hammer.

I suppose I’ll start with the soup.

Since the rice and curry had been meaningfully separated, Alphonse decided to partake in the latter by itself. He dunked his spoon into the deep plate and

lifted it to his mouth.

“Nngh?!”

The moment the chicken curry touched his tongue, Alphonse’s eyes widened in shock: he was being assaulted by a burning sensation unlike any he had ever experienced.

I-It’s so spicy! Crap!

He immediately reached for his water and emptied the glass. The gentle lemon-flavored water washed away the flames in his mouth, giving him a moment to collect himself.

“Whew... Curry really does go best with rice,” Alphonse said aloud. This experience was proving that simple truth.

He grabbed a spoonful of rice and topped it with some curry before taking another bite.

...Oooh, I knew it.

Alphonse was tremendously pleased with the flavor spreading throughout his mouth. The extreme heat of the curry was kept in check by the rice. But that wasn’t all. By eating it with the rice, Alphonse was able to take his time and experience all the deliciousness that the curry soup had to offer.

I see. It’s not that there aren’t any vegetables in the curry, it’s that they’ve completely melted into it.

This new curry was packed with the flavor of chicken and vegetables.

Alphonse deduced that the master had cut the vegetables into small pieces and cooked them down over a long period of time. The melted vegetables then spread their savory quality through the soup, eventually becoming one with the broth.

Unlike the typical curry mouthfeel, this new concoction had so many layers of deliciousness.

And this chicken is so tender.

The only curry ingredient that kept its shape was the chicken. Chopped into

sizes perfect for a single bite, the meat was so tender that it almost immediately fell apart in Alphonse's mouth.

It was skinless meat that had absorbed the flavors of the soup stock over a long period of time, free of any extraneous fat but filled with the deliciousness of curry. It was tasty enough that it absolutely deserved the star treatment it was given in this dish. Chicken curry could not exist without chicken, after all.

Once Alphonse recognized all of this, he saw no reason to hesitate further. It wasn't long before he'd devoured everything.

The master came out to check on Alphonse and get his review.

"So? How was it? I know it's a bit hot, so I'm not sure if folks from your side'll like it or not..."

The master knew it was a big hit with the folks from his world, but he was tremendously curious about what the others would think.

"Mm. Let's see." Alphonse looked pensive. "It's much hotter than the other curry dishes I've eaten. It's almost an entirely different type of food. But it's extremely delicious in its own way! Master, could I have another?"

He made his request, giving the master two thumbs up.

I would like one as well, thought Black.

"Aye, coming right..."

As he left to get another serving, the master suddenly let out a surprised cry.

"...What the?!"

What's wrong?

"She" tilted her head and posed her question to the master, her voice echoing directly into his head. A young girl with pointy ears, moonlight eyes, and pale white skin, almost translucent. Her long, pitch-black hair stretched all the way down to the floor.

Was she an elf? The master had been dealing with the denizens of the other world for over ten years now, and he knew an elf when he saw one. There was only one key difference that didn't make much sense to him. A rather large

difference, actually.

“Um, young lady?” The master sputtered. “Erm... Where are your clothes?”

The girl was completely naked.

Clothes?

Black surveyed her surroundings, somewhat confused by the unfamiliar word. But her observations made the situation clear.

Oh, I see.

A quick glance at the other customers revealed that they were all wearing some form of plant thread or animal fur. Black and her kind paid little mind to customs like this, but it was likely some unique facet of elf culture.

I understand. One moment.

If this was an elf nest of some sort, she should abide by their customs. Black quickly set about fashioning “clothes” for herself.

She turned her attention to a horned female elf, who was watching her with stunned eyes. Black was certain she had probably been affected by her condition.

Judging by her current height, Black determined she could simply copy this young female’s garb. It didn’t take long for her to use her magic to change the small particles of dust in the air into “clothes.”

And just like that, Black was clad in an appropriately black waitress uniform.

Is this all right?

Black turned to the master and inquired, once again, directly to his mind.

“Huh?!?! Erm, uh, yeah... That’s some incredible magic you got there.”

It was fairly typical magic for Black, but the master was nonetheless stunned. She’d just changed into a dress out of nowhere, after all.

He knew that magic existed in the other world, but this was his first time seeing it with his own eyes: the kind of magic he’d read about in old picture books and fairy tales.

“Mm, that’s an elf for you.” Alphonse nodded. “They have all sorts of talented magic users.”

At first, he had been a bit startled. As one who lived by way of the sword, he knew little of the ways of magic. However, even he could tell that the magic they’d just witnessed was likely impossible for the average human mage to perform. Elves were on average much more skilled in the magical arts than humans. It wasn’t terribly surprising to see one who could wield it like this.

“Master, get this young lady an order of chicken curry. I’ll cover the cost,” Alphonse spoke up. He should treat the girl after getting to see something so interesting.

This was no sweat off his back. After all, Alphonse had finished paying for curry at this restaurant some ten years ago. He could afford to buy the little lady a meal.

“Aye, you got it,” said the master. “I’ll be right out with your order then. Hang on just a moment.”

He seemed to agree with Alphonse’s reasoning and left for the kitchen to ready an order of curry for the bizarre girl.

Indeed, there was only a single person in Nekoya who truly understood just how abnormal Black’s magic was. Altorius, the great sage who had mastered magic at a level higher than the average elf, had nearly spit out his beer in stunned shock when he saw the display. Who could blame him?

N-no way. She can’t be...?!

Altorius was struggling to come to terms with what he had just seen and that he wasn’t dreaming. The great sage’s genius mind screamed at him: the girl in front of him was almost certainly not an actual elf. In such a short period of time, she was able to use physical manifestation magic without any sort of catalyst.

And there was only a single regular at Nekoya who could do something like that.

Don’t tell me she’s like her?!

Altorius decided to calmly keep tabs on the situation, setting his theory aside for the meantime. But he and his comrades had defeated the dark lord, and he knew there was no way they could handle the creature in front of him.

“Sorry for the wait. Here’s your chicken curry!”

The master returned with curry in hand, passing off Black and Alphonse’s orders to them before disappearing into the back again. Watching him leave, the young girl recalled how Alphonse had indulged in his curry and copied his actions. She took her spoon in hand and tasted the soup.

Delicious.

Black was shell-shocked by the taste of the “chicken curry”—something she’d never eaten in her entire life. Both her tongue and curiosity hadn’t the slightest clue what was hitting them. This so-called chicken curry soup was filled with meat and vegetables that had been cooked in a large volume of water.

Long ago when Black had lived on the surface of this planet, she recalled there being a group of creatures who could not directly absorb the magical energies in the air. In spite of that, they had some measure of knowledge. Black remembered them making a similar dish.

I see. I understand why Red is so fond of this place.

The meat and vegetables had grown tender from being cooked over flames, a taste that would have been unimaginable if they were eaten raw.

This flavor was comforting in a way. It helped Black to recall her old comrade, someone who was also quite fond of the unnecessary action known as “eating.” She and her fellow beings could directly absorb magical energies in the air, so they had no need to consume food.

Red, the comrade in question, wielded the power of fire and was perhaps the most antagonistic of the Ancient Six. After their battle with *it*, each of her comrades had decided on a new nesting ground. Black hadn’t met her since their territories were decided upon. She hoped she was doing well.

Eventually, she finished off her curry.

Another, please.

Black thrust her empty bowl forward, making her request to the horned elf girl who appeared to be in charge of carrying the food.

“Aaaaah?!” Despite her surprise, the elf girl nodded her head. “Oh, um, yes. Of course.”

A little while later, she came out with a new dish.

“Sorry for the wait! Here’s your chicken curry,” said the girl, placing down Black’s second order before her.

Black repeated this process approximately one hundred times, until well after the other customers had headed home and it was about time to close.

Half a day had passed since Black first appeared in the restaurant.

“Oh, what’s this? What a rare treat.”

As Black continued her curry feast, someone approached her.

Red?

Black’s hands stopped moving, hearing her comrade’s familiar voice. Standing before her was her old friend in the form of a human woman.

“Mm. Indeed, it is I. It would appear that you’re doing well, Black.”

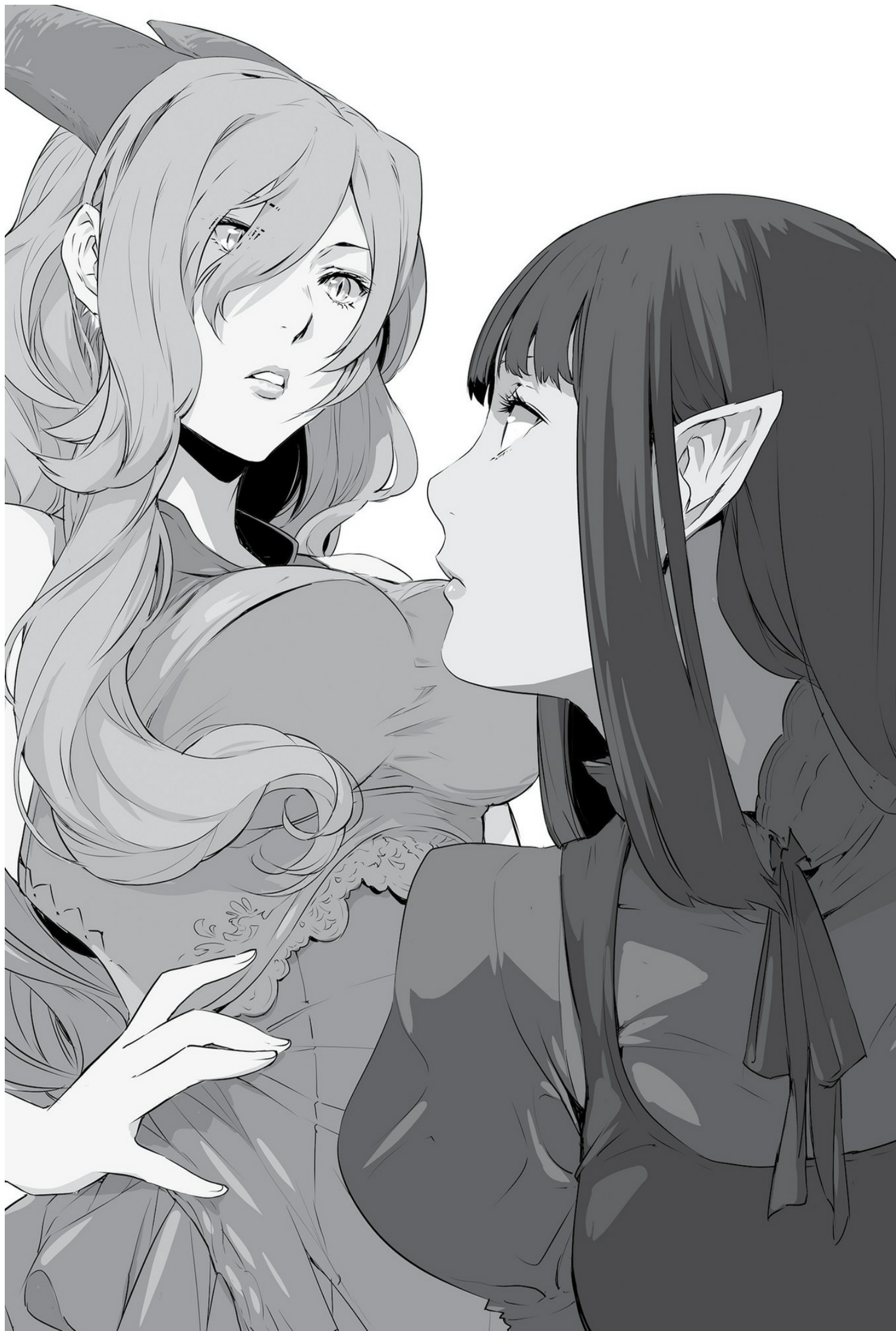
The Red Queen couldn’t help but chuckle at how little her old friend had changed. She was just as she had been tens of thousands of years ago.

Of the Ancient Six, Black was the wisest of all. Yet she also only took interest in that which she cared for. And she was the wielder of darkness itself.

Long ago, the Ancient Six had eliminated the destroyer of worlds and giver of life, the “Million Colors of Chaos.” After it had been dealt with, Black proclaimed that the edge of the sky would be her territory and vanished to go there. The Red Queen hadn’t seen her since, but it appeared as though she’d been getting along just fine over the years.

“I suppose that means a door has appeared in your land... Well, that’s fine.”

The Red Queen gave a wry smile. Then she grew serious again.



“I have a question for you,” she asked her old friend, knowing full well that Black could become an enemy based on her answer.

What is it?

The Red Queen knew Black’s true nature all too well.

The wise creature showed no interest in things that did not draw her fascination. Yet she closely attached herself to anything that did in fact interest her. Depending on her answer, the Red Queen would be forced to show her just who was the most powerful among them.

And so the Red Queen posed her question.

“What is the most delicious meal at this restaurant?”

Chicken curry.

The answer came immediately. To Black, there was simply no other choice.

“...I see. My mistake.”

The Red Queen simultaneously found herself ever so slightly relieved and yet satisfied. She continued to speak.

“Let me give you some advice. At this restaurant, in order to eat any of the dishes, curry included, you need a type of currency that the long-ears thought up.”

Huh?

Black’s eyes widened in surprise. She had no idea what this “currency” stuff was.

“I doubt you’d ever do anything, but let me state it for the record nonetheless. This place is a part of my territory. If you try to pull something here, prepare yourself for the worst,” Red continued, satisfied with the expression on Black’s face.

She knew Black all too well. Unlike the Red Queen, she was not fond of meaningless battle.

And just as Red predicted, Black responded with a question.

What should I do?

She didn't want to have to fight Red. But she found the food here fascinating, and she wanted to try even more of it.

"It's rather simple, really," Red said. "All you have to do is work. The humans here work in exchange for money. Hey, Master!"

Red called over the restaurant's master, formally introducing Black to him.

"This young lady here is an old friend of mine, you see. She lives in the sticks and has never seen or heard of money. The problem is that she's grown quite fond of your cooking. If it's all right with you, could you perhaps hire her to work for you? I can guarantee you that she'll take the job seriously. Plus, instead of coin, you can simply pay her with any leftover chicken curry."

The Red Queen was killing two birds with one stone. Nekoya had been busier than usual lately, and they could use another pair of hands. At the same time, she would also be able to have Black keep an eye on things here while she was busy during the day.

Red was incredibly pleased with this plan of hers.

"Um, is that okay with you, little lady?" The master, somewhat puzzled by this development, turned to Black. The girl nodded her head firmly.

Yes, of course.

It could be nice every once in a while, Black thought to herself. Being in such a loud, crowded place. Spending time with people.

And so on that day, the Restaurant to Another World added a new item to its menu and a brand-new waitress to its Saturday staff.

She was a mysterious girl who appeared when the restaurant opened in the morning, carried food throughout the day until closing time, and then ate chicken curry in exchange for her work.

Only one person knew her true identity.

Chapter 42:

Mont Blanc

Thomas, an adventurer from the Kingdom, couldn't hide his surprise at the amazing taste he'd just stumbled upon.

What the hell is this?! It should be illegal for sweets to taste this good!

The treat before him used marone (known as chestnuts in the other world) quite liberally. It was positively nothing like any sweet Thomas had ever tasted.

At the very top of this dish was the brilliantly yellow, shining marone that had been sweetened and pureed. This part of the confection quickly came undone, falling to pieces in his mouth.

But underneath that was some sort of white substance. It was gentle but sweet like milk, melting in Thomas's mouth the moment he took a bite. Underneath that was some kind of bright yellow, soft, sweet bread.

Any single one of these layers would've been good enough to present to a nobleman or noblewoman. But this dish combined each one of these amazing elements into a single food.

The gentle sweetness faded from Thomas's mouth, and he found himself immediately wanting to take another bite. As he repeated this process, the plate in front of him eventually emptied.

"Yo! Little demon lady!" he called. "Can I get another one of these mont blanc thingamajiggers?"

"Yes, of course!"

This was the third time Thomas had placed this order.

And so, while he waited for his third serving of mont blanc, Thomas leaned back into his comfortable chair and took a moment to lose himself in his thoughts.

When I accepted this gig, I figured something had to be up, considering they offered me 3,000 silver coins just to search for a single confection. But this...

Now having experienced it himself, Thomas understood why he was offered so much money.

I gotta give thanks to the head maid for this one.

Thomas offered his silent gratitude to the head maid, who had passed on to the next life last winter. If it hadn't been for her keeping this place a secret, he would've never gotten his hands on a 3,000 silver coin gig like this. Nor would he have ever been able to eat mont blanc.

I want you to find something for me.

Roped in by the promise of 3,000 silver coins, Thomas the Searcher, an adventurer hailing from the Kingdom, had accepted the gig. This had all happened ten days ago.

It had taken approximately three days by horse carriage and foot to reach the town from the capital city. To the east of this place was an orchard of well-kept marone trees; the town harvested a massive bounty every fall.

In fact, most of the nuts used to make roasted marones or boiled marones came from this very town. This is what led to the town being popularly referred to as "Marone City" instead of its actual name. One could argue that it was among the most important towns in all the Kingdom.

The lord of the territory had married into his wife's family, making her the de facto ruler.

And this woman, Eleanor, was the one who had given Thomas the job.

"S-so you're saying..."

"Yes. I'd like you to search for a certain confection made using marone."

Eleanor was an incredibly beautiful woman in her mid-twenties who already had a child. She smiled and nodded, responding to him.

But Thomas doubted his ears. *She's serious? 3,000 silver coins just for a*

confection?

The instigator of all this was the veteran head maid, a woman who had served the household ever since Eleanor's grandfather's era.

For years, whenever summer turned to fall, the head maid would somehow obtain an amazing confection made using marone and share it with the noble family. It was so incredible that it simply blew away all other confections Eleanor had ever sampled. The entire household was soon helpless before the sweets. They looked forward to this time of the year.

Thomas addressed the young woman. "And so this head maid passed away, leaving you all with no way to find this confection, eh?"

"Correct. It's not as though I haven't searched, but..." Eleanor signed.

From what Thomas was told, the head maid was quite old when she passed away. What they thought was just a simple cold (it was winter, after all) ended up being the thing that took her away from the family. It all happened in just a handful of days.

That's how things were, though. Death was often swift, and one could only make peace with that.

The problem was that the head maid had taken her secret with her to the grave. She was born the daughter of a defunct noble family, and since she had spent most of her life serving the lordship, she didn't have any blood relatives of her own to speak of. She'd passed away single, with no children of her own.

Even her successor, whom she trained herself for many years, had no idea where the head maid had acquired the mysterious confection.

At first, Eleanor assumed she'd be able to get her hands on the confection once the seasons changed. After all, it was made using egregious amounts of marone, her town's most famous crop. While it was certainly of a higher quality than most treats she'd sampled, it seemed safe to assume that the patisserie in town was the source.

And so once fall came around, Eleanor herself went into town to ask the

citizens about this confection. Just where had the head maid bought it all those years? Unfortunately, she soon discovered that not a single person knew.

“I see.” Thomas nodded. “That explains why you’re barking up my...er, asking me for help.”

“Exactly. With Jazelle gone, I’d like you to find this mysterious ‘mont blanc’ for me. Our town’s prosperity rests on your shoulders.”

Indeed, the reason that Eleanor so desperately sought “mont blanc” wasn’t simply because she wanted to eat it herself. Because they’d only ever offered mont blanc to certain visitors, it had become somewhat famous for being a treat one could only find in Marone City.

Eleanor wasn’t sure how they’d learned about it, but people came to town looking for the mont blanc. There was one of the great merchants from the capital city and even a high priestess from the church of the Lord of Light—nobles with an extreme sweet tooth.

They were the kind of people who had no reason to visit a tiny town during this time of the year, yet they came in search of the confection.

And it might have been just a confection. But having these visitors come from so far away, only to be denied that which they so wished to partake in, had left Eleanor with a bad taste in her mouth. More importantly, the value these visitors brought with them was nothing to laugh at, and it was troubling for her to disappoint them, as de facto lord of the land.

So even if it meant spending an exorbitant amount of money, it would all be worth it if she could figure out a way to get her hands on mont blanc again. That’s why Eleanor went out of her way to send a servant far away to the capital city to fetch Thomas and why she had prepared the hefty sum of 3,000 silver coins.

“Understood,” Thomas said. “I’ll do it.”

After hearing the long and short of it, he agreed to take on the mission. While

he was an adventurer, he was much better suited to these kinds of investigations than he was to actual battle. He had once been a treasure hunter, after all.

His eyes had gotten worse and his hands were no longer capable of performing the tricks of a treasure hunter, so he had to step down. But he still retained all the necessary knowledge for tracking down the good stuff. That was why Thomas specialized in investigations as an adventurer; that was who he was now.

“Leave it to me! I’ll find that mont blanc stuff of yours, no matter what!”

And so Thomas began his investigation some eight days ago.

Yet by the third day of his mont blanc investigation, Thomas was stumped.

“Ain’t nobody got a clue, eh?”

This was the season that roasted marone did the rounds, even in the capital city. Thomas was munching on some as he let out a sigh.

The mont blanc search was proving to be about as difficult for Thomas as it was costly for Eleanor. It made sense; her ladyship had already inquired about its origins only to come away with no leads. Thomas figured he’d give it another try, being a fresh pair of eyes, so to speak. But he had nothing to show for his search, even if everyone he spoke to was being mighty cooperative thanks to her ladyship.

In the end, all he had was a handful of requests from the most powerful residents of Marone City asking to be informed about the whereabouts of the mont blanc once he figured it out. Great.

This is real bad. Nobody has a clue. Though I suppose you could say that this proves that the head maid had a way to get her hands on mont blanc without anyone knowing.

Thomas finally realized that it must have been fairly difficult for the head maid to acquire this confection every year without others spotting her.

First and foremost, the confection was not homemade. While the head maid was apparently capable of making simple dishes, she didn't have the means to make something on such a professional level. Plus, if this was simply some homespun recipe, it wouldn't be a mystery!

Additionally, the head maid served the ladyship for many years; there were few in Marone City who didn't at least recognize her.

While the children might not have known her face, the adults who grew up in town would have seen her around from time to time, tagging along with previous lords' wives.

If she was out and about in town, someone must have seen her.

This went doubly so if she was carrying a box with mont blanc in it...

It was a bright blue paper box bearing an illustration of a winged monster dog. A rare sight no matter how you looked at it.

This was what led Thomas to his conclusion.

Could it be...the head maid got her hands on the mont blanc somewhere inside of the mansion?

While this seemed a bit odd, all of the evidence pointed in that direction. Given how familiar the head maid had to be with the grounds, it wouldn't be unusual for her to know some secret the others didn't.

Thomas also concluded that the mont blanc was something the head maid could only get her hands on once every seven days. She had only ever offered the confection to her master during that exact time frame. Not before and not after.

According to Eleanor, any time she or the other members of the household requested the confection, the head maid had turned them down.

And so Thomas decided to ask the maids of the mansion if they had seen the head maid do anything odd. Perhaps that would lead him to "X marks the spot."

There was a closet in the mansion that was used to store Eleanor's old toys and the dresses she'd worn when she was a child. It was cleaned on a fairly regular basis, but otherwise nobody really ever used it. However, the head maid

had apparently visited the closet with great regularity.

“Now that I’m getting up there in my years, there are times when I want to just throw myself into my memories of the Young Mistress,” the other maids reported her saying. But there were too many holes in that story.

The mont blanc has gotta be there.

As a part of his investigation, Thomas elected to make his way to the suspicious room three times a day.

It was on the fifth day that he spotted the magical door bearing an illustration of a cat.

“Now hold on a damn minute. The hell is this?”

In front of him stood a magic door, one that he was certain had not existed the day before. It was as if it had appeared in the closet out of nowhere.

But Thomas didn’t take long to solidify his resolve. “Common sense says what I’m looking for is just beyond...”

He put his hand on the handle and opened the door.

The door opened with the sound of ringing bells.

“Oh? Welcome. You’re quite early.”

Thomas walked through the door into a mysterious room he had never seen before.

There was a demon girl wearing rather daring clothing, her legs bare for all to see. She was cleaning the room alongside a middle-aged man. The latter, likely the master of this place, cheerfully called out to Thomas as he entered the room.

“Ah, yeah, just, uh... Do you have something called ‘mont blanc’?” Thomas asked. “And...do you happen to know Jazelle?”

The first-time customer’s question brought to mind one of the master’s cake-loving regulars. But he hadn’t seen the old woman in nearly half a year.

“Well, not directly, but...”

Thomas was sure of it. This place was the origin of the mysterious mont blanc. His lips curled into a smile. He was pleased as punch that he'd managed to successfully complete the gig.

So Thomas ordered himself a dish of mont blanc, confirming not only that it was as delicious as rumored, but that the place it had come from was called the “Restaurant to Another World.”

After eating a whopping four servings of the stuff, he ordered some more “to go.” Then he took a moment to think.

Lemme see... I completed the request, but this seems like kind of a waste.

At this rate, Thomas would likely never get the chance to eat this amazing confection ever again. Once he handed over the mont blanc and information about the restaurant, he'd probably receive his reward and be sent packing. There was no way Eleanor would just let him use the door if he asked.

Thomas quietly hardened his resolve. *I guess I'll figure it out.*

While he sat in the restaurant enjoying his mont blanc, he noticed all kinds of customers coming in and out. Monsters, nobles, commoners, and even demons sat around him, enjoying their favorite otherworldly foods.

If nothing else, it was clear that there were as many “doors” here as there were customers.

I guess it's time to do a little digging.

If Thomas was lucky, there could even be a door near the royal capital.

“Sorry for the wait.” The demon lady returned, handing him a to-go package. “Here are your six orders of mont blanc!”

“Ah, thank ya.”

Thomas handed over three silver coins, the total cost of the ten servings of mont blanc that he'd ordered. Yet he knew the package he was carrying was, in fact, worth 3,000 silver coins.

Chapter 43:

Scotch Egg

Emilio, a young apprentice priest who served the Lord of Red, stood nervously before the woman in the large stone chair.

“You are most welcome here. I’m truly happy that you’ve come,” Lucia said with an elegant smile.

Although she was older than Emilio’s mother, the skin of Lucia’s face was not marked by a single wrinkle. In fact, at her age, she was still an utterly infatuating woman, with her thin silk robes gracefully hugging the curves of her body. She was a priestess of the Lord of Red, but not just any priestess. There were few who worshipped the Lord of Red who did not know her: Lucia was the great priestess herself, the current leader of the religion.

Lucia was like a queen of sorts to this region’s followers of the Lord of Red. Though she was over fifty years of age, she still retained her great beauty—and thanks to the power of her belief, she was able to take the form of a dragon. In the many battles against the followers of the other Lords, Lucia had been an unstoppable force on the battlefield.

Not only was she herself incredibly accomplished, she came from a long line of distinguished ancestors. She was the descendant of a family bloodline that produced many illustrious priests and priestesses across the ages. Over a thousand years ago, when the non-believer long-eared barbarians invaded from the north, wielding magical weapons, it was Lucia’s ancestors who had transformed into dragons and soared through the skies, burning down the invaders in droves. Even the priests of the Holy Shell Shrine could not ignore their powers.

“Th-thank you very much. It’s an h-honor to be allowed to t-train here,” Emilio replied to the great priestess. He hoped he was conveying how hugely grateful he was for the opportunity.

Emilio was more than aware that as a follower of the Lord of Red, he was still woefully unskilled. He wasn’t a high-ranking priest. He certainly was not

talented enough to be given the opportunity to train here by someone as incredible as the woman before him.

I knew it. I...

Emilio felt the dark thoughts creeping up on him. He may have been an untalented priest, yet there was one attribute he possessed that no other did.

A form like a beautiful young girl.

It was a gift that Emilio didn't need, especially since all he wished for was to become more manly.

Emilio had been subjected to many romantic confessions—from both men who knew he was a man, and men who didn't quite realize it. He had also been on the receiving end of much jealousy from women who coveted his beauty.

He had tried to shave his hair and wear more masculine clothing, but none of that had made a difference. People saw him as a pretty girl, and that was that.

So when Lucia saw his beauty and spoke to him, it gave Emilio pause.

But the great priestess laughed kindly. "Worry not," she said. "I see the potential in you..."

Whether or not she could sense Emilio's inner insecurities, Lucia flashed a beautiful smile, gently caressing the small, feminine boy. Not with her hands, but with her incredibly long tail.

Indeed, humans were not the only race that worshiped the gods with fervor. As long as one had the intelligence, culture, and desire to do so, any being could follow the path of belief.

Lucia herself was one of these nonhumans who worshiped the Lord of Red. She was a lamia. Far stronger than humans, the upper bodies of these beings resembled those of human women, yet their lower bodies were huge snake tails. Lamia were considered to be the race most closely related to the gods, the strongest living creatures in the world. They could take the form of dragons and were also extremely intelligent and magically talented.

Even the lamia who weren't priestesses were stronger than your average

human warrior. That the lamia were able to get along peaceably with humanity was the result of a unique quality inherent to the race.

All lamia were born as women.

As a race of only females, when lamia came of age, they sought out mates from another race in order to have children. Once they received the seed of, let's say, a human, they would then give birth to an egg that would eventually hatch into a lamia girl.

And so, if the lamia cut themselves off from the human race, they would face annihilation.

One needed only look to the great northern continent for proof. According to travelers, the barbaric non-believer lamia who made their home there lived in a tiny village composed of mothers and daughters. There, they would kidnap humans against their will, give birth to their children, and dispose of their functionless partners. As a result, the lamia were viewed as dangerous creatures and were on the verge of extinction.

Lamia elsewhere were more than aware of this situation and so they sought friendly relations with their human counterparts. Occasionally, they would even take in people like Emilio as "trainees." That said, there hadn't been a single female trainee in over a thousand years.

Lucia took her place next to Emilio, bringing her lips close to his face, almost as if she were whispering sweet nothings into his ears.

"Now come... Today is a special day. I'll lead you to the sacred land myself."

"Th-the sacred land?" Emilio stuttered.

"Yes, that's correct. It's a special place to us. Hopefully it will become one to you as well. I welcome you from the bottom of my heart, Emilio. I want you to truly understand that I tell no lies when I speak to you."

Lucia still smiled as she continued to talk to the somewhat confused Emilio. And then she began to move, and he followed, almost as though she were pulling him along.

Look, that's the one Lady Lucia spoke of.

Wow, how wonderful! Lady Lucia certainly has an eye for quality.

Oh, my, are they going to...? Ah, that's right! Today is the Day of Satur, is it not?

The pair made their way through the lamia settlement, which had been designed to hold many times the weight of the average human. Emilio could hear the voices of women talking about him; they were like birds chirping at one another.

E-everyone's looking at me.

Feeling so many eyes tracking him was extremely unsettling. Nonetheless, Emilio continued to follow Lucia. Eventually, the great priestess came to a halt; they had arrived at their destination.

"We're here. This is the sacred land... A place that guards something incredibly special."

Lucia turned to Emilio and revealed what looked, at first glance, like a simple cavern.

The entrance was cracked reddish stone, opened up to the world outside. But there were no decorations or signs that it was maintained like a shrine might have been. It was just a natural cavern.

Emilio looked upon the entrance. "This is... No, I see. I can feel the strength of the fire coming from inside. Its power..."

Emilio was certain that Lucia's words were true: this was sacred land. He sensed the divine powers of the Lord of Red.

Lucia looked at Emilio, her eyes happily narrowing "Right? Let me take you inside." The great priestess began guiding him inside the cavern.

"Thank you very much," Emilio said. He nodded his head and followed after her, unable to contain his curiosity.

They hadn't gone far into the cavern when they came to an open space.

As they crossed, human and lamia, to its far side, Emilio was suddenly struck by the meaning of Lucia's words.

The identity of the item the cavern contained.

Before them was a giant red scale sunken deep into the ground.

"I understand now. So the special thing you mentioned was..."

The Lord of Red must have shed the scale from her body when she did battle with the Lord of Chaos.

And he noticed something else, too. The space around the scale was occupied by dozens of lamia.

"Yes, this is the special thing I mentioned...and it is a place to protect my children," Lucia quietly said, casting her gaze at her fellow lamia curled up all across the open area.

Emilio could see they were soon to be mothers; the lamia women were all coiled around white eggs, each about the size of a human baby.

"It'll be about three seasons until these girls hatch," Lucia said. "Until then, all of the mothers spend most of their days here in this place filled with the energies of our lord."

Lucia made her way to one of the young women, who glanced up as she approached.

"Ah, Grandmother, what is it?" she asked the great priestess, all the while coiled around her egg.

"Rest easy, Lumia. Today I've brought a guest."

"A guest? Oh, my. Welcome to our sacred land. My name is Lumia. It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir Priest."

She gracefully bowed her head to Emilio.

"And so, Lumia, I'm fairly certain today is your day to go..." Lucia began.

"Don't worry, Grandmother," Lumia interrupted, catching on to what the great priestess was requesting of her. The young lamia smiled. "In exchange..."

"But of course," Lucia smiled knowingly in turn.

“Um? What’s going on?”

Emilio sensed he was the only one present who couldn’t follow the conversation.

“Fear not. You will understand soon enough,” Lucia explained. She smiled still as she led him deeper into the cavern, only to stop again further down the way.

Emilio tilted his head in confusion. “Huh? Why is there a door here?”

Why in the blazes was there a door made of oak wood in the middle of a cavern?

This place had been left untouched by outside forces, perhaps because of its status as a divine space. Yet here was a well-kept door, clearly made by some talented craftsman.

Lucia laughed softly at the boy’s bewilderment. “Over ten years ago, our lord bestowed this door upon us. It connects us to the land of the gods.”

The great priestess gently placed her hand on the golden handle.

She turned it and opened the door. And then the sound of ringing bells filled the air.

“Whoa! Wh-what the?!”

As soon as the door opened, Emilio let out a cry of shock. He was engulfed in the power of the Lord of Red, but not just any power. The energies in the air far right now surpassed even those of the shell within the Holy Shell Shrine.

Emilio had never felt the presence of the Lord of Red as strongly as he did in this very moment.

“Prepare yourself,” Lucia warned Emilio, recalling the first time she had entered the door some ten years ago, when it first appeared out of nowhere.

“Beyond this door lies the true holy land, a place that offers its visitors the food of the gods.”

Lucia felt her mouth water. Normally, only expectant mothers were allowed the privilege of feasting here. She hadn’t had many chances to savor the holy land’s delicious goods.

The holy land was much busier than expected.

“There sure are a lot of strange folks here.” Emilio offered up his honest impression, surveying his surroundings with curious eyes.

Sitting inside of the holy land were people wearing unfamiliar uniforms. There were small faeries and even smaller people, a man with a lion head, and a person with cat ears. There were even humans with strangely long ears. It was a collection of truly odd individuals.

“Yes. You see, this is a different world. And like us, all of these people have crossed over from our world via a door,” Lucia explained. She was making her way to an open spot, beside a priest of the Lord of Gold who had recently started frequenting the holy land. She coiled up her tail and sat.

Lucia then directed her gaze at the black-uniformed waitress before turning back to Emilio.

“Come here.”

“Yes, of course...” Emilio made his way to his seat. “Excuse me, Sir Priest.”

“Mm.”

The imposing priest of the Lord of Gold was munching on some kind of confection made of kumaala.

“Welcome! Have you decided on your order yet?”

A beast girl with goat horns appeared before them like she had been waiting in the wings.

“Yes. As usual, we’d like an order of scotch eggs, please. Oh, and make half of them hard-boiled, the other half soft-boiled. As for our sides, we’ll have bread, thank you. And we’ll be ordering more to go. Could we get a pack of twenty made the same way as I just asked? Is that all right with you, Emilio?”

“Yes, I leave it in your hands,” Emilio said, turning bright red as Lucia flashed her beautiful smile his way once more.

“Thank you very much! Here’s your water!”

The waitress gracefully placed two glass cups filled with water before them on the table and disappeared into the back.

Lucia watched Emilio's eyes dart around the room.

"Is it all that strange?" she asked.

"Well, yes..." Emilio said. "This is the Lord of Red's holy land, correct? But it looks more like some sort of dining establishment."

The decor of the room was as mysterious to him as the guests occupying it. Though this was the holy land of the Lord of Red, Emilio and Lucia seemed to be the only ones present who worshipped her.

Right beside them, for instance, was clearly a priest of the Lord of Gold, judging by his clothes. At another table were four women in strange garments, giving off the energies of the power of light. They were almost undoubtedly priestesses of the Lord of White.

He could even sense the presence of the Lord of Black. Was this really, then, the Lord of Red's holy land?

"Yes, you're correct," Lucia said. "This is in fact the domain of the Lord of Red. As for why, well... The Lord of Red herself frequents this very establishment."

Lucia thought back on that day ten years ago. It had been the very first time in her life that she was truly stunned beyond words. She thought of the moment with great fondness and nostalgia.

Meanwhile, this truth bomb sunk in for Emilio.

"What?! The Lord of Red herself?!"

Emilio managed to swallow back any words that might imply he didn't believe Lucia. In front of him was the honorable great priestess of the Lord of Red. Someone of her prowess, never mind your average priest or priestess, would never lie when it came to matters concerning their lord.

"That's right. And it's all because the food here is positively delicious. Fortunately, she only visits late in the evening, so until then, why don't we enjoy ourselves?"

"Y-yes, of course!"

Emilio, still panicked by Lucia's explanation, nodded his head vigorously. Being able to meet the Lord of Red herself would be an unbelievable honor, but it was also too heavy a burden for him to bear. None of this felt real at all.

As they spoke, Lucia spotted a middle-aged man. It was the master of the restaurant, carrying over their food.

"Excellent. Shall we eat then?"

"Sorry for the wait, folks." The master lightly placed the plates of food down on the table.

"Here are your scotch eggs!"

On top of the white plate was a host of lush green vegetables and red sauce accompanying some kind of meat dish. There was also a small container filled with more of the sauce's red juice.

The scotch egg on one side of the plate was cut in half, revealing the thinly diced meats and the yellow and white insides. The egg on the other side maintained its round form, sizzling still.

Next to those eggs was a bowl of colorful soup and another brown dish that Emilio couldn't identify. He only knew that the aroma coming off of it was positively delectable.

"This all looks incredible."

Emilio was at a loss before this mouth-watering display.

"I'll bring your takeout orders and tequila when you're ready to go home. Enjoy!"

The master then vanished, leaving behind Emilio and Lucia surrounded by their plates of steaming food.

"Shall we dig in?" Lucia gazed down at the food. When she looked back up at the excited boy her smile deepened.

"O-of course."

And so the feast began.

"Ah! This is amazing..."

The first thing Emilio reached for had a surface that was well baked and crispy, while the insides were fluffy and sweet. He'd never tasted anything like it before and couldn't help but be impressed.

"That's called 'bread,'" Lucia explained. "It's apparently made by taking a kind of plant called wheat, grinding it into powder, and baking it."

"Wow, wheat, eh? Not corn?" Emilio directed his attention down at the bread in his hands.

Emilio's people usually ate foods made from cornstarch, kneaded in water and then steamed. The fact that he was tasting something so different was enough to convince him of this place's otherworldly nature.

"Now, now." Lucia laughed. "I know the bread is delightful, but make sure you try the scotch eggs!"

"All right," the boy said. "Don't mind if I do..."

Taking Lucia's advice, Emilio turned his attention to the scotch eggs. One of them had been cut in half, steam rising from its yellow and white insides. The cooked meat surrounding the egg was brown like the bread he had just eaten.

Emilio took a bite of one of the eggs, its insides resembling the growth ring in a cut tree.

Whoa...

After biting through the aromatic surface, he could immediately taste the meat below. It had been salted and seasoned perfectly, bringing out the savoriness of the fatty meat and the sweetness of the vegetables.

But that wasn't all; Emilio could taste the boiled egg. It was ever so lightly salted, fusing tightly with the savory flavor of the meat to form a singular experience.

After watching Emilio slowly swallow down the scotch egg, Lucia deepened her smile and asked the boy for his impressions.

"Is it to your liking?"

"Yes, it's spectacular! Incredibly so." Emilio smiled.

“I knew you’d like it. But that’s not all there is to a scotch egg, you see. Next you should try it with that chili sauce... Er, the red juice right there.”

“Okay!”

Emilio once again did as Lucia suggested, pouring just a dab of sauce onto the egg before eating it. Immediately he covered his mouth with his hands.

What the?! It’s so hot!

Indeed, the red juice was in fact both hot and sour. It was clearly a fusion of marmett and chili pepel. By itself, one would be hard-pressed to call it delicious.

But like this, it’s...!

Emilio continued to drive his fork into the scotch egg, dabbing a bit more of the red juice on top of it before eating.

Delicious!

The red juice added a spicy sourness to the relatively simple flavor of the egg and meat. It elevated the scotch egg to a different tier of tastiness. Like the countless lamia who were entranced by its immaculate flavor, Emilio, too, fell under its spell.

“I’m so glad you like it,” Lucia smiled. She turned to eat her portion before they grew cold, relieved by Emilio’s reaction.

And so for a time, only the sounds of forks clanking could be heard coming from their table.

“Next up is the ‘soft-boiled’ scotch egg,” Lucia said to Emilio. They had already made their way through the hard-boiled scotch eggs that had been sliced in half.

“You mean these uncut ones?” Prompted by Lucia’s words, Emilio looked down at the remaining brown egg-shaped objects on the plate. Judging by the shape, it seemed like they must also have been scotch eggs.

“Why haven’t these been cut in two?”

“You’ll find out once you cut them for yourself,” Lucia answered softly. “Now go ahead, cut into it with that knife over there.”

“Okay.”

Emilio picked up the radiant silver knife, pressing it into one of the scotch eggs. It gave no resistance whatsoever, its yellow insides oozing out onto the plate.

“Huh? Wh-whoa! This is...”

After recovering from his surprise, Emilio realized what it was he was looking at.

“That’s right. The yellow yolk hasn’t hardened,” Lucia said.

So that was why they couldn’t come precut.

“Go ahead and eat up... Us lamia have struggled to determine which of the two types of scotch eggs is most delicious.” Lucia urged Emilio to dig in with a smile on her face.

Taking a bite of one of the soft-boiled scotch eggs, Emilio immediately understood why the lamia had so much trouble making that decision. While the yellow yolk of the egg hadn’t yet hardened, it was far from raw. The rich egg flavor coming from the yolk turned out to be the best possible seasoning for the meat.

“Right...I see. This really is hard to compare.”

The egg yolk could be enjoyed on its own or eaten together with the meat. Regardless of how one chose to enjoy it, it tasted incredible.

And so silence once again descended over their table as they dug into their (now soft-boiled) scotch eggs. Before long the dish was finished, and they were using bread to soak up the remaining bits of egg yolk and red juice.

Emilio sighed. “Phew, that was incredible.”

“Wasn’t it just? I’m so glad you enjoyed it all,” Lucia said to her dining companion. He was a thin boy, but he had a healthy appetite.

A little while later, the master appeared, a brown paper bag full of scotch eggs in hand.

“Sorry for the wait! Here’s your order of scotch eggs to go.”

Next to him was a young girl clad in an all-black uniform, holding a bottle of what looked to be some sort of liquor.

“Thank you oh so very much. As always, it was just delightful.”

Lucia expressed her gratitude to the master and took the bag filled with treats for those who could not come with her to the restaurant. With her long fingers, she passed him a handful of silver coins.

The lamia then glanced again at the black-clad girl, feeling a cold chill run down her spine. It made her fingers tremble. Nonetheless, she furrowed her beautiful brow and took the bottle from her.

The master took the silver coins from her and shoved them into his pocket after a quick count.

“Thank you very much! We’re looking forward to your next visit!”

“Indeed. I shall return. Now come, Sir Emilio.”

“Of course.”

The pair passed through the door, their stomachs and hearts full.

“Welcome home, Lady Lucia!” The lamia waiting beyond in the cavern, resting with their eggs, greeted their leader in unison. They gazed fiercely at the bag in Lucia’s hands.

“Hee hee.”

Emilio and Lucia’s eyes met, and they smiled at one another.

And so Emilio’s days of peaceful training were coming to an end. Little did the boy know on that fateful day Lucia had sensed his innate talents. Eventually she would help him to master his great potential and gain the ability to transform into a dragon. He would go on to sire ten “daughters” with Lucia’s grandchildren and become a famous priest in his own right.

Chapter 44:

Salt-Grilled Pacific Saury

In the light of the full moon, Koheiji surveyed his surroundings.

There's gotta be something that can help me get away from that thing...

The wind blew, but Koheiji could still hear its approaching cries.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah..."

It was the cry of a sad, cursed voice, accompanied by sounds of rustling clothes.

There's no doubt about it. All the folks who went missing out here got done in by that wraith.

Koheiji felt chills as he recalled his first encounter with that *thing*.

It was a female wraith—incredibly beautiful, yet where a beautiful woman would have had eyes, the wraith had two shining red lights, infernal embers embedded with a curse toward all living creatures.

He'd heard that, once every few years, a handful of travelers on this road would go missing.

But he didn't think much of it. For merchants like Koheiji without the money to hire a bodyguard, putting one's life in danger was part of the job.

If you found yourself in a bar around here in search of directions, you'd hear all kinds of horrible tales: about roads occupied by packs of ravenous wolves, roads that had been cleared by adventurers who had taken out a goblin nest or two, and roads where ogre couples had made their homes.

When you'd heard all those stories, the fact that one or two people went missing every few years seemed like no worry at all. You'd have to have incredibly bad luck to pull such a short straw.

But Koheiji never expected that he'd be the one to draw that straw.

He looked up at moon shining radiantly in the heavens above. Since the ancient times, it had been said the full moon strengthened the power of the

dead.

Now that he thought back on it, even his little hometown had an apprentice from the shrine keep watch over the cemetery on full-moon nights.

The reason was simple: the powerful dark magic of the full moon was capable of transforming corpses into undead.

I never knew wraiths could be so terrifying...

Koheiji's body trembled in fear. He knew that the wraith was likely still looking for him.

When he was just a kid, he and his dumb friends once came face-to-face with a ghost. A traveler had died near the village entrance; the ghost was, supposedly, his. Koheiji remembered it being a fairly unexciting sight, a translucent man simply standing in place below the cliff he had slipped off of.

While it was creepy—and he had heard that staying around a ghost for multiple days would suck the life out of you and kill you—Koheiji was pretty sure his mom was ten times scarier when she was angry at him and ready to throw a fist or two. It certainly didn't help that a priestess in training with only a bronze sigil to her name was able to exorcise the thing with little difficulty.

But the wraith that Koheiji had just encountered was something else entirely.

This was a real monster. Judging by her appearance, she was likely some sort of noble princess who'd died here during the great war between humans and demons.

A wraith like that, one that clung to this world through the power of its rage and sorrow for decades, or even hundreds, of years—it was said they could take down a priest or priestess with a silver sigil in but a single night.

And if that's how a proper exorcist would fare, there was little doubt that a merchant with minimal sword skills and no magic to speak of wouldn't last a minute. Koheiji was in a pickle.

His path lit by the moon above, Koheiji furiously searched the area for something that might come to his aid.

I-I just need something, anything, to prevent that thing from following me...

What the hell's that?!

That's when he noticed the door with the illustration of a cat on it.

Wh-why in the blazes is there a door here...? Wait, it's about to disappear!

As the full moon made its way to the sky's zenith, the door slowly began to grow transparent. At this rate, it would vanish entirely before he got there.

C-crap!

If Koheiji didn't dive head first into the door at this very instant, there was no question: he'd be killed by the wraith before sunrise.

He didn't know what awaited him beyond the door, but Koheiji had no other option. He had to flee from the monster chasing him.

Ring ring.

The sound of bells rang out as the door opened—just at the moment two white hands caressed Koheiji's face. He immediately passed through, closing the door behind him as hard as he could.



The wraith attempted to follow the merchant, placing a ghostly palm on the surface of the door. But the instant it made contact, the terrifying being let out a scream of intense pain; its hand was burning up.

Slamming the door shut behind him, Koheiji collapsed on the other side.

“A-am I saved?”

The ground on the other side of the door was neither stone nor dirt, but a floor of warm wood, clearly man-made.

He didn’t know where he was. It was pitch-black, but he could sense the presence of other living things. This wasn’t the land of the dead.

And that was enough for him.

Safe for the time being, Koheiji let out a sigh of relief. He leaned against the door. As soon as he realized he was no longer in danger, every ounce of energy left his body; he could barely stand.

Ever since the full moon had risen, summoning the wraith, all he could do was focus on running away from it. Now the exhaustion was finally catching up with him.

It didn’t take long before Koheiji’s snores were sounding throughout the Restaurant to Another World.

“Erm, who the heck is this?”

It was Sunday, the only day that Nekoya was actually closed.

The master had come down to the basement later than usual to turn on the lights in the dining area. It was there that he saw a young man leaning against the door, snoring up a storm.

“I guess he must’ve found his way in during the night.”

The young man was wearing clothes that would have been suited to hiking up a mountain... Actually, his garb resembled something a warrior from the Sengoku period might’ve worn, complete with short blade at his waist.

It didn't take much for the master to figure out what happened.

Last night after giving an order of beef stew to his last customer, he'd seen his two waitresses off for the evening. On the other side, that would've been the middle of the night.

As far as the master knew, the door typically disappeared from the other world at around midnight. This man must've wandered in during that small gap of time.

"Mmm... Is it morning?"

Meanwhile, the man on the floor slowly came to, awakened by his bright surroundings.

"Is it just me, or did it take a while for it to get bright today...? Huh? Who are you?"

The sleepy man finally noticed the master. He tilted his head in confusion.

"...Welcome to Western Cuisine Nekoya," the master said.

Whatever was going on, he was going to treat this odd visitor as a customer.

An otherworldly diner, eh?

A little while later, Koheiji slowly sipped on the ice water the master had put out for him. As far as the merchant could tell, the man was at least ten years his senior.

Koheiji was processing all that had happened.

According to the master, he had wandered into an otherworldly diner that was open only once every seven days.

It was a strange story, certainly, but apparently the previous master and his wife started this place together, and it'd been running for half a century. They'd been doing business with folks like Koheiji for nearly thirty years.

The merchant decided to tell the master about what had led to him wandering through the door: the moonlit night, his awful encounter with the wraith. Apparently there weren't many undead in this world as the master was

surprised by his harrowing tale.

He then spoke to the merchant...

“Sounds like you’ve had one helluva day, pal. Unfortunately, today just happens to be an off day, so I can’t offer you our full menu. But I’d be more than happy to cook you up something if you’d like.”

At that exact moment, Koheiji’s stomach let out a fierce rumble.

Truth be told, he’d spent so much time fleeing for his life that he hadn’t had a single bite to eat since the previous morning.

Koheiji decided to take up the master on his kind offer. Of course, being a fellow merchant of sorts, he refused to accept a meal for free.

Fortunately, he just so happened to have some money on hand in the event he had to abandon his bags. Wrapped up in some cloth were dozens of gold and silver coins he kept on his person at all times.

Koheiji refused the master’s offer to eat for free; together they determined he would pay a single silver coin. Thus he became a proper customer and guest of the Restaurant to Another World.

And so:

“Sorry for the wait. Here’s your order of salt-grilled pacific saury. Today’s miso soup has radish and fried tofu in it.”

The master set Koheiji’s otherworldly foods down in front of him.

Koheiji stared. “Master, I gotta say, this is all pretty grand.”

He wasn’t just being polite; looking at the arrangement of dishes in front of him, it was the only honest reaction. This was far removed from the kinds of fare he expected from the average diner. In fact, it was so luxurious that even describing it as food fit for nobility felt like an understatement.

Packed into a small bowl was a mountain of shimmering white rice, reflecting the light coming down from the ceiling. Sitting next to it was another bowl filled with hot brown soup of some sort. It smelled delicious.

Even the yellow pickled vegetables on their own tiny plate looked great.

But the main attraction of the meal sat directly in front of Koheiji, set on its own separate plate: a slightly browned, black and silver blade-like fish. This was what the master referred to as “salt-grilled pacific saury.”

Beside the fish there was some kind of white, snow-like substance and a piece of green fruit.

“I’m glad to hear you say that!” The master smiled. “Oh, make sure to use some of the soy sauce—that red bottle over there—when you eat the saury. We offer free refills on rice and miso soup, so if you want some more, just give me a holler. Take your time and enjoy yourself!”

And with that, the master returned to the kitchen to start cleaning up and left Koheiji to his meal.

“It all looks so good. Wouldn’t want to let it get cold and all. Guess I’ll dig in.”

Unable to resist the call of the delicious, steaming food in front of him, Koheiji grabbed a pair of chopsticks off of the table and started his journey through food-land.

“Let’s start with this... Whoa, delicious.”

He first grabbed the bowl of brown soup and took a sip. The salty broth was refreshing to Koheiji’s tired stomach and body.

The soup was filled with boiled, minced radish and thinly sliced light brown pieces of something he couldn’t identify.

Both ingredients absorbed the broth of the soup; when Koheiji bit into them, he got to enjoy both the taste of the soup and these components. It was unbelievable.

Without thinking, he immediately reached over for his bowl of rice.

It was the middle of autumn, and the glimmering white rice was likely freshly harvested.

Koheiji took a bite and was stunned into silence.

What the hell? This rice tastes sweet!

Indeed. The rice from the other world was ever so slightly sweet.

It was also significantly softer than the dry stuff that Koheiji was used to. And the more he chewed the rice, the sweeter it tasted.

This partnership of rice and soup was a perfectly satisfying meal in and of itself.

And so the merchant dug into his bowl of white deliciousness while treating the soup as his side.

Koheiji called out: “Master, my apologies, but can I get a refill on the rice and soup?!”

“Aye, you got it. Hang on just a sec.”

The master was quick to fulfill Koheiji’s request, bringing out second servings of both soup and rice almost immediately. But just as the young man was ready to continue his food journey, he realized something important.

He still hadn’t tried the fish.

Koheiji glanced over at the fish he’d never seen before, sitting quietly on its undisturbed plate.

There were diagonal cuts on its crisped skin, with white meat peeking out. The body of the saury itself was thin and long; it was slightly browned after being cooked but still a silver color overall.

Pacific saury was apparently a fairly fatty fish. That explained the fragrance coming from it.

Wait, could this be...

Koheiji remembered something that made his mouth water and his chopsticks reach for the fish.

Perhaps because of how carefully the master had cut into the fish, it was surprisingly easy to pick out the meat from the bones.

Koheiji examined the white meat nestled between his chopsticks before tossing it into his mouth.

This all but confirmed his hunch.

I knew it! This is the “fish of the sea!”

The master had served him something he was more than a little familiar with. Koheiji hailed from the Mountain Nation where the “fish of the sea” was a tremendously important food. And this was that very fish.

Its body was fatty and yet lacking in bones; it tasted far better than anything Koheiji’s people could catch in the rivers of their land.

The master was clearly a pro: the fish was well-cooked, without being dry at all. The browned skin was just as aromatic and delicious as the meat hidden beneath.

This is goddamn incredible!

Koheiji shoveled more rice into his mouth.

A little bit of fish, a lot more rice. The merchant barely made his way through half of the fish before finishing off another bowl.

“Master! Seconds!”

The master already had a fresh bowl in hand as he approached Koheiji. He also offered him some words of advice so as to better enjoy the pacific saury.

“Aye, here you go. Oh, and sir, you should really try the saury after pouring some of the sudachi juice on it. It also goes great with the grated radish. And I highly recommend pouring some of that soy sauce on top as well.”

“Really?”

Koheiji had the sense that the master knew what he was talking about, so he did as he was told. He drizzled some of the green fruit’s juices onto the fish and then put a dash of the grated veggies on top as well. Last but not least, he took hold of the red bottle and drizzled its contents out onto the silver fish.

The liquid slowly turned the white vegetables black, spreading across the silver surface of the saury.

“Well then...”

Koheiji grabbed a piece of the fish and took a bite. It was like a shock to the system.

What is this?! It's even more crazy than it was before!

By adding the refreshing juice of the sudachi, the slightly bitter grated radish, and the uniquely salty soy sauce to the fatty saury meat with its delightfully scented skin, Koheiji had created something else entirely.

It was tremendous. Absolutely tremendous.

There were few other words he could use to describe the meal in front of him. So he just continued to eat, and eat, and eat.

There's no way that one silver coin is enough to pay for all of this.

It wasn't an overstatement to say that this was the most delicious meal Koheiji had ever eaten. And sadly, it didn't take long to finish it all off.

"Now that's what I'm talking about..."

Koheiji devoured another bowl of rice along with some pickled vegetables and soup. Finally, he placed his chopsticks down on the table. His stomach was full, and the fear he felt all throughout the previous day almost seemed like a dream.

"Yo, Master! You're a real lifesaver. I'll leave the money here," Koheiji yelled with extreme gratitude, setting the silver coin down on the table.

"Ah! Hold on just a second!"

The master panicked for a moment, running out to stop the merchant before he could leave. In his hand was a brown paper bag.

He handed it to Koheiji.

"Please take this with you. I rolled up some rice balls for you—kombu, plum, and salted rice balls to be exact. I made sure to include a whole bunch of pickled stuff for ya, too, so feel free to have these for lunch later."

"...Are you sure?" Koheiji replied, stunned by the master's generosity.

Of course he was grateful for the lunch, but he already felt like the pacific saury was worth far more than the single silver coin he'd paid.

"It's no biggie. Plus, 1,000 yen, er, a silver coin is way too much for just pacific saury."

So apparently the master didn't agree.

"All right, if you say so. I'd be more than happy to take these off your hands."

"Great. I'll be looking forward to your next visit, sir. Preferably on a Saturday!"

And so they warmly parted ways.

When Koheiji exited, he found himself underneath the dark fall sky.

"Now that I think about it, only half a day's gone by since all that craziness," he said to himself.

The merchant had been chased by a wraith who undoubtedly would have killed him if it had the chance. All he could do was run...and run he did, all the way to an amazing meal in another world.

Now Koheiji stood tall, alive and full.

It truly put it all in perspective. He was a lucky man.

"Ah, it's all here. Thank goodness."

Koheiji's personal belongings and bags were all present and accounted for on the other side of the door. The wraith obviously had no interest in his stuff. He was hugely thankful that he was able to recover everything he'd had to abandon the previous day.

"Now then, I better haul ass to town before it gets dark."

Once he got there, things were going to get busy. Even if he was going to start selling his wares tomorrow, he still had to report the wraith to the shrine. Once they were made aware of the existence of a wraith—that undead being appearing with the rise of a full moon—they would undoubtedly move to strike it down. The undead were their mortal enemies, after all. Once it was all said and done, that road would be safe for everyone.

Or at the very least, nobody would have to fall victim to a wraith just because they were passing through on the night of a full moon.

I should head back there one of these days.

But as a merchant who traveled the world selling his wares, he wasn't exactly

sure when that day would come.

Still, if he ever found himself traveling that road again, Koheiji decided to visit the restaurant as a proper customer. The thought alone was mouthwatering.

Chapter 45:

BBQ

Stab. Stab. Stab. The master threaded the bamboo skewer over and over again, each stab meeting its target precisely.

His right hand clad in a thin vinyl glove, he was totally focused in the rhythm of filling the bamboo skewers with large chopped up pieces of meat and vegetables.

The master had woken early that morning—so early that many people would describe it as the middle of the night. He'd finishing his preparations and had been single-mindedly stabbing the pieces of food onto the skewers ever since.

There was a mountain of skewers to go, along with meat and vegetables, so he kept at it until opening hours rolled around.

Stab. Stab. Stab.

"Um, Master? What are you doing?"

Aletta's voice broke the master's skewer-trance.

The workday had begun, and he'd barely realized it. He turned to his employee.

"Hm? Ah, just preparing some stuff for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Isn't that an off day?"

"Oh, no, no. When I say tomorrow, I don't mean for Nekoya. These are for the fall festival." The master waved his hand back and forth before a puzzled Aletta.

Indeed, Sunday was the day of the fall festival at the neighborhood shrine. The master and the rest of the business owners in the shopping arcade were going to be putting out stalls and helping out.

There were a great many restaurants in the shopping arcade that Western Cuisine Nekoya occupied. In fact, about half of its neighbors were other restaurants. And another half of the remaining shops supplied those restaurants with ingredients.

Most of the companies in the business district of the neighborhood lacked cafeterias, so every workday around lunchtime, about a thousand office workers would wander their way into the shopping arcade in search of a tasty bite. It made sense that the majority of shops over here would eventually turn into restaurants.

But that didn't mean they had it easy.

More than half of the customers that came to the shopping arcade had a specific place they preferred over all others; they were guaranteed repeaters.

This meant that if a restaurant didn't have at least one unique speciality—one “thing” that brought people back—they wouldn't last a year.

Because of those high standards, the restaurants left standing were highly regarded. Nekoya, of course, was one of them. The shopping arcade boasted Western cuisine, Japanese cuisine, Chinese cuisine, soba, sushi, ramen... While each restaurant had its own unique menu, their chefs all had the skills and clout to call their food the most delicious.

During normal business hours, the restaurants had an agreement that they wouldn't step on each other's toes when it came to menu items. What benefit was there to cannibalizing each other, after all? But there was an exception to this rule, and it came around every fall for the local shrine's festival.

On that one day of the year, restaurant stalls went head to head, competing with each other to sell their fare.

Most customers tended to peruse each stall before deciding on something to eat. It wasn't as if there was anything to lose or gain if a particular customer didn't select you. But there was something deeply frustrating when that person turned you down to eat someone else's food.

Which was why every year, each restaurant in the shopping arcade would attempt to sell more than their rival did. And after lowering their prices as far as they could while still breaking even, it all come down to making the food that would draw the most customers.

It was because of this very “competition” that what started as a tiny shrine's little festival quickly became a popular hot spot for tourists and regular

customers alike. It even got a special feature in every year's Town Magazine.

Of course, as one of the oldest restaurants in the shopping arcade, Nekoya wasn't excluded from this cutthroat competition.

Every year, all the way back to the days of the previous master, Nekoya put together a booth that pushed the standard of quality forward.

And so, the master had settled on his dish for this year's festival.

"These are some skewer-grilled foods I'm planning on selling at the stall. BBQ is probably a better way to describe 'em," the master explained, showing Aletta one of the meat-and-vegetable-stacked skewers.

"BBQ... That's what you call skewer-grilled food in this world?"

"Yup! I had one of my other part-timers give it a try yesterday, and they said it was damn good. And with homemade sauce to boot."

Last year, the master lost handily to a Chinese restaurant, The Laughing Dragon, and the special steamed pork buns they always brought to the festival. Back when he was in high school, he'd worked part-time there under its owner, who was someone he considered to be his own master of sorts. But this year he had confidence that he could win.

If The Laughing Dragon's master was going to come at Nekoya with the mouthwatering aroma of hot, steamed foods, then Nekoya would respond with the savory scent of barbecued meat, vegetables, and seafood.

The master was ready to rock and roll.

"Oh, and I'll be giving you and Kuro some, so you've got that to look forward to!" the master told Aletta. Kuro had just arrived for the day as well. "I figure BBQ is a little too heavy for the morning, so that'll be tonight."

This would be a good chance to get his employees' impressions, too.

"Yay! I'm really excited!" Aletta cheered.

Understood. I'll have it with my curry, Kuro spoke into their minds.

Aletta nodded her head firmly. If the master was so confident, there was no

way it wouldn't be delicious. She was certain of it.

"That's what I like to hear." The master smiled. "Ah, looks like we've already got guests."

The bell at the front door rang, signaling the start of business hours. The master watched as Aletta hurried over to greet the customers and went back to threading the skewers with vegetables and meat.

While the Restaurant to Another World was busy around lunchtime, things got fairly quiet when the sun set.

Many of the doors Nekoya was connected to were in out of the way spots. Some of them were near settlements or in towns and cities, but the majority of doors were in the middle of nowhere.

If someone tried to visit Nekoya in the evening hours, by the time they reached the door, the moon was usually high up in the sky.

Not to mention, the night brought with it all manner of dangerous beings. Monsters, beasts, and the undead were all active in the nighttime. So it simply made more sense to drop by during the daytime, rather than risk death.

But these beings, too, might be customers of the Restaurant to Another World. All manner of monsters called the areas around doors their homes. Halflings weren't the only race to camp out nearby.

And so the evening came. Compared to lunchtime, things were generally much less busy. One group had pushed two tables together to fit their whole party.

"Oh hoh! Whiskey really is the best damn liquor ever!"

"Oooh, yeah! And with this fried seafood? Unbeatable, you hear me?!"

Gard and Guilhem, a pair of dwarf artisans, downed strong whiskey as if it were water.

"Heh, you just don't get it, do you? Shochu is the best booze in this whole joint."

“Right that. They both might be strong, but shochu is way more delicious.”

Drinking next to the two short dwarves was a couple of ogres at least three times the dwarves’ height, Tatsuji and Otoru.

“I wonder about that. I’m personally all about the wine here.”

“Agreed, my love. The red and white wines of this world are positively delightful.”

A pair of pale vampires, Romero and Julietta, offered this opinion to the group, savoring their wine.

“Really? If we’re talking grapes, I’d rather go with brandy... Wait a second! Hey, dwarf! I heard rumors that you folks can make whiskey. C’mon, make some brandy instead! Lady Celestine needs some for those sweets she makes and all! If you can make the real deal, the Shrine of Light would gladly buy it all off of you!”

Carlotta, a ravishing redhead and silver sigiled priestess of the Lord of Light, had enjoyed a round of pound cake with her boss and fellow associates. After seeing them off, she’d stayed behind with this group to enjoy a glass of brandy.

Indeed, each of the people at this table was able to leave Nekoya that night without any concern. They were the boozehounds of the Restaurant to Another World, the tipsy regulars. Had their meeting happened out in the real world, there was little doubt that it would have been a nightmarish bloodbath. But at Nekoya, that kind of behavior was strictly forbidden.

Long ago, a customer who dined and dashed had been forbidden from ever returning to the restaurant. That was when this rule was first established.

After enjoying their favorite meals, the members of this group had moved from their respective tables and joined up to enjoy some drinks and light snacks together.

Meanwhile, Aletta found an open table and sat down with a plate for herself—a single skewer. Tatsuji and Otoru caught sight of the dish in the girl’s hands.

“Oh? Ain’t that the waitress? Must be dinner time.”

“Wow... Is that some kind of skewer-grilled food? Looks real good.”

They knew that the master, a resident of the other world, offered his employees foods that he normally didn't serve to customers. Off-menu dishes.

On occasion, people would see the demon waitress eating something that looked delicious and attempt to order it for themselves. But they almost always got the same response: "Sorry, pal. But that's not the sort of dish I offer to customers."

"Man, today's staff meal looks even more delicious than the usual."

"I bet it'd go great with booze..."

The dwarves, catching sight of Aletta's plate as well, could tell that her dinner would pair well with alcohol. They gulped their drinks, eyes set on the girl and her meal.

Their round noses quivered, taking in the aroma of the cooked fish. The delicious scent in the air only made it worse that they couldn't sample the skewer themselves.

"Hmph... Seafood and vegetables, eh?"

"I bet it'd go lovely with white wine, my love."

The vampire couple waxed nostalgic about the pairing of wine and fish. As nobility in their realm, they'd sampled it many times.

Carlotta was less impressed.

"Hmm. I prefer meat, to be honest. I've never really had much fish. I can't even imagine what that dish would taste like."

She'd been born in a landlocked place; "seafood" meant little to her.

Aletta paid no mind to the eyes on her as she gulped her meal down loudly.

I better eat before it gets cold!

Under normal circumstances, the skewered seafood and vegetables would have been handed to her from a booth and eaten on the spot.

From top to bottom, the skewer was threaded with scallops, a yellow vegetable called corn, krakeen, a kind of mushroom called king oyster, and

finally a curled-up shripe. The vegetables in particular were said to be most delicious during this time of the year. They'd been barbecued with just a dash of soy sauce.

According to the master, the skewered meat was a bit rich in flavor, so seafood was the lighter of the two options.

"Thank you, oh god of demons, for this, my daily bread. I offer you my gratitude."

Aletta offered her prayers to her god before promptly lifting up the skewer. The tantalizing scent wafted upward.

Aletta's other boss, Sarah, had once explained to her that there was a saltwater lake called the ocean. The demon girl had unfortunately never seen it for herself.

What she did know was that all the creatures of the ocean that Nekoya served were delicious.

Aletta took a moment to just enjoy the unique aroma of cooked seafood and soy sauce.

It was enough to make her mouth water.

She swallowed loudly and took a bite.

Mm! It's delicious!

Aletta opened her mouth to let out some of the hot steam from the freshly cooked food, taking time to savor the first bite.

The first thing that jumped out at Aletta was the flavor of the shellfish seasoned with soy sauce. She was used to eating these sorts of foods with some kind of crust or breading, but this had just been cooked over fire with some soy sauce. Yet it tasted amazing! Was this magic?

With each bite the shellfish fell apart in her mouth, releasing its savory juices. This would have been a magnificent meal in itself.

But there was so much more to the skewer.

The sweet corn, the tender mouthfeel of the krakeen, the mushrooms

drenched in soy sauce, and the delicious finale: shripe.

Because the skewer alternated from seafood to vegetable, Aletta could enjoy each component on its own.

It didn't take long for her to polish off the whole thing.

That was delicious, but I want more!

The skewer had been a shock to her taste buds, and Aletta was ready for another round.

That was when it happened.

I brought seconds. Try the meat one.

Kuro, the other waitress, telepathically communicated her intent to Aletta, placing a new skewer atop her empty plate.

"Are you sure?!" Aletta looked up, spotting both Kuro and the master.

"Of course!" the master said. "Plus, I figured just one wouldn't be enough. I was planning on having you try both of them to begin with. Kuro said it was delicious, by the way."

"Wow, thank you so much!"

Aletta reached for the meat skewer while the master watched over her.

Ah, the sauce on this is amazing!

The moment she bit into it, Aletta was overwhelmed by the deliciousness of the meat skewer's sauce.

It was sweet, spicy, and sour at the same time. All three flavors mingled in her mouth, fusing into one super flavor.

The beef on the skewer had soaked up the sauce. Thanks to the master's careful prep work, the meat was nice and tender, filled with delicious juices that gave the sauce a run for its money.

Even better, between the pieces of meat were pieces of oranie and cobbler's tubers. The oranie had only been lightly cooked, so it maintained its delicious snap and hot flavor just fine. Each bite came with a satisfying crunch, the vegetable melding wonderfully with the taste of the sauce. Meanwhile, the

cobbler's tubers had been boiled and cut into the perfect size, and crumbled apart in her mouth with every bite.

Each vegetable was a palate cleanser, allowing Aletta to fully enjoy the rich flavor of the meat without issue. She was thoroughly satisfied.

"Well? How was it? Do I get a thumbs up?" the master inquired.

"Two, even! They were both delicious!" Aletta smiled, nodding her head. This was her honest impression. In fact, it was so delicious that she'd be willing to part ways with some of her precious pay just to buy more.

"I see, I see," the master said. "All right! Tomorrow's lookin' damn bright!"

He let out a sigh of relief. But little did he or Aletta know that nearby, a certain group had been eavesdropping.

"Yo, Master! Are those for sale?"

The master jumped in surprise as the large ogre man called out to him. And it wasn't long before he saw: not only were the ogre's eyes enthusiastically glimmering at the prospect of BBQ, but so were the eyes of all his companions at the table.

"Huh?! Uh, well, er, yeah..." the master stuttered.

As soon as he'd said it, the thought crossed his mind: *Did I just make a terrible, awful, no good mistake?*

"Well, in that case, get me one of those skewers! I'll take five of them seafood ones to start with!"

"Five meat skewers over here, Master! Make haste!"

"We'll be having ten each to start with! Oh, and another bottle of shochu!"

"Just keep 'em coming! I know for sure they're gonna go well with the booze!"

"Then I suppose we'll have one of each, then. Ah, if possible, could you bring them out without the skewers?"

"Spare the garlik, thank you!"

“Ah, then I’ll have one of the meat ones. I bet it’d go better with beer instead of brandy, so could I get some of that, too?”

Everyone called out an order.

“Huh? Um, well, all right.”

The master reluctantly nodded his head. He hadn’t planned on selling the skewers to customers, but it’d be rude to say they couldn’t have them because they were from the other world.

...By the end of the night, over one hundred BBQ skewers would be devoured, forcing the master to work well into the night to prepare for the fall festival. But that’s a story for another time.

Chapter 46:

Cream Stew

Now that I think about it, mused the half-elf magic warrior Melissa, *I suppose today's going to be my last day coming here.*

She was greeted with the familiar sound of bells ringing as she stepped into the Restaurant to Another World.

All the preparations had been made; the next day she would be departing for her homeland.

It had been ten years since Melissa and her crew of adventurers had stumbled upon this place at the end of a journey. They'd been through so much together since then, good times and bad.

Melissa had been fifty years old when it all started; now she was sixty. And while in her mind that span of time was a mere instant, to her human friends it felt much, much longer.

It was so fun when we first found this place...

Melissa had first met her friends when she was a novice adventurer just starting out on her own. She would battle goblins or protect folks traveling from one town to the other and then work as a waitress at the local bar in her downtime.

One day Melissa and her crew decided to pillage a local ruin not too far out of town. Little did they know that the place had been ransacked and robbed of all its riches long since.

The leader of their group proclaimed that all adventurers had to try their hands at treasure hunting at least once. This was enough to send the crew off to the ruins, despite the master of the bar insisting that there'd be nothing left to find.

No matter. This was their first attempt at ruin-diving, and she remembered it well.

They struggled and fought their way through, fending off the wild beasts and

weak demi-humans that made the place their home. Finally, they came to the deepest room. There, all they found was an empty treasure chest that had been destroyed by previous visitors. But there was also a “door.”

A magical door, one that only opened once every seven days, on the Day of Satur.

The door to the Restaurant to Another World.

Beyond the door was a restaurant that served all manner of otherworldly foods, things that Melissa and her friends had never seen, heard of, or eaten before. The kicker? It was all delicious. The crew quickly fell under the restaurant’s spell.

Because of the door’s out-of-the-way location, they couldn’t quite visit every week, but somehow it seemed that they made their way to the place every time something notable happened or was worth celebrating.

For example, when a bodyguard gig went off without a hitch, lining their pockets with cash.

Or the time when they got caught up in the events that would shake a small nation to its core—and had finally returned in one piece after months and months of perilous adventure.

Or perhaps the time when they had finally become proper adventurers, when they were mourning one of their own, a friend who’d died after getting caught in a trap in an old ruin.

Or even the happier time they had welcomed a new friend into their party, and they’d led them into the ruins to share the secret of the door.

...And then there was the time when the group’s leader and its mage announced they would be getting married. It was then the party decided to finally split up.

Seven days earlier, Melissa’s party had held a final goodbye feast.

They set up camp deep within the ruins, using huge amounts of their saved-

up funds to supply the festivities with booze, food, and merriment. They cheered and partied all day and all night. It was a celebration to remember.

Two days later, the leader and mage were married, and they returned home. A few other members of the crew decided to take this opportunity to retire and use their saved funds to start a business. Others joined up with another party. Everyone followed their own unique paths, and soon they had scattered to the four winds.

Melissa, the magical warrior (she had inherited her mother's magical talents and her older brother's spear skills), was no different. She decided that the time had come; she would go home for the first time in ten years. Home to a small human village on the edge of the elf forest.

There, she would see her mother, a woman who had likely changed very little since her departure.

Melissa was something of a rarity these days: her father was a human and her mother was an elf, but she was no changeling. Just an ordinary half-elf.

When her father was still young, he had been renowned as an incredibly gifted mercenary, a man who faced off against countless powerful demon foes armed with a single spear.

Melissa's mother was a maiden who left the elf forest out of sheer curiosity, wanting to see the outside world. Yet she had been caught by a group of bandit demons who enslaved her. It was Melissa's father who stumbled upon this group and saved her. The two of them traveled together and eventually wed.

As a young man, Melissa's father had been quite the looker. Before he was married, all manner of women sought his affections—a source of endless jealousy for his soon-to-be wife.

Melissa couldn't even begin to imagine it. He died when she was just ten years old, and she could only remember him as an old, bald man with a snow-white beard.

Melissa was the last born in the family, and a latecomer at that. Her mother had decided that she would never be with anyone other than her husband, and so she coddled and doted on her youngest daughter endlessly.

The magic Melissa learned from her mother—they'd work in a lesson when business was slow at the family inn—had proven useful in her adventures. And so had the spear skills she was taught by her much older brother—there was a fifty-year age gap between them. Her brother had learned spear-fighting at the hand of their father and passed down what he knew.

When Melissa had reached her fifties, she told her family that she wanted to become an adventurer. She longed to see the outside world that her mother and older brother spoke so much of. The two of them laughed, but they saw her off with smiles as Melissa made her way.

And so when it was decided that the crew would part ways, Melissa chose to go home. She would help her mother manage the inn that her father built.

Truth be told, she planned to begin her journey home the day after the goodbye party. The only reason she stuck around for another seven days was because of the words of the master.

Indeed, on the night of the party, the master of the restaurant—he reminded Melissa of her own father—told her what was to come.

"I see, so you're heading home, eh? In that case, do you think you could wait a week...er, seven days until you go back? I'd like to treat you to something special—an off-menu item. Think of it as a goodbye gift."

The white-haired master of Restaurant to Another World gave her a smile. She wasn't sure what it was, but something about talking to him made it seem like her own father was standing before her, though he'd passed away fifty years before.

A special meal from the Restaurant to Another World. Sheer curiosity was enough to make Melissa wait for seven days. So she got a room at an inn in town.

And then the day finally came.

"Yo! Glad you came."

The master approached her with kindness as he always did, in the fairly

empty restaurant.

“Of course. Thank you so much for having me,” Melissa responded politely, taking a seat at her usual spot. “So what are you going to be serving me today?”

The old gentleman deepened the smile on his face as he began to explain.

Melissa had known the man for some ten years now. For a human, that was a not insignificant amount of time, and she felt she knew him fairly well.

She knew that even though he had been married for over fifty years, he was still madly in love with his wife. She knew that he was excited for his grandson’s future—the young man had recently made great strides as a chef.

And she knew that he had never once disappointed her when it came to food.

“Well, ya see... Today you’re gonna be having cream stew! No meat, of course.”

“Wow. You made me cream strew?”

Melissa understood why the master had said it would be something special.

Cream stew without the meat. This was a dish that Melissa often ordered.

As a half-elf raised by a mother who was a pure-blood elf, she wasn’t particularly fond of meat, fish, milk, or eggs. It wasn’t as though she couldn’t eat them at all; in a worst-case scenario, she could bear with it. But the smell of animal products was extremely unpleasant for her.

Yet she’d still managed to fall in love with this restaurant’s cream stew. It was positively delicious.

And so whenever Melissa requested cream stew, the master would prepare it without the meat and add more vegetables.

“Of course, this ain’t no everyday cream stew. It’s pretty dang special if I do say so myself.”

The master carefully watched Melissa’s expression, his smile deepening ever further.

“So just hang on real quick.”

The older man then retreated into the back to collect the dish he'd just finished.

"Sorry about that. I present to you, Nekoya's special elf bean cream stew!"

The older man lightly placed a deep dish before her. It was filled with white soup.

"This is my gift to you, so of course it's on the house," the master said. "Dig in!"

"Thank you very much," Melissa replied, a big smile on her face.



“Well then, take your time and... Oh, it’s nothing!”

At the front of the restaurant, bells rang.

“Hello?”

The master quickly trotted over to greet a new customer, a lizardman. Melissa picked up the silver spoon on the table.

No meat as usual.

Melissa briefly checked the components of the stew. Thick mushrooms that were readily harvested in the fall, fresh orange karoots, oranie that had been stir fried until they were translucent. And then of course there was the spinooch that was added at the very end, still retaining its bright green color.

There was indeed no meat to be found in the dish. The fresh vegetables mingled in the stew, creating a wonderful aroma.

Melissa noticed something was different, though.

Wait a minute... This stew doesn’t smell the same as usual. But why?

The aroma had an ever so slight variation from the norm. It made sense that it didn’t smell of meat, but it also lacked the milky scent it usually had.

Well, I suppose I’ll figure it out once I try it.

She brought the silver spoon to her mouth.

It’s delicious, of course.

The slightly sweet but gentle flavor spread throughout her mouth, causing Melissa’s cheeks to puff out with glee. The vegetables had been cooked just right.

They were all so tender that they crumbled after a single bite, and each one had absorbed the flavors of the soup. The milky flavor helped make the vegetables moist, while the vegetables helped to enhance the taste of the milk. And then there were the mushrooms.

The savory mushrooms tasted just like the ones you could find in the elf forest near her home. The nostalgia and fusion of flavors put a giant smile on Melissa’s face.

The master wandered back over. “Oh, I take it you’re enjoying it?”

“Absolutely. Could I possibly get seconds?”

“Of course. I made this specifically for you, after all. Ain’t no other customers gettin’ it, so have as much as you’d like!”

The master smiled, nodding his head. It would’ve been a shame if Melissa only got to enjoy a single bowl of this tremendous dish.

The young woman looked about the same age as his own grandson, and the master couldn’t help but smile. He wanted to dote on her a little bit.

And so after finishing off three whole bowls, Melissa finally set down her spoon. She let out a satisfied sigh.

“Phew, that was truly wonderful. Thank you, Master.”

“No problem at all! Ain’t nothing better than seeing someone enjoy my cooking! If anything, thank you for all these years of patronage. I really appreciate it.”

Melissa looked at the bowl. This would be the last dish she ever finished here.

With that thought running through her mind, Melissa decided to ask the master about the strange thing she’d noticed.

“...By the way, how did you make this? It tastes like milk but doesn’t smell like it at all.”

Milk was an absolute requirement when it came to making cream stew taste, well, creamy. But there was no way to get that flavor without the accompanying scent. Or so she thought, anyhow.

If she didn’t ask for answers now, she thought she would never get them.

“Oh, well you see...” The master immediately began to give her a rundown of his process. “I made this cream stew using only stuff from your world. Not just the vegetables, but the sauce and everything.”

He’d bought all the ingredients off merchants from her world who frequented the restaurant. That was the food he was accustomed to preparing and serving

to himself, his beloved wife, and his grandson.

And so using ingredients from Melissa's world, he'd made this cream stew using techniques from his world.

"So you see, in our world, we got milk that you can't get from animals. Hell, we basically make it from scratch. Elves hate raw-smelling things, yeah? So today's soup was made without using a single thing that smells raw. I guess if I had to give it a name on this side, it'd be something like a vegetarian stew."

The elf bean existed in Melissa's world; they were raised by elves themselves. However, there was a very similar crop in the master's world.

In his country, they used that bean to make a manner of food products. It was very useful in that way; one such use was a milk that could be made without a cow.

And so out of curiosity, the master decided to give this a try with the elf beans from her world. He'd found he was able to make pretty much the same exact thing. That's why he decided on this dish when it came down to saying goodbye to one of his long-time regulars.

"As far as how I actually put it all together, well, try and figure that out for yourself." The master chuckled. "Unfortunately, it's a habit of mine not to share recipes with customers. Hah hah."

This wasn't limited to denizens of Melissa's world, either. He didn't tell anyone his recipes. And perhaps more importantly...

"Plus, I'm sure you can figure it out. I know you can. This is my gift to you."

Melissa was one of only a handful of customers who had frequented the Restaurant to Another World since its creation. The master was certain she'd be able to find the answer for herself.

"I see... Thank you, Master. It was truly delicious." Melissa could do nothing but smile warmly at the master's words.

Indeed, the stew was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted, and the fact that she had some to take back to her village with her made it all the better.

Melissa got up. "This will probably be the last time we see each other. Take

care, Master.”

“Yeah, you too. If you ever end up near a door, know that you’ll always be welcome here.”

And so the master said goodbye to one of his regulars, the both of them certain this would be the last time they ever exchanged words.

And so eighteen years passed since Melissa’s encounter with the “special cream stew.”

Today, the inn where Melissa worked as a chef was packed with customers as always.

“Whew, it’s really gotten cold out there. Melissa, can I get some of that elf bean cream stew, please?”

“That stuff really is delicious, right?”

“Yeah, this is the ticket. The last time I had cream stew made by a human, it was so smelly that it barely qualified as food.”

“Well, Melissa’s stuff is special, after all.”

“Wait, is this tofu?”

“Excuse me! Can I have another order of elf bean stew?”

Over half of the customers in the small dining room were elves, stopping by the inn that Melissa’s father built many moons ago.

In the daytime it served as a restaurant; at night it became a tavern. What made this place unique was a special item on the menu that could only be eaten there.

Elf bean cream stew.

It was a mysterious stew that contained no meat, fish, eggs, or milk, so elves could happily enjoy it with no issues.

The dish was so renowned that there wasn’t a single elf in the area that hadn’t sampled it.

After her last visit to the Restaurant to Another World, it took Melissa eight years to finally decipher the secret of the recipe.

That day, the master had told her it was “elf bean” cream stew.

Something about that seemed off. After all, there were no elf beans to be found in the stew itself. No *whole* elf beans. It was that realization that changed everything.

After dozens of tests and hours of experimentation, Melissa discovered that by soaking elf beans in water, then grinding and boiling them, she could make a substance resembling milk.

When she realized this, Melissa drew on her memories of the flavors she’d savored that day to perfect her own elf bean cream stew.

First she had her pure-blood mother try it, and then she had her mother’s elf acquaintances try it, and so on and so on...

Eventually, rumors of this stew made their way to elves all across the Eastern Continent. The reviews of Melissa’s dish were so high that elves would travel over from other forests just to try it for themselves. All of this meant that business at the inn was booming.

“Yes, yes. Just hold on a second. I have a whole pot that’s almost ready!”

Melissa stirred the giant pot, filled with enough stew to feed dozens of people. At her side, her half-elf older siblings prepared the next portions.

It was yet another busy day in Melissa’s life.

...Yet another fulfilling day in Melissa’s life.

Chapter 47:

Pot-au-feu

Arnold the adventurer sighed with relief as he and his daughter holed up in the abandoned cabin.

“I think we’re going to be okay. Elly, it’s all going to be okay.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

He slowly let down the girl from his back. In the evening darkness, it was safer for her to travel like this.

Earlier, before the sun set, the pair had taken refuge from the light rain by setting up a cloth as a makeshift shelter beneath a tree. But once the sky went dark, the drizzle became a downpour. The cloth provided little shelter, blowing sideways in the heavy rain and winds.

The storm was so strong that their campfire was doused almost instantly. Arnold knew that if they stuck it out here through the morning, the cold would do them in. And so he took up his lantern, put the young girl on his back, and went off into the dangerous darkness of the night.

He’d made the correct choice. They hadn’t gone far before Arnold came across the cabin.

“Elly, hurry and get changed into some dry clothes, okay?”

“Okay.”

After making sure the young girl was actually doing as she was told, Arnold reached into his sturdy leather bag and pulled out a change of clothes for himself.

Arnold took a moment to wipe himself down with his cold, wet clothes before changing into the dry set. Now he was finally in a position to examine their new shelter.

“Yeah, this should be good. We don’t have to worry about the rain anymore.”

As far as he could tell, the cabin had been built by some noble. What its

purpose could be was anyone's guess. The whole building was sturdily constructed, meaning the rain would be no problem; they couldn't even hear the sounds of the storm outside.

That being said, it was dusty as all hell.

Arnold guessed that the place had been out of use for some years. But this meant that there'd be nobody around to complain if they chose to stay until this awful rain let up.

"Now then, let's hope there's some firewood laying around..."

But the adventurer was disappointed to find that while there was a fireplace in the cabin, there was no firewood left to speak of. He grabbed Elly's hand.

"Let's go, Elly. Time to explore a little."

"Okay."

Now changed into dry clothes, the little girl nodded and grabbed Arnold's hand. Given that the only light they had to rely on came from his small lantern, he knew she was probably scared. Her little fingers had a tight grip on him.

Now that I think about it, this place could very well be haunted.

At this passing thought, Arnold reached into his pouch to confirm that he still had holy water.

These sorts of buildings, left abandoned for years on end, tended to be haunted by the ghosts of their previous residents. Such places were called "haunted houses." If you were fortunate, you'd only stumble across a harmless ghost. It was easy enough to live alongside one for a few days and come out unscathed, albeit creeped out. However, if you happened to cross paths with a wraith, your only option was to flee as quickly as possible.

As a simple warrior with a child in tow, a wraith would be too much for Arnold to handle on his own.

"All right, let's go," Arnold said.

"Okay," Elly replied.

Arnold could feel the strength building in his hand as he held on to Elly's. His

wife had risked everything to protect the girl from the monsters. No matter what happened, Arnold had to make sure their daughter was safe and sound.

That was why he'd left his job as an adventurer and had been traveling through all these dangerous places; all so he could deliver Elly to his parents, back in his hometown where they ran a weapons shop.

"Okay, let's start here."

One door stood out among the many in the cabin: a beautiful one with a brand-new knob. Arnold put his hand to it, checking to see if it was locked. There did appear to be a locking mechanism, but it wasn't currently triggered.

Arnold opened the door quickly and decisively.

The sound of bells rang out as the door opened.

"Whoa?!"

"Aaah!!"

And all of a sudden, Arnold and Elly were blinded by a bright light.

"Oh? Welcome! Is everything all right? It's quite late."

"You both look kind of wet. Are you okay?"

Arnold heard voices talking to him. As far as he could tell, one of them sounded like a middle-aged man, while the other sounded like it belonged to a rather young lady.

Ugh, what do I do?!

He had accidentally wandered into this strangely bright room with strangers in it. Wasn't this cabin abandoned?!

Arnold found himself having to decide between two courses of immediate action: greeting them as friends or attacking them as enemies. He had to make a choice, and he had to do it fast.

"Dad..."

Elly was frightened; she tightly grabbed her father's sleeve.

That was when everything began to move.

“You must be real cold, huh? Aletta, sorry, but could you go grab me a towel?”

“Yes, of course!”

The pair in front of them spoke with kind, warm words, but Arnold’s hand tightened up over the sword at his waist.

Upon closer inspection, the young lady disappearing into the back appeared to be a demon. The middle-aged man in the room with them slowly stood up, bowing his head to Arnold and Elly.

“Welcome to Western Cuisine Nekoya.”

“N-Nekoya...?”

Arnold tilted his head in confusion at the foreign word. The master continued.

“Yes, that’s this restaurant’s name! Folks from your side like to call it the ‘Restaurant to Another World.’ Unfortunately, we’re actually closed for the day, but it seems to me like you two are in a bit of a pickle. All I can really offer you is some leftovers, but if that’s all right, would you like me to fix you up something?”

The master’s words washed over the adventurer. All he could feel was his daughter tightly clutching his sleeve.

Along with the cute sound of her stomach rumbling.

Arnold and Elly wiped their bodies and hair dry with the strange cloth that the middle-aged man called a “towel.” It was able to soak up the water like magic. Now that they were dry as could be, father and daughter sat down and observed their strange surroundings.

“...This place is amazing.”

“It sure is.”

Elly had never been outside of the town where she was born, but even if she had, this still would have been a shock to her. Arnold couldn’t help but feel the same way. He was an adventurer who’d been through all kinds of dangerous

situations, but this place was as strange to him as it was to her.

There was a line of tables and chairs, all of them polished and well kept. The room itself was bright as if it were daytime, although there were no fireplaces or lanterns to speak of. Hell, there was no fire at all, and yet it was warm as a spring day.

On top of each table there was a small glass bottle containing some sort of substance, along with a small porcelain pot.

Arnold glanced over at the door he and his daughter had only just come in through. According to the master, this was the door that connected his world to the other.

So did someone build that cabin specifically because of the door?

The adventurer began to think. A door that only appeared once every seven days. It was entirely possible that somebody long ago had learned of its existence and built the cabin around it so they could more readily travel to the other world.

“Sorry for the wait! Here’s your hot milk.”

As Arnold continued to theorize, Aletta came out holding their first order. Warm cow’s milk, something both he and Elly were very familiar with.

The milky aroma coming from the large porcelain cups was enough to take the weight off of their shoulders.

“The master said he’s reheating the food, so it’ll be just a little bit.”

With that, Aletta waddled back into the kitchen.

“...It’s nice and warm.”

“Yup. And tasty, too.”

Arnold and Elly both let out satisfied sighs.

The warmth of the hot milk was a real treat for the both of them. They sat in silence and drank.

With each sip, their bodies warmed up, reminding their stomachs that the last thing they’d eaten were some cold preserved foods, hours ago during the

daytime.

“I wonder what sort of food we’re gonna get to eat,” Arnold whispered.

“Me too...”

Elly nodded her head in response. The master had said he didn’t have left much in the way of ingredients. If anything, he’d seemed sad that soup was the only thing he could offer them. A soup from another world.

But beggars can’t be choosers, and besides, the cost of this meal was going to be easy on Arnold’s money pouch.

So while neither of them were certain what they’d be served, they were sure it’d be more than enough to fill their empty stomachs.

Just as they were finishing their hot milk, the master appeared before them with bowls in hand.

“Sorry for the wait. Here’s your pot-au-feu.”

The middle-aged man gently placed the main dish before them on the table.

“Wow, it looks amazing.”

The deep dish was filled with a soup consisting of big chunks of vegetables and thick pieces of sausage.

Beside the soup was a large silver spoon, along with two fresh-baked rolls, each the size of Elly’s hand. The aroma wafting off of them was sublime.

Arnold looked up at the master. “Are you sure it’s really okay to have this? This is all way more than I imagined.” He could feel his mouth watering.

Normally when someone says “leftovers,” they’re referring to some uneaten slices of meat or a soup made up with vegetable scraps from other dishes. Perhaps a piece of hard bread with a single slice of cheese.

It was impossible for Arnold to look at the dish before him and believe it was anything but a proper soup, prepared freshly for them.

But the master simply nodded his head.

“Yeah. I just whipped that up real quick using the leftover vegetables and sausages I had in stock. Oh, and you get free refills on the bread and soup, so

eat as much as you'd like. Take your time and enjoy!"

With that, the master returned to the kitchen, leaving Arnold and Elly alone in the quiet dining area.

Arnold turned to his daughter. "Wanna dig in?"

"Sure."

Arnold wasn't about to complain about getting to eat something that looked so delicious. More importantly, his appetite couldn't hold off any longer. They started digging into the pot-au-feu.

This is one helluva soup.

It only took one sip for him to realize that this soup was in a category of its own.

Arnold could taste root vegetables like cobbler's tubers and karoots, along with light green leaf veggies, sweet oranie, and thick cuts of mushrooms. He could also taste what he imagined was the flavor of the sausage, along with the butter that had been melted into the broth.

But the biggest mystery of the soup was that Arnold could sense the flavors of vegetables and meat that it didn't actually appear to contain. And there was another thing he noticed:

I can't believe how seasoned this is...

The soup's well-salted flavor was complemented by the unmistakable hotness of pepper.

Pepper was a precious commodity in the Eastern Continent. Considering how much Elly was enjoying the dish—she had been quietly digging into her soup and bread since the start—the master hadn't added too much pepper. But nonetheless, the subtle flavor gave the whole dish an extra kick.

And this bread is something else, too.

Its surface was crunchy, but its insides soft and fluffy. Arnold had never had bread quite like this before.

In fact, the bread alone would have gotten this place a thumbs up from him.

Meanwhile, Elly had bought a one-way ticket to food town. Unlike her father, she wasn't wrapped up in the details. The girl held out her empty plate and called for Aletta.

"More bread and pot-au-feu, please!"

"That'll be right out!"

Aletta quickly collected her dish, bringing out another serving for the girl. Watching all of this unfold, and feeling pressed for time, he started eating faster. The vegetables had been so well boiled that they barely had any resistance to them, despite maintaining their form. One bite caused them to erupt with the flavor of the soup they'd soaked in. The sausages burst in his mouth, spilling out their juices.

"Sorry, but could I get seconds as well?!"

The pair used their remaining bread to soak up the dregs of the soup before requesting another serving of everything.

And so, father and daughter enjoyed their quiet little feast well into the night.

The next morning, Arnold and Elly began their journey anew. The clouds had parted ways in the sky, and the sun was shining.

"And today's meal wasn't so bad, either."

"Mm-hmm..."

The pair recalled the breakfast of eggs and bread they'd just had.

In the end, the master allowed Arnold and Elly to sleep in a corner of the warm restaurant. The next morning, he whipped up what he called the "morning special" for them before they went off on their way.

"I hope we can go again..." Elly sighed.

"We will. We definitely will," Arnold replied, nodding his head.

It would be another four or five days before they arrived at his hometown.

There, the journey would come to a close. The father and his daughter would live their lives to the fullest, in remembrance of their departed wife and mother.

When she gets bigger, we should really head back there...

Elly was all Arnold had left of his beloved wife, and he'd take good care of her. He gripped the girl's tiny hand tightly.

Next time, they would visit the restaurant during the day as proper customers.

With all this in mind, Arnold slowed his pace down to match Elly's, and father and daughter walked into the future.

Chapter 48:

Cream Puffs

Far from the imperial capital was a quiet estate, where Adelheid, the young princess of the great Empire, lived in seclusion while recovering from her ailments.

She passed the hours peacefully, but there was little to do on the estate, and Adelheid was often bored. Yet every seven days one thing brought her great joy. That's right; her visits to the Restaurant to Another World kept a smile on her face.

On the seventh day, after finishing her lunch and letting her stomach settle, the princess would secretly make her way to the Restaurant to Another World.

"My gosh, that really happened?"

"Indeed it did. My dear brother, what in the world inspired you to stand right within their line of sight? That was foolish."

"Not at all, brother. It was necessary to raise our soldiers' spirits. Get them fired up, you know? Father was handling command in the back, after all."

"But did you really have to? I've heard that the soldiers of the Sand Nation are incredibly brave warriors."

Adelheid enjoyed her delicious snack, happily chatting with two of the friends she'd made as a regular at the restaurant.

The sweet and cold snack filled her stomach, and the warm "cafe ole" made with cow's milk energized her body as she chatted. (Her parents had recently sent her cafa beans at the estate, so she'd been able to drink it at home, too.)

Her friends were nobles from a faraway country. First were the siblings, Shareef and Renner, with their beautiful black hair and bronze skin. Then there was the half-elf mage, Victoria, wise beyond her years.

These were the brand-new friends that Adelheid had gotten to know as a

regular customer.

The lonely hole in Adelheid's heart, borne of her life on the isolated estate, could only be filled by the delicious parfaits and friendly conversations she enjoyed at the Restaurant to Another World. These moments were irreplaceable.

That being said, they passed all too quickly.

Victoria, the half-elf mage, took a moment to consider the time.

"Mm. It's about time I head back."

"Oh, my. Is it already that late?" Renner said.

"As much as it pains me to say, we should probably be going as well, Renner," said his brother, Shareef. "Adelheid, I do look forward to seeing you again soon." He raised his hand.

"Excuse me, could I get the check? And the usual order of ice cream to go, please."

"Me as well. And the usual pudding to go."

"Of course! Hold on just a bit," Aletta nodded cheerfully, heading back to tell the master their orders. It wasn't long before the master himself emerged from the kitchen.

Beside him was the new waitress girl, all clad in black. Both of them were holding the same type of takeout box.

"Sorry about that. Here are your takeout orders of ice cream and pudding. You folks know the drill. Don't take too long to dig in, all right?"

Take out... How nice. Adelheid thought to herself, watching Shareef and Victoria collect their orders.

Unfortunately for the imperial princess, she had no means by which to take a parfait home with her.

The reason was simple enough. The parfait was a fragile delight, one that would begin to melt even before she could finish eating it at the restaurant.

There was simply no way she'd be able to bring it back to the estate.

That said, it was still terribly disappointing that she could only enjoy the frozen treat every seven days. Was there really no hope for her?

"Um, Master?" Adelheid spoke up. "Do you happen to have any treats available for takeout that use cream like your parfaits do?"

If he did, then wonderful. If he didn't, she'd simply order a fruit sandwich like she always did. Her expectations were realistic.

"Hm? Something that's made with cream and can be ordered as takeout... Lemme see."

The master took a moment to search his thoughts. While he made plenty of cakes with whipped cream, the menu featured only a few items with cream as the primary ingredient.

But then it hit him. "Aha. I believe cream puffs would fit the bill."

Victoria considered the offer, but as a regular who had tried every single sweet that the restaurant sold, she was quick to nod her head.

"Cream puffs, eh? Yeah, yeah!"

The master thought this was an ideal solution. They were called "cream puffs" for a reason.

"So would you like some cream puffs to go? If I remember correctly, the shop up...er, our recipe uses custard and whipped cream."

"Yes, that'd be wonderful," Adelheid said. "Could I have two, please?"

"Two? Really?"

Adelheid nodded her head, slightly embarrassed.

"Yes. I thought that I might share some with Hannah."

If she was going to enjoy a delicious treat, she'd much rather share the experience with someone else than keep it to herself. Hannah had come out to the estate with her, and she was probably feeling just as lonely as Adelheid was. Why not spread some of the joy?

Far away from the illustrious imperial capital was the “Wilhelm Estate,” a luxurious palace built for the royal family. The great emperor, Wilhelm, had made it his final resting place.

It was there that the beautiful princess lived totally alone.

Adelheid was the eldest daughter of the current emperor, christened with the name of her grandmother, the great emperor’s beloved mother. She had been sent to recover at the Wilhelm Estate after contracting the illness known as the “peasant killer.”

Unlike everyday injuries, a sickness like this could not be healed through prayer.

Priests were capable of harnessing immense magical powers through rituals; they were even able to summon miracles as great as reviving the dead. Yet attempting to use these powers to expedite the human body’s innate healing capabilities only resulted in worsening illnesses.

Of all the various ailments that existed in the world, the “peasant killer” was particularly frustrating.

On the occasion that a human fell ill with it, it would cause pain in the lungs and repeated coughing spells. Finally, it would drain the unfortunate patient of all their energy.

The ailment wasn’t the kind of thing you could catch by simply spending a short amount of time with someone. Yet there had been stories of servants—often tied to their employer for forty-six hours straight—and even helpful family members coming down with the peasant killer after spending a long period of time with the infected.

To make matters worse, there was no quick fix. It took several years of doing nothing to be healed. All you could do was keep your head low, take in the proper vitamins and nutrients you needed, and wait for the illness to lose all of its power.

Unfortunately, not everyone was capable of living a life of rest for multiple years at a time. People had to work in order to live. And work they did. This

often lead to the sickness worsening, and eventually to death. That's why it had earned the name "peasant killer."

It was an especially harsh ailment for peasants and often led to their deaths. For those of noble blood or with money to spare, the illness would steal precious years of their youth.

Thus was the peasant killer feared by all, high and low-born alike.

And so once it was confirmed that Adelheid was suffering from the peasant killer, it had been a bit of a struggle to find her a new servant. Her old one quit the day after the news got out.

Even though she was afflicted with the peasant killer, Adelheid was still a princess, and not just one of some small nation. She was the princess of the Empire, the most powerful and influential nation on the Eastern Continent.

The person selected as her servant would have to be of a certain quality. Just any commoner off the street would not suffice.

The servant would have to come from a respectable family—and be someone who could potentially become afflicted with the peasant killer without causing a fuss for anyone.

Hannah was the person who best fit these conditions, and she would become Adelheid's new servant at the Wilhelm Estate.

Hannah came from an old, low-ranking noble family that once made the outskirts of the imperial city their home.

She was the oldest daughter in her family, with two older brothers, two younger brothers, and three little sisters. Her house had failed to ride the wave of change in the half-century since the foundation of the Empire. Because so many of the children in the family had lived into adulthood, they barely had any money left to spare. In fact, they all relied on the money Hannah sent home while working at the palace in the imperial city. Things were tight.

Before she was hired at the palace, Hannah had realized that she might never be able to get married. And so for several years she'd trained to be a priestess at the Lord of Earth's shrine (this was the most common of the religions in the Empire). Hannah knew simple healing prayers and had the ability to ward off

the undead. In fact, she had worked so hard that she became a deacon of the church, earning herself a Bronze Sigil.

She was the daughter of an old and storied house, had some training as a priestess, and moreover she would be no trouble to anyone if she became afflicted with the peasant killer.

The current emperor thought Hannah would be the perfect person to serve as his beloved daughter's servant, so he ordered her to take the post. Hannah accepted her task with little fanfare. And now it had been a year and half since.

Serving at Adelheid's side was, in a word, breezy.

There wasn't actually much to do in the way of work, beyond attending to a few things around Adelheid's person and cleaning the rooms.

As a bonus, instead of living in the servant quarters, Hannah had a guest room to herself—though this also served to keep her isolated from the other servants at the estate. And the pay wasn't bad, either.

All other jobs were handled by the servants who lived year-round at the estate, so Hannah never had to trouble herself with them.

Because Adelheid was sick, she didn't have to put on the elaborate dresses that royalty were normally obligated to wear. Instead, she wore fairly simple designs, best suited to lazily hanging out at home. This meant that Hannah didn't have to worry about the process of dressing the princess.

Additionally, Hannah's mistress, Adelheid, was unlike many other nobles that she had known. She wasn't cruel, and she wasn't needy. If Hannah was unlucky, there was the fear that she might come down with the peasant killer. But that was her only worry.

And if she were to become afflicted, she had been told that the Empire would take full responsibility for her recovery. If Hannah had to spend multiple years recovering from the peasant killer, she would certainly miss her chance of ever getting married. But at the same time, by working at the estate, she was already chewing away at those precious years to begin with. If that came to pass, she had already resolved that she would return to the shrine and become a proper

priestess.

And so Hannah had grown accustomed to her life at the estate, going through the motions of her job from day to day.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty,” Hannah said at the door of the princess’s bedroom.

Perfect. She’s out going for a walk.

As she always did, Hannah confirmed that Adelheid wasn’t in before entering.

It’s gotten a bit late, so I should hurry and wrap this up.

Hannah set down her bucket of water, and with broom and cloth in hand, began to clean Adelheid’s room.

Once every seven days at around the same time, the princess would go for a long walk. As far as Hannah could tell, she must have been taking some path that only the royal family was aware of. During those hours, Adelheid seemed to literally disappear.

The guards at the gate and townsfolk alike claimed to not see her. Hannah knew she must be within the estate grounds.

Adelheid always returned before sundown, so Hannah had made peace with this.

Which was perfect, because it left Hannah with time to tidy her mistress’s room. Since Adelheid was here to recover from her illness, she rarely went out. While Hannah didn’t mind doing things like changing sheets in front of her mistress, she had some hesitation about properly cleaning up the place in front of her.

And so every seven days Adelheid provided Hannah with the perfect opportunity for a full cleaning.

But that day as she was cleaning, Hannah suddenly heard the sound of bells ringing behind her. She quickly turned around.

“Oh, Hannah. Wonderful work.”

“Huh?! Your Highness?!”

Adelheid had appeared behind her, almost as if she’d used some sort of teleportation magic. Hannah could hardly hide her shock.

The princess had walked out of an oak door that had no place being in the room.



The moment Adelheid made her exit, the door vanished into thin air as quickly as it had appeared, as if some sort of concealment spell had been cast on it.

The princess was carrying a small square box with a handle. An illustration of a puppy monster with wings adorned its surface.

“Could you please put this somewhere cold and out of the sun?” Adelheid asked. “I’d like you to bring it back to me at noon tomorrow, if you would.”

Hannah accepted the mysterious box from Adelheid without a second thought. It was made of some sort of sturdy paper.

“Your Highness, what exactly is in this box?”

Hannah couldn’t wrap her head around any of this.

In response, Adelheid politely provided her with the answer she sought.

“A wonderful confection made using cream. I believe they’re called ‘cream puffs.’”

“A confection...?”

“Yes. According to Lady Victoria, if you’re looking to enjoy the taste of cream, it’s the best treat at the shop.” The princess was smiling widely.

Who is this Lady Victoria? And what does she mean by shop?!

Adelheid’s answer only created more questions for Hannah, but given that she was talking to the imperial princess herself, she knew better than to pry. It would be rude.

Hannah swallowed her curiosity and took the box.

“I understand. I’ll hold on to this, then.”

“Thank you. Oh, and when you bring this to me tomorrow, I’d be delighted if you could prepare some cafa, milk, and sugar as well.”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

The box itself was surprisingly light, and this only furthered Hannah’s curiosity.

And so the next day at noon, Hannah returned.

“Your Highness, I’ve brought the box from yesterday as well as some cafa.”

Hannah came to the doorway of Adelheid’s room, silver tray in hand. Atop the tray was the aforementioned box, along with all manner of china decorated in beautiful flower designs. This was a cafa set which Adelheid had received as a gift from the Sand Nation.

“Wonderful. Well done, Hannah. Could you pour me a cup of cafa, please?”

“Of course.”

Hannah obeyed her mistress, preparing to pour a fresh cup of cafa into one of the beautiful china cups. Meanwhile, Adelheid opened the box, removing its contents.

Hannah prepared the cafa in the Sand Nation style. Though the drink was largely unknown in the Empire, Adelheid quite liked it with milk and sugar, so Hannah had gone out of her way to master its preparation. She took this opportunity to ask the princess a question.

“Are those the cream puffs you mentioned, Your Highness?”

At first glance, the confection looked fairly plain.

Outside of the snow-like sugar topping, the cream puffs were simply brown. As far as Hannah could tell, they contained no fruit, which would explain the lack of vibrant coloring. Truth be told, the brown objects on top of the thin, silver foil looked more like pieces of bread than anything else.

“Yes,” the princess replied. “I actually had one yesterday, and it was quite delicious.”

She had “taste tested” a cream puff the day before. Just the memory of its cold sweetness was making her mouth water.

Adelheid had gotten dangerously close to eating a second, but she resisted the fierce urge. Patience was a virtue she’d become closely acquainted with of late.

“Here’s your cafa.” Hannah presented the cup.

With the steaming drink now before her and the preparations complete, Adelheid looked up at Hannah.

“Wonderful. Thank you very much. Now then, Hannah. Take a seat.”

“Huh?!”

Adelheid beckoned Hannah to sit down, beaming the biggest smile ever seen in the Empire. Hannah couldn’t imagine she would ever see such an expression on the princess’s face when she had first come here. Seeing that her servant was at a loss for words, Adelheid explained further.

“I recently discovered that food is far more delicious when you share it with someone else... Ah, but perhaps you don’t wish to join me?”

And just like that, Adelheid’s happy face suddenly fell in sadness. Her close friend from the Western Continent had secretly taught her that such an expression would be difficult for people to resist.

“N-no! That’s not it at all!”

Flawless victory. Hannah waved her hands in a panic, sitting down at the table with Adelheid.

Under normal circumstances, someone would have stepped in to prevent this from happening, claiming that Hannah, a servant, was rude or presumptuous to sit with the princess. But the only people present were Adelheid and Hannah. There was no one there to stop them.

Adelheid’s smile returned. “Thank goodness. Then please, take this.”

She handed Hannah a cream puff.

“Please try it. I do so hope you like it.”

There was no way Hannah could say no to a smile and a request like that.

“W-well, then. Thank you, oh Lord of Earth, for this, my daily bread. I offer you my gratitude...”

Hannah offered a brief prayer before sinking her teeth into the strange pastry.

Huh? She said this was a confection, but it's not all that sweet.

Hannah had decided to take things slowly, only taking a small first bite of the surface of the cream puff. The taste left her puzzled.

It certainly had a sweetness to it, thanks in part to the white sugar sitting on top, but it wasn't particularly strong.

The faintly sweet flavor of the dough wasn't terrible. But it was weak compared to the "high class" sweets that Hannah was familiar with.

And the weight is strange, too. Though I suppose the fact that the princess brought it at all is the strangest part, but...What?!

Lost in her aimless thoughts, Hannah decided to just hurry up and finish the cream puff. She took a much larger second bite. It was then that she became flabbergasted.

I-It's so sweet! What is this?! What's going on inside of this thing?!

The bread-like skin of the confection was like a bag that had been completely filled.

The moment she broke the surface of the cream puff the second time, its contents came spilling out. It was as if the food had been stuffed with snow so soft that there were no words.

It still wasn't overly sweet, but this subtle seasoning allowed the flavor of the milk to come out more strongly.

Despite her status as a low-class noble, Hannah had still sampled many confections and sweets in her years. But this was something entirely new.

If there was one word to describe what she was experiencing, it was...

"...Delicious."

"Right?! I was also surprised when I first ate it!"

Adelheid's smile deepened as Hannah unconsciously let her thoughts spill out. It was great to experience something delicious for oneself, but it was also wonderful seeing someone else experience that same joy. And this was especially true for Adeheid and Hannah, the princess and the girl who tended to

her every need all day long at this lonely estate.

But Hannah didn't even notice Adelheid's pleased gaze as she continued her journey into the cream puff dimension.

Mm, when combined with the filling, the sweetness of the outer layer is just right.

By itself, the surface of the cream puff wouldn't have been quite sweet enough. But the delicious white filling made the whole dish come together.

Meanwhile, the filling was too soft to provide any sort of satisfying mouthfeel on its own. The flavor and texture of the pastry helped to bring out its sweetness.

It makes sense that the princess would recommend... Ah?!

As Hannah continued her multi-dimensional cream puff journey, she realized that the flavor had changed.

She immediately looked down at the cream puff.

Through the hole she had bitten, Hannah could see that she had just reached the middle of the cream puff. She recognized the white filling she had been enjoying up until now, but it was starting to mix with an unknown yellow substance.

Adelheid smiled. "You see, that cream puff has both white whipped cream and yellow custard inside of it!" she explained.

"Custard..."

The word washed over Hannah as she resumed her creamy journey. The thick, sweet custard was wholly different from the white substance known as whipped cream. The former had an eggy flavor, while the latter tasted of milk.

This was a tremendously elaborate and delicious confection that featured two wonderful kinds of creams.

There's no doubt about it. This is the most delicious confection I've ever eaten.

Hannah couldn't help but wonder where the princess had gotten her hands on such a tremendous dessert, and before she knew it, the cream puff was

gone.

“Ahhhh.”

Hannah let out a satisfied sigh. Coming out of her cream puff trance, she suddenly remembered who she was sitting with. Her cheeks turned bright red.

“I-I’m so sorry, Your Highness. That was so rude of me, I...!”

“Please, don’t worry about it. If anything, I’m just happy you enjoyed it so much!”

Adelheid was tremendously satisfied, watching Hannah turn bright red. Some of the white cream was still on her lips. The princess then turned to her own portion.

Cream puffs are quite wonderful indeed... Hm? Oh, Hannah.

As the princess enjoyed her own flavorful journey, she realized that Hannah was staring at her.

Well, more accurately, she was staring at her cream puff.

Judging by that look...

I should probably order three or four next time. Truth be told, one isn’t quite enough for me, either.

Adelheid decided to make a slight adjustment to her upcoming schedule.

Chapter 49:

Steamed Pork Buns

Western Cuisine Nekoya was tucked away in a corner of the bustling shopping district. On days that it was open as the Restaurant to Another World, things got quite busy.

It all started in the morning when the restaurant door connected to the other world. That's when prep began.

The master had recently brought on two new workers, Aletta and Kuro. After they arrived, the three of them would eat breakfast together before starting on some light cleaning and kitchen prep for the day.

Customers rarely showed up this early, so for a time the restaurant was fairly peaceful.

But as soon as noon rolled around, business started to pick up.

Customers from all over the other world started to arrive in search of the master's delightful dishes.

To the outside observer, this looked like any weekday at Nekoya; orders flying to and fro as Aletta, Kuro, and the master made their way around the restaurant, trying their best to keep the customers satisfied.

Once noon had come and gone, peace once again settled over the Restaurant to Another World.

It wasn't as if there never were any customers during this block of time—just that the ones that did come in were generally looking for desserts and sweets, not hot meals.

Unlike the rest of the menu, the majority of the desserts and sweets came from the bakeshop just above Nekoya. They were delivered to the restaurant early in the morning, no prep required.

That being said, there were some desserts and snacks that the master made himself. Things like chocolate parfaits, pancakes, crêpes, and even potato chips were items that the master prepared on his own. As for the rest of them, he

simply paired them with appropriate drinks and brought them out to customers. In general, this part of the day was used as break time, prep time for dinner, or a lunch break for the master and Aletta.

As evening rolled around, things got busy once more.

All manner of customers who had finished a long day of work swung by the Restaurant to Another World.

Once again, orders flew to and fro, many of them for alcohol.

A lot of the customers who stopped by at this time of day were looking to get their hands on “otherworldly alcohol” they couldn’t get at home.

These customers drank and drank, ordering all kinds of snacks to go with their booze.

After sundown, quiet settled upon the restaurant once more.

Apparently, it was normal for folks in the other world to hurry to bed once the sun set. There were fewer visitors during this time of day than any other. However, there were some customers who only came at this time. There was even one specific customer who always appeared just before closing.

One Saturday, the master came face-to-face with one of those rare afternoon customers.

“Thank you so much, Ms. Haruko. You didn’t have to.”

In the back of the restaurant, the master bowed his head to the woman named Haruko. She had come to deliver news about a recent neighborhood meeting, along with a bag of goodies.

“Now, now, no need to thank me. My husband might be busy right now, but I have all the free time in the world. Those haven’t been steamed yet, so make sure and do that before you eat them... Oh, but more importantly, are you sure it’s okay for you to be talking to me here, Mako? You have work today, right?” Haruko asked the master. She had a worried expression on her plump, round face. Since she helped in the kitchen, she wore no makeup.

While they held different jobs, they were both workers, and Haruko was

concerned that she might have interrupted the master at an inconvenient time.

Haruko was married to the master of the “Laughing Dragon,” a Chinese restaurant that also called the shopping district its home.

The Laughing Dragon had opened just after the end of the war, and its current master was the second to run the place. Like Nekoya, it was one of the oldest restaurants in the area.

Since they were old neighbors, the previous master of Nekoya had got along well with the family who ran The Laughing Dragon. His grandson did as well, but in a slightly different way.

“No, no, it’s absolutely fine,” said the master. “My customers around this time are all after that guy’s cakes, so I’m not actually that busy. Plus, the new girls I brought on recently are way more adept than the student part-timers I usually hire.” The master could sense Haruko’s concern, so he answered with a smile.

“Is that so? I’m glad to hear it.” Haruko smiled in return.

Her round face was warm and gentle. It was easy to imagine that she must have been adorable when she was younger. And yet there was something about that smile that caused the master’s expression to harden ever so slightly.

The master’s old wounds felt like they would start bleeding at the lightest of touches, even now.

Haruko looked upon the master’s expression and smiled sadly.

“...You know, I still think of you as my own son, Mako.”

If things had been different, he likely would have been the third master of The Laughing Dragon, after all.

But there was no going back. There was no recovering from that loss.

“Well, then. I’ll be on my way... I do hope you drop by and say hello to Natsuka sometime... She can get quite lonely, you know?”

Haruko couldn’t help but bring the topic up—even if she knew that her words were like a curse that chained the master down.

And so the sun set; it was time to close up shop.

"I shall return," said the final customer of the day, exiting the restaurant with her giant hot pot in hand.

"Have a careful journey home! Thank you very much," called the master.

"Thank you very much!" Aletta followed.

Farewell, Kuro said.

They were officially closed.

"Phew..." Aletta let out a light sigh, relaxing her muscles.

"All right! We're done for the day," the master said. "All that's left is cleanup. Hang in there, ladies!"

"Yup!"

Understood.

They both replied with smiles on their faces. In this line of work, a smile was important.

"Excellent. That's what I like to hear. As a reward, how's about I make you two a little evening treat?"

"Wow, are you sure?"

Really?

Aletta's cheeks lit up. They had already found time for dinner earlier in the evening, but that just meant she was starting to feel a wee bit hungry again.

"See, I actually got it as a gift, and there are way too many for me to eat alone, so..." the master replied bashfully.

The gift he'd received was portioned out for a high school boy with a bottomless pit of a stomach. The master was long past the age when he could down that much food by himself.

It wasn't the sort of snack he could hold onto for a few days either, so he figured it might be nice to make his two workers happy.

"It's gonna take a little bit for me to steam them up real good, so could you two finish wiping the tables in the meantime?"

“Okay!”

Yes.

Aletta was now in a brighter mood than usual.

While she and Kuro cleaned the dining room, the master got to steaming.

“All right, that should do it.”

The moment he took the lid off of the steamer, the sweet smell of wheat filled the air.

“Master hasn’t lost his touch, I see.”

The aroma alone was enough to put a smile on his face, as he mused aloud to himself. In front of him were the pure white loaves that he’d first eaten as a young boy.

They were The Laughing Dragon’s secret best menu item, a food that was only available during the cold winter days. Office ladies and businessmen on the way home from work always stopped in to buy a few to go.

“Ain’t nothing like a good steamed pork bun around this time of the year,” the master said, nodding to himself as he lined up the buns on a big dish.

The master called out to Aletta and Kuro, who had finished wiping down the tables. The three washed their hands and sat down together.

What are these?

“Are they some kind of...bread?”

Aletta cast her gaze down at the white lumps on the large plate.

It appeared that the master’s evening snack for them was a round white bread with a pointed top.

I wonder what it tastes like...

Aletta had no idea what she was looking at.

“Ah, these are steamed pork buns. There’s meat packed inside of ’em, and

they're delicious," the master explained to the girl curiously examining the plate. He picked up one of the six buns lined up on it.

After peeling the paper from the bottom of it, he split the bun in two and took a bite.

"...Yeah, dang good."

The filling was loaded with meat juices, but it didn't all come oozing out after a single bite. The savory filling combined with the gentle softness of the bun and spread over his taste buds.

Mm, I'll never be able face off against Master with my Chinese food skills.

The master was fully confident that, although he had improved his skills since his high school days, it would never be enough to beat his master.

This thought left him simultaneously happy and a wee bit annoyed.

"Thanks for the food!"

After watching the master dig into his pork bun, Aletta felt her stomach start to rumble. She picked up one of the buns.

It was warm to the touch.

Not so blisteringly hot as to burn her hands, but not cool, either. The warmth filled Aletta's palm.

So the master split his in half...

Aletta followed in the master's example, dividing her bun in half. It was at that very moment that the sweet smell of bread and filling wafted upward. It was the scent of steamed meat.

This was more than enough to make her mouth water. Aletta dug her teeth into half of the pork bun.

Ah, it's so soft.

That was the first thing Aletta noticed.

It was completely unlike any of the bread she was accustomed to. It was almost as if it were only made of the white of the bread.

The dough was ever so slightly moist, and it smelled faintly of wheat. To Aletta, this thick layer of the bun was more than delicious enough to be its own delight.

But the true star of the pork bun resided within the bready exterior.

The diced pieces of fatty pork, the green oranie added for flavor, some kind of yellow, crunchy substance, and diced mushrooms all fused together, cooked over flame.

And all these various flavors soaked into the soft, white bread, blending harmoniously together.

Aletta smiled, offering her impressions as she finished off her first pork bun.

“This is delicious!”

It’s not as good as chicken curry, but it’s still very good, said Kuro.

“Right?”

The master rarely praised his own cooking—well, in this case it had just been steaming—but he agreed with Aletta.

“C’mon now, keep on packing them away! Oh, and these go great if you add a dash of vinegar soy sauce or mustard after the first bite.”

The master smiled, offering this seasoning advice to his employees as they dug in. It was the same thing Haruko had once told him and the other part-timers so many years ago.

And so Aletta found herself walking home through town that night.

Those pork buns sure were tasty...

Winter nights in the royal capital were always chilly. But thanks to the sturdy coat she’d gotten at the secondhand store and the pork buns in her stomach, Aletta could barely feel the cold.

It was winter, and she was as happy as could be.

Aletta hurried down the house-lined street, clutching a mincemeat sandwich for her employer and a box of cookies for her employer’s little sister.

Chapter 50:

Macaroni Gratin

In a small inn in a small town somewhere in a small country, business was bustling as ever.

“Heeey! Let me get some of that knight stew!”

“Same here! Two plates, lots of meat! And a beer and some bread, too!”

“Excuse meeee! Check pleaaaase!”

“Yes, yes, right away!”

Myra scurried around the tavern inn, carrying food and drinks, taking orders, accepting money from customers, and clearing tables once they had left.

They’d made a new hire, but it was still as busy as always.

Last year, the tavern had been fairly peaceful up until sundown, when travelers headed to the city would drop in to get a night’s sleep, and folks coming from work would swing by for a bite. Nowadays? They were busy from the second the doors opened until they shut at closing time.

Even the inn itself had grown to be a popular spot. Folks went out of their way to stay there even if it delayed their arrival in the city by half a day.

And all because the inn was the only place around where you could get a genuine plate of “knight stew.”

It had all started nearly a year ago, when a halfling couple swung by town.

They were a pair of chefs who traveled from city to city, cooking up dishes out of ingredients they came by and selling their fare to passing customers.

It was the halflings who brought “knight stew” to town. When Myra’s father Laury first tried some, he felt like a million-dollar idea was hitting his tastebuds.

The halfling duo sold out their entire pot of knight stew in no time at all, so when Laury offered them money in exchange for their recipe, they happily

obliged.

Myra nearly lost it when she heard that her father had given half of the inn's monthly earnings—over one hundred silver coins—to a pair of halfling strangers.

Their inn was hardly raking in cash to begin with. What did he think he was doing wasting so much money?

But at the end of the day, Laury's bet paid off. Once they started serving knight stew at the bar, business boomed. Their pockets were heavier than ever.

"The moment I tried some of their knight stew, I knew that if we had it on the menu at the inn, it'd sell like crazy," Laury said.

It was the end of the day, and the sun was beginning its slow descent.

"Perfect. We ain't got no more ingredients left, so that's it for today. Myra, you can rest until the evening."

"Okay, Pops. Good luck with the rest."

Laury gazed over at the empty pots he'd prepared in the morning and again just before lunch, waving Myra off on her break.

It went without saying that there were other dishes on offer at the tavern inn. Boiled potato dishes, simple soups, and the like. And booze, of course. But the real draw was the knight stew.

If the customers found out there was no more, the tavern would have a considerable drop in business. Laury was making another batch, but it wouldn't be ready until the evening.

But Myra left the remaining work to her father and went off to rest.

Her mother had been a frail woman, and she'd passed away some years ago. Myra was her and Laury's only child. Eventually, Myra would find a husband for herself and take over the inn. That was why her father never pushed her too hard. It'd be a real problem if she couldn't inherit the business.

And that meant Myra had a lot of free time on her hands.

"Whew, I'm dead."

Yet there wasn't actually much to do out in the middle of nowhere. Myra collapsed onto the bed in her room on the first floor.

"It's great we're doing well and all, but there's such a thing as being too busy," Myra muttered to herself, face down on the pillow.

For a brief moment, she looked back fondly on the days when business was slow—when she'd had no responsibilities at all.

Back then, she'd been free to take a nap if she wanted, as customers wouldn't show up until the evening when they needed a room. That being said, she had no desire to return to the days of watching her father sigh anxiously over the account book.

Lost in this reverie, Myra heard a voice from outside her window.

"Heeey, Myra, are you there?"

Myra sat up from her bed. "What's up, Johan?"

At her window was the second-oldest son of the baker next door. Johan wore an old sword at his waist (borrowed from the town guard). He was the same age as Myra.

After making sure she could see him, Johan made his proposal: "So I found this super amazingly delicious new shop, right? Wanna come with?"

Myra was puzzled by her friend's words. "Amazingly delicious, huh? I don't remember there being a place like that in town."

She had been born and raised in this town, and she could count on both hands the times she'd ventured outside of it. Myra knew the place inside and out. Yet she had no clue what establishment Johan could be talking about.

"I found it just the other day. It's kind of strange, but the food there is incredible! You in?"

"Incredible, huh? Well, I guess it doesn't look like you're lying."

Working at an inn meant Myra spent a lot of time watching people closely. If nothing else, she could tell that Johan was telling the truth.

If anything, he was still the same kid he'd always been. He was too dumb to lie.

"Fine, I guess," Myra shrugged. "It's not like I have much to do until the evening anyhow."

"Great! That's what I wanted to hear!" Johan smiled. "Let's get going. I've been so excited to go that I skipped breakfast this morning!"

Johan extended his hand to her, just as he had since they were children.

"Then go we shall."

Myra took his hand in hers as she always did and climbed out the window. They went on their way.

But they hadn't gone far when Myra began to suspect something was up.

"Hey, Johan. Are you messing with me?"

He'd led her through the woods—a place that the younger children were forbidden from entering. It was said that wolves lived in their shadows.

"You said we were going to grab a bite, right?" Myra continued, following her friend. "So why exactly are we walking through the woods?"

She was alone in a dark forest with a boy her age. Even though she'd known Johan since they were wee tots, it was the kind of situation that any girl her age would get anxious about.

"I'm telling you, I'm not lying!" Johan said. "It's just up ahead."

He didn't seem concerned in the least. The boy was driven entirely by his appetite.

And he seemed entirely confident that there was some amazing restaurant right around the corner.

But Johan's innocent honesty only added to Myra's bewilderment.

"How did you even find a place like that out here?"

Why would there be a restaurant in the middle of the woods? And why would

Johan think to even go there?

“It was about a year ago, right? Remember those halfling chefs that came by? You know, the ones who made the knight stew that you guys sell?”

Johan began to tell Myra about the man he considered his savior, and the story of how he’d learned about “that place.”

“I heard from one of my elders, right? Apparently when the halflings stayed in town, they would go into the woods singing some weird song.”

If it were just that, he wouldn’t have paid any mind.

It was impossible to understand the doings of halflings, travelers that they were.

“But see, after doing the rounds for a while, I realized that most of the halflings who come to town go to the woods.”

It was true. Halflings often dropped by their little town. The couple that made knight stew were the only chefs, but in general, a few halflings swung by once every few months.

Johan had seen that, after doing some light shopping, they would then enter the woods and vanish entirely. They took no room nor board in town.

By chance, one day Johan had the opportunity to talk with a warrior from another town who was guarding some nobles through the area. The warrior said that where he came from, halflings only popped up once every few years at most.

Too many halflings visited Johan’s town.

“I figured that there must be something they’re doing deep in the woods, right? So I went and checked it out.”

And that’s when he found it.

“What is that thing? Why is there a door in the middle of the woods?!”

Myra couldn’t hide her surprise at the beautiful oak door suddenly standing before them.

“It’s the door to the restaurant I was talking about! It’s called Nekoya.”

As he told Myra what she was looking at, Johan was just as excited as he had been seven days ago when he first stumbled upon the door.

As the door opened, they were greeted by the sound of ringing bells.

“Ah! Welcome! Take a seat here.”

Johan and Myra were greeted by a young lady with two strange objects adorning her hair. Her well-made uniform ended just above her knees, leaving her legs bare for all to see. She motioned for the two to take a seat. In her hands she was carrying a large book.

“Um, if I remember correctly, you can read. Right, Johan? This is our menu,” she said, handing the book over. “Once you’ve decided on what to order, feel free to call for me!

...Ah, yes! I’ll bring you your refill right away!” The waitress bowed her head, hurrying to attend to other customers.

And so the young friends sat down at the beautifully polished table.

“What is that?” Myra whispered, watching the girl retreat.

“Apparently that’s the uniform they wear in the other world,” Johan said, repeating the explanation he received from Aletta, which was the waitress’s name. “She told me it was a little embarrassing, but I guess it’s normal here?”

“Other world?” Myra’s eyes went wide. “Are you telling me we’re in another world right now?”

“Apparently. It’s a restaurant in another world—that’s why folks around here like to call it the Restaurant to Another World. Wait, did I forget to tell you all of this?”

Johan finally realized that he had failed to explain any of today’s plan to his friend.

Myra sighed loudly. “You literally told me nothing.”

She expected as much from her childhood friend; he was as spacey as always. She took a look around the restaurant.

“This place is pretty weird.”

It didn't take long for her to notice that the clientele was exceptionally... varied.

And that was an understatement. Surrounding them in the dining room were normal families (albeit a bit dressed up), finely dressed nobles who Myra would normally never mingle with, an older gentleman who appeared to be a mage, a group of young priestesses, and a warrior who looked like he was at least a hundred times stronger than Johan. There were even customers who were very clearly not human. Little people, faeries, some kind of giant lizardman, a pair of girls with bird wings, and even a woman who appeared to be half human, half serpent. The restaurant was full of such monsters. This place was a far cry from the small world that Myra came from.

Now truly believing she was in another world, Myra opened up the book on the table and took a look at the pages inside.

They were full of beautifully written Eastern Continent characters detailing each dish's name and description. Of course, she knew she couldn't fully understand the meaning of everything without trying it. But there was one thing she understood after a single glance.

“...It's a little more expensive than our place, huh?”

The prices listed next to each dish were affordable enough for Johan with his meager pay. But they were still slightly more expensive than they would have been at Myra's inn.

That must mean this was a place friendly to commoners—not like the fancy places nobles frequented where you'd pay dozens of silver coins for a meal and drink.

(Of course, there were still nobles dining in this restaurant who far outclassed the lord of Myra's town.)

Johan nodded. “You'd think, but not quite. So get this. Along with any order you make here, you can eat as much white bread as you want. And it's incredible, too! I'm talking the kind that'd cost at least a single silver coin at our bakery.”

Johan's words completely flew in the face of Myra's hypothesis.

"Huh? You're kidding!"

"That's just how it works here. No matter how much bread or rice you eat on top of your meal, the price is always the same."

Madness.

That was the only way to describe the expression on Myra's face. Johan continued explaining the shocking truths he'd learned on his visit seven days ago. Then he pointed to a single item on the menu.

"I personally recommend this right here. It looks just like knight stew—but it's even more delicious."

On Johan's last visit to the restaurant, he'd requested "something cheap." This was the dish they'd brought out for him. And this time, he was here to order it outright. He was sure that Myra would like it, too.

The young lady read out the dish's name.

"Macaroni gratin?"

According to the description, it was a dish that involved baked cheese over knight sauce.

They gave the waitress their order, and it didn't take long to come out.

"Sorry for the wait! Here's your macaroni gratin. It's hot, so please be careful."

The voice belonged to a middle-aged man, likely the master of the restaurant, who came out from the back holding a large tray. On top of it were fresh bread rolls the size of their hands and beside that a tough-looking, deep porcelain dish with a handle, filled to the brim with food.

It was quite clear that the food in question was hot; it quietly sizzled as the master lowered the tray.

"Yahoo! Now that's what I'm talking about!"

Johan couldn't help but raise his voice in glee. He'd waited seven long days to eat this again. It had only taking one meal to turn him into a slave to its great

taste. The fact that he could only have it here, at the Restaurant to Another World, made the wait that much more unbearable.

“Please take your time and enjoy!”

The master grinned, delivering his usual line as he watched the young man’s excitement. Then he left for the kitchen.

“All right! Let’s eat! ...Iz hawft?!” Johan said through a full mouth. “But it’s delicious! Myra, c’mon, you gotta try some before it gets cold. It’s amazing.” He turned his full attention back to the macaroni gratin and the fork lifting it up to his mouth.

He opened his mouth to let out hot steam, but his hand never stopped moving. He was like a hungry beast.

It looks hot, so I guess I’ll start with the bread...

After watching Johan dig in, Myra immediately understood that the food was so hot that she might burn herself if she wasn’t careful. She figured it’d be safer to start with the so-called “all you can eat” bread.

Ah, this is delish.

Myra’s cheeks swelled with one bite of the freshly baked bread. The surface was nice and crunchy, and the inside was warm and soft.

The inside of the bread was also white as snow; it was clear the dough had been made using quality wheat.

It also clearly contained more than just water and salt. Myra could sense the flavors of butter, milk, and high-quality white sugar, giving the bread a faint sweetness. Johan couldn’t have been more right; his father’s bakery would charge at least a silver coin for one piece.

“See? Amazing, right?” Johan smiled, noticing Myra’s reaction.

“Yeah...”

Myra was forced to admit it. Just this one piece of bread was worth the price she’d read on the menu earlier.

To someone who helped run a “normal restaurant,” it really proved how

amazing the Restaurant to Another World was: they were able to offer this caliber of food for basically free.

“Now c’mon, you gotta have some of this macaroni gratin. I brought you all the way here ’cause I wanted you to try it!”

“Okay, hang on.”

Myra picked up her fork and dug into the main attraction.

Thanks to the thickness of the porcelain plate, the macaroni gratin was able to maintain its temperature long after it had been taken out of the oven.

Myra pressed her fork into the macaroni gratin, breaking the surface of the browned cheese.

Peeking out from beneath was the white knight sauce. Seeing that bright color only deepened Myra’s anticipation. She pulled her fork up to her mouth.

It’s so hot! ...But it’s amazing!

She let some of the hot steam from her mouth and began to chew the gratin.

Cheese and knight sauce go amazing together.

The first thing Myra tasted was the cheese. It was cooked just right, spreading a wonderful sour taste throughout her mouth. Then she noticed the thick knight sauce and its rich flavor.

It was this fusion of milk and butter that made the knight sauce richer and creamier than the stuff Myra sold at the inn. The sour cheese and the sweetness of the sauce melded together in her mouth, bringing out the best in one another.

Let’s see... Oranie, chicken breast, mushrooms, and...noodles? Is this macaroni, then?

Myra took a moment to identify all of the ingredients, each of which tasted absolutely wonderful.

The caramelized oranie brought its own unique sweetness to the dish. The chicken breast provided a savoriness and a satisfying mouthfeel. The thick mushrooms soaked up the flavor of the sauce, while the noodles, which were

made from flour of some sort, were smooth and toothsome.

This macaroni stuff is fantastic.

The best part of these mysterious noodles was the hole inside them that soaked up the rich, creamy sauce.

Every bite into the noodles made the sauce caught in the holes come spilling out. It was tremendous.

“Well? It’s damn good, right?” Johan asked.

“It is!”

Myra smiled at Johan as he used a piece of bread to mop up the remaining sauce on the plate. He was right; this was indeed an “amazingly delicious new shop.”

At the same time...

“It’d be great if we could serve this at the inn,” Myra whispered.

Myra couldn’t help but consider it: a knight sauce dish with all sorts of other ingredients inside of it, baked with cheese on top. If they could somehow reproduce this at the inn, they’d get even more customers than before.

“For real?! If you end up making it, I’d come by every single day!” Johan replied excitedly to Myra’s statement.

The thought of being able to eat macaroni gratin outside of the Restaurant to Another World was enough to fill Johan with pure joy.

Encouraged by her friend’s enthusiasm, Myra quietly made her decision.

“Really? Hm... I guess I’ll give it a try.”

Making the noodles would be tough, but as long as she figured that out, everything else would fall into place.

I wonder if this is how Dad felt when he first decided to learn how to make knight stew...

If Myra could make the macaroni gratin happen, it’d be incredible. Excitement building in her chest, she continued to dig in. Surely eating more of the dish would help her understand its secrets.

Chapter 51:

Birthday Cake

That day, Ellen's whole family was dressed to the nines.

"Hey, Mom, let's goooo."

"Nope. Today's your special day, so you gotta look the part."

The star of the party that day was Bona. She had just turned nine years old, and her mother was dressing her in pretty clothes and braiding her hair for the occasion. Excited to get to the party, Bona whined for her to go faster, but to no avail.

The occasion in question was a party called the "Children's Blessing," which was usually held during the New Year's Festival. It was a celebration of a child living past their earliest days and growing up to be a proper "kid." This meant that they'd be able to formally help their parents around the house. While it wasn't as big a deal as the coming of age ceremony that was held when a child turned fifteen years old, it was still a major event.

As the official ceremony drew near, Ellen and her family decided to hold a private celebration at the Restaurant to Another World.

Ellen had given birth to a grand total of five children, but Kai and Bona were the only two to live to their ninth year and celebrate their "Children's Blessing" day.

Ellen's first child was a frail little girl who didn't survive her fifth winter.

Her second child was a tough little boy, and perhaps this is why she and her husband let their guard down. When he was just seven years old, he'd fallen from a tree and passed on to the next world, just like that.

Ellen still didn't understand how or why her fifth child had died. She'd happily drunk her milk one night, and then Ellen had put her to bed. When she woke the next morning, the baby had turned cold.

And so her only children that remained were Kai and Bona.

Which was precisely why three years ago, they'd decided to hold a huge celebration for their third child, Kai, when he turned nine.

From their small savings, the family used nearly as many silver coins as they had fingers on both hands to order the "special celebration" at Nekoya.

The master had lived up to their expectations and some. Their table for four had played host to a massive feast. And no matter how much alcohol or drink they ordered, the price stayed the same.

And then there was the giant, sweet, melt-in-your-mouth confection that he brought out at the end of the meal. Truth be told, it was a feast that far surpassed the meager sum they paid for it.

Six-year-old Bona would never forget that day. Even three years after Kai's celebration, she was still clamoring for the special meal her brother got.

And so it was decided that they would celebrate Bona's ninth birthday at Nekoya, which meant that Ellen was going to have her daughter looking her absolute best.

"Hee hee, I can't wait! I bet the food's gonna be super-duper amazing! And I get to eat that 'cake' thingy again!"

A smile formed on Bona's face as she excitedly thought about the meal to come. All the while her mother continued to fix her hair.

Being nine and all meant that Bona was far more concerned with eating than she was with her physical appearance. Three years ago, everything she'd ate at her brother's party was undoubtedly delicious. But it was that confection she couldn't forget. That was the only time she'd ever been able to sample it.

It had been massive, and sweet to a surprising degree. Even three years later, she still sometimes had dreams about eating it.

It wasn't rare for Ellen's family to bump into well-dressed nobles at Nekoya. Bona's mom would often tell her that "they lived in a different world altogether." Yet even those fancy people never ate anything as incredible as the

confection Bona had eaten that fateful day.

In fact, this small family celebration was more exciting to Bona than the big party on New Year's.

"Mooooom, are we ready yet?!"

She just wanted to get to Nekoya as soon as possible; she couldn't care less if her hair was braided neatly. She was on the verge of throwing a bit of a fit.

"There. All done. Don't you look beautiful? Enchanting, if I do say so myself!"

Ellen nodded to herself, grinning at Bona's pained expression. She was pleased with the job she had done dressing up her daughter. She'd gone as far as to use some of their precious firewood, something they normally sold for a profit, so that she could wash Bona's hair with warm water. Now it was nice and braided.

Combine that with the brand-new set of clothes Ellen had spent all year making for this very occasion, and Bona looked like a young lady from the city or even a fairy from the forest. She was beautiful.

"Ooh, all done? Let's get a move on!"

"Mooooom, you're so slow! Let's goooo!"

Of course, Herman and Kai showed little interest in any of Ellen's hard work. The two were at their wit's end; all they'd consumed that morning was some water. Why fill up when there was going to be a massive feast later that day?

So their stomachs were empty, and their patience running impossibly low.

"Mooooom! Let's goooo! I'm hungry, tooooo!!!"

The young Bona was completely in agreement with her father and brother.

"Okay, okay! I get it, geez. Shall we?"

Ellen sighed to herself. She was accustomed to her family's attitude toward her. So together they headed off to the party venue.

By the time the family arrived at their destination, the sun had risen to its zenith.

Ring ring.

“Welcome! We’ve been waiting for you! Right this way.”

The moment the family walked through the door, Aletta was there to greet them with a bright smile. She carefully guided them to their seats.

There was a table specially prepared for a party, with a little sign on top of it that Aletta couldn’t read. The master told her that it said “reserved seats.” She picked it up and gestured to the family to sit down.

“Your food will be right out, nice and hot! Oh, and what will you all be having to drink?”

“Awesome, let’s see... How about a beer to start with?” Herman perused the menu. “Actually, no. Lemme get a, uh, whiskey! Yeah.”

“I’ll be having wine, thank you,” Ellen said.

“Get me a cola!” cried Kai.

“Me, too! Me, too!” his sister echoed.

No matter what they drank, the price would be the same. So Ellen’s family decided to order their absolute favorites.

“You got it! Hold on just a moment,” Aletta responded with a big smile on her face, leaving for the kitchen.

“Master, Mrs. Ellen and her family are here!” she called.

“Oh, perfect.” The master nodded his head. Then he got to work.

Along with some of the regular dishes, the birthday menu was primarily based around a bunch of made-to-order items. He had waited to start final preparations until the family arrived so that he could serve them the cold dishes cold and the hot dishes hot. Now he’d put the finishing touches on the whole shebang.

Now, then. I really hope they enjoy this.

The master glanced over at the fridge.

It’d been three years since somebody ordered this particular item at the Restaurant to Another World. It was a dessert he very rarely served.

That said, it wasn’t actually a rare cake at all. At Flying Puppy and most other

cake shops, it was a staple on the menu.

The master would have to be very careful about when he presented the cake to them.

And so the master, Aletta, and the newly hired waitress each carried various dishes over to the family's table.

"It's here!!"

"What a feast..."

"Amazing!"

"Wow!"

They sat in stunned appreciation of the mouthwatering display before them.

An entire roasted chicken.

Fresh vegetables—hard to get during the winter—topped with some kind of vinegar-based brown sauce. Thinly sliced fried cobbler's tubers, crushed and scattered atop the fresh veggies.

Potage soup, made from milk and a yellow vegetable called "corn," with its slightly sweet aroma.

Fried shripe and scallops, both varieties of seafood, were still making sizzling sounds in their dish. There was more than enough of both for everyone at the table.

Bright yellow omelets filled with smoked meat and cheese, topped with a slightly sour red sauce.

A large plate lined with small sandwiches, each filled with mayo, eggs, marinated eggs, cucumber, crushed cobbler's tubers, and thinly cut vegetables.

The various dishes lined up on the table were more than enough to send the family's stomachs into a maddening spiral.

In fact, other customers couldn't help but glance over at Ellen's table, their own appetites stirred by the amazing sight.

"We'll bring out the cake at the very end, so... Please take your time and enjoy yourselves."

Watching the family struggle to hold themselves back, the master decided to keep his remarks brief.

As soon as he was finished, all four members of Ellen's family reached for their favorite dishes.

It went without saying, but everything in the party set was delicious. The roasted chicken's skin was crispy, its meats deliciously juicy covered in sweet and sour sauce. The herb seasoning gave it a fragrant aroma.

The slightly sour sauce and the salty cobbler's tubers went down nice and easy with the fresh vegetables.

The yellow soup warmed the body; it tasted just as sweet as it smelled.

The various fried seafoods—dishes that the family would normally never get the chance to experience—had unique savoriness. They paired perfectly with the tartar sauce in the middle of the plate.

The omelets were perfectly cooked, gently breaking apart in their mouths. The sandwiches allowed them to experience all kinds of foods in one bite, gently nestled between the soft, high-quality white bread with a touch of sour mayo.

And then there were the endless drinks: delicious booze and sweet beverages.

Ellen's family quietly tucked into the smorgasbord before them.

They ate in complete silence. That's how delicious it all was.

It's so...good...but I have to...hold back.

Along with the rest of her family members, Bona tried a little bit of each dish, doing her best to fight against her natural urge: the need to feed.

Of course she wanted to dig in like everyone else. But she couldn't.

After all, Bona knew what would be coming out at the end of the meal. She'd been waiting three long years for this moment.

If she let this opportunity slip through her fingers, she'd likely have to wait until her brother's coming of age ceremony to taste it again.

The greatest food of all, in the best condition possible. Three years ago, she'd been so full she was only able to eat half. Her brother ended up eating the rest of her serving. She would never suffer that humiliation again.

At last, the moment came.

"Excuse me, would you like us to bring out the cake?"

Aletta waited until the plates on the table were just about cleared before posing the question.

"Yeah, that sounds good," Ellen said. "Thank you."

It's time! Bona thought to herself, hearing her mother's words.

"Hold on just a moment."

The little girl watched as Aletta cleared the table of the rest of the plates and left to get the cake from the back.

C'mon, c'mon...

Bona could barely keep still. She'd been waiting so long for this moment. So very long.

"Sorry for the wait! Here's your birthday cake!"

It was the confection of her dreams: a cake that she could only eat on a very special occasion.

The cake was a special item at the Restaurant to Another World that needed to be reserved in advance. It was so big that Aletta actually had to hold it with both hands.

"Oh, my. That's quite large."

"Lady Victoria, did you know they sold that here?"

"No, this is my first time seeing it. In terms of size, it's about on par with those whole takeout cakes. But I've never seen one decorated like that before."

"Lady Celestine, what is that?"

"I don't know. But it looks delicious... No, it's beautiful, even."

“I’m not sure what to say. It’s amazing. Do you think that the doll and the sign are edible?”

“...I’d say there’s a high probability. Most cake decorations are edible and tasty to boot.”

Voices murmured from the nearby tables.

Bona glanced in their direction, seeing the regulars who often came to Nekoya to eat sweets.

These were the very same people that Bona’s mother had said “lived in another world.”

Their eyes were locked on the cake, as were Bona’s and her family’s.

It was both a confection and a piece of art.

Its surface was decorated with red berries and white cream.

The cream covered the entire surface layer of the cake, and was also used to draw complex patterns on top. The red berries adorning the cream were sprinkled with white particles like a dusting of snow. This made the berries stand out on the pure white surface of the cake, a wonderful burst of color.

At the center of the cake there was a brown sign with some kind of pattern on it, along with four cat dolls.

“Wooooow!!!”

“Do you like it, young lady? This is a cake made just for you.”

The master couldn’t help but smile at the sight of the little girl being charmed by her cake. He gestured to Ellen with a cake knife.

“Would you like me to cut the cake?”

“No, I’ll do it myself.” Ellen shook her head. “Would you mind handing me the knife?” She gently accepted the knife from the master.

Now let’s see...

Ellen couldn’t help but feel a little bad, digging the knife into such a work of

art. But she cut into it nonetheless.

She took off the sign in the center of the cake, placing it off to the side. Kai said he remembered it being super sweet and delicious from last time.

Each of the four cat dolls were positioned so that each person would get one. That said, the one beside the sign was the largest of them all.

The other three members of Ellen's family watched carefully as she cut the cake into slices.

"Mooom! I want this one!"

"Now hold your horses! Your old man should get first pick."

"Stop right there, both of you. Aren't you forgetting something important?"

Typical brutish man behavior. Despite eating and drinking their fill of the earlier feast, they were both trying to claim the largest slice of cake. Ellen stopped them in their tracks.

"Today's guest of honor is Bona, so she gets to pick whichever slice she wants. Go ahead, honey," Ellen said with a big smile.

"This one!"

The answer was obvious.

"Yay! Cake time!" Bona cheerfully exclaimed. She grabbed her fork.

"I'm gonna start with this!"

The birthday girl decided to begin with the brown sign with the pattern on it. Three years ago, Kai had taken it all for himself, so she didn't get to try any.

Her brother told her it was super-duper sweet and delicious to boot.

According to the nice man in charge of the restaurant, the strange patterns on the tiny sign were words celebrating her birthday. But that didn't matter to Bona at the moment.

"Woooow! It's bitter but sweet, too! What is this?!"

This was beyond her wildest expectations. The second she bit into the sign, it

snapped right in half.

It was simultaneously sweeter than anything she'd ever eaten before and slightly bitter. Underlying it all was the faint flavor of milk. The sign began to melt in her mouth.

As Bona lost herself in the flavor and mouthfeel of the mini sign, Kai looked on with a jealous expression on his face. It didn't take long for her to finish it off.

"Ah, it's all gone..."

Then Bona remembered something important.

I still have the whole cake left!

Indeed. The main star of the evening still remained.

As she took fork in hand and cut into her piece of cake, Bona unconsciously recalled her experience from three years ago.

She didn't want to rush, so she cut a small piece off of her slice and brought it to her mouth.

Aaah, it's so tasty.

In that very moment, the taste in Bona's mouth triggered a vivid memory.

A memory from three years past. A memory of a flavor that had pushed her forward all these years.

An explosion of milky, creamy, soft goodness took place on her tongue.

The sweetness of the fruit syrup sandwiched between the cake and the cream burst forth with each chew. That combination was totally different than the sweetness of the cream alone.

And then there was the delicious sour note amidst all the sweetness, which came from the red berries.

This fusion of flavors showed Bona a dream.

It was a dream of sweet cakes, stretching on and on into the distance.

In this dream, Bona ate what seemed to be an endless supply of cake.

This was the very moment she'd been waiting for, all these three long years.

And so the dream came to an end.

"...It's all gone."

Once Bona finished off the red berries covered in sugar and the crunchy candy doll, she sadly looked down at her empty plate.

How could such a huge cake disappear so quickly?

All that remained was a feeling of fullness. And of sadness.

If only there were more...

She gently rubbed her tummy and looked up at her family.

"Whew, now that's what I call good eatin'!"

"Ugggh, I can't eat any more..."

"This place really is the best."

Everyone had smiles on their faces.

They were wearing pretty clothes and eating delicious food. How could they possibly do anything but smile?

"All right, we'll hang out a little longer, let this all settle, and then head home."

"Sounds good to me. I feel like I'm about to burst."

"Ugggh, it hurts... Ah, miss, another cola, please!"

Her beloved family talked amongst themselves, smiles all around.

"This really was the best... Can I get another cola, too?"

Bona couldn't help but smile, also, as the best day in her young life slowly came to a close.

Chapter 52:

Sweet Red Bean Soup

It was the first Friday in January.

The New Year's holiday was still going in Japan, so local stores and business were closed for business.

Nekoya, of course, was no different. And so, alone in the restaurant, the master got to work.

"All right. Let's do this."

Standing in the kitchen, he whispered to himself. It was New Year's, and yet here he was working. Why? Well, it was Friday.

Chicken curry and beef stew... Oh, and I should probably make some of the regular curry, too.

The master was thinking about one of his weekly regulars, as well as his new black-uniformed waitress, the one who preferred to get paid in curry. His thoughts turned back to the customer, who would doubtlessly show their face the next day.

Tomorrow was Saturday, after all, when the Restaurant to Another World would be open for business.

Nekoya paid no heed to Obon, the year-end festivals, New Year's, or Golden Week. In fact, the other-worlders didn't even have a word for New Year's. And that meant the master had work to do.

Normally, while preparing for the weekdays with his staff, he'd always tack on a little bit of prep work for Saturdays. But on the Friday of a long break like this, the master would have to spend an entire day doing prep all on his own.

He didn't mind, though.

A little work is the perfect cure for vacation blues.

At this time of year, the master helped out at a local shrine, pounded mochi, chilled at his older brother's house, and did all kinds of other stuff. But generally

speaking, he was on vacation.

So he was fully recharged. And this prep work would be perfect for getting his cooking back into shape—his skills had probably gotten a bit rusty over the break.

Let's see...

With everything else taken care of, it was time for the master to start doing his special New Year's prep.

At this time of year, the master liked to offer a special New Year's menu at the Restaurant to Another World. It was about as Japanese as you could get, but there were customers who really enjoyed it.

It had all started as a little bit of extra New Year's service that the old master used to fit in. There had always been one particular customer who just lapped it up.

Hell, ever since the current master was a kid, this customer had shown up once a year only for the special New Year's meal. That's how devoted they were.

The master knew full well that if he stopped doing this, it would be a huge letdown for this longtime customer. So here he was, continuing his grandfather's tradition all these years later.

I wonder if that long-eared lady's gonna show up again this year... the master thought as he started on the preparations.

On the Western Continent, deep in an old forest surrounded by mountains, there was a towering tree. In a hollow within, the female elf sage Selena was ending her meditation. Slowly she opened her eyes for the first time in a year.

I see the year has turned again.

The flow of magic had shifted imperceptibly under the influence of the sun, moon, and the stars. Selena could sense the passing of the old year.

The sage had absorbed spiritual energies into her body, turning them into magic that allowed her to stay young. This kept old age and death at bay for

Selena for all eternity.

It was a technique that the gods of old—who'd thrown away the ancient world and fled to another in fear—had used as naturally as breathing. It helped them to escape the seven terrifying colored overlords of the old civilization.

And now Selena was the only elf in the world still capable of using this magic.

It was a vicious time. The elves, having thrown themselves into magic research, were locked in battle against five overlords (Million Colors and Black had since vanished to realms unknown) and their progeny in the south. It was then that they sought to depart that realm, to the deep oceans and the lofty skies. To elf-less worlds.

Elves were talented mages by nature and so they thought themselves to be the true rulers of the world. They were nothing like the lizards and monsters who hid themselves away in the planet's dark reaches.

Selena was only one hundred years old at the time. Barely on the precipice of adulthood, and yet she had mastered this magic technique.

It would give elves an immunity to death without requiring them to vacate their bodies or lose their self-awareness and knowledge. This was a very different thing from becoming an undead.

At the time, Selena couldn't believe the talented elven mages who spoke of abandoning their bodies in order to gain immortality and further their own knowledge. Through this, they would become purely spiritual beings known as liches.

While it was true that their bodies were comparatively weak, with spirits that vanished once those bodies were destroyed, elves were still fundamentally creatures of the physical world.

Yet these researchers thought nothing of abandoning their bodies for a purely spiritual existence.

The researchers scoffed at Selena's fear of the concept and threw themselves

into their research. In only a few hundred years, their vision was realized.

But in the process, their souls were devoured by death itself. They became monsters who spread death throughout the world aimlessly and without remorse.

In the end, Selena's fears had come to pass.

The monstrous remnants of these geniuses were consumed by death. And while they still possessed all manner of knowledge, they no longer had any actual intellect to call their own. When Selena recalled how the remnants of her former friends were destroyed, stronger than her sadness at losing them forever was her feeling of peace, knowing that she had never become one of them.

The world had grown painfully aware of its danger, and so the ritual was forever rendered taboo. But even now, the remaining lichs wandered the planet, spreading death in their wake.

What a lonely thing eternity is.

Though she had turned her back on the lich ritual, Selena eventually found her way to another form of immortality. It took her approximately 500 years to devise her theory and another 300 to raise a forest with the magical energies necessary for the technique.

All in all, it took Selena 800 years to complete everything. This was a massive chunk of an elf's lifespan, said to be 1,000 years. Yet the strength of her magical prowess was incredible. As long as Selena stayed within the forest's bounds, she could live forever without food or even water.

That said, it wasn't all rainbows and sunshine. If Selena ever were to leave the forest, she wouldn't last ten years. She was incapable of returning to the nearby capital, which meant that she would spend eternity in these woods. In exchange, she gained both the time she so desperately wanted to perform her research and a deep loneliness the likes of which her fellow elves had long since forgotten. This was the unfortunate bargain Selena had entered into.

3,000 years had now passed since she'd first perfected the technique and gained eternal life. Besides the monstrous remnants of her former friends,

there was likely no one left in the elf capital who remembered her.

I suppose that's fine, Selena thought to herself. After all, things have gotten rather fun recently.

Selena had dedicated her life to meditation and the pursuit of knowledge. Yet in the last thirty years something changed. A door to another world had appeared in the forest. It was a magic remnant of an old friend.

It really is wonderful.

On the other side of the door was a place that offered food in exchange for coin. It was lovingly called the Restaurant to Another World by its human and monster patrons alike. There, they served a special dish once a year, on the first day of Satur of the new year.

It was a dish made of rice, a food popular all across the Western Continent, pounded into a substance called mochi. It was because of this dish that Selena made her yearly visit to the restaurant.

Thus, a few days later when the first Day of Satur of the new year arrived, Selena smiled to herself and spoke aloud.

"It's time."

She had detected the presence of the door within the forest. Selena rose from her position and made haste. The door was by a small pond that the beasts of the forest used as their watering hole.

Because most of the forest creatures were currently in winter hibernation, the pond was still. And there it stood on its shore, the magic door decorated with an illustration of a cat. Selena gently placed her slender fingers on the handle and turned...

The soothing ringing noise filled the silence of the forest, signifying the activation of magic. Savoring the warm sound, Selena stepped through the door.

Compared to the cold darkness of the forest, the inside of the restaurant was bright and warm. It was full of customers celebrating the new year.

Selena had heard stories through the grapevine about how humans had greatly increased their numbers after the awful sickness that nearly wiped them out. And then there were the children of both humans and elves, the half-bloods.

There was the demon race who had gained inhuman powers and bodies through their prayers to the old overlord of chaos. There were the monsters with their culture that was so different from the elves'. And then who could forget the descendants of the southern continent's overlords, the elves' former arch-enemies?

This crowd of diverse beings paid no mind to Selena as she entered the restaurant, continuing to eat and make merry.

On occasion, the black-clad waitress would enter Selena's line of sight, causing her to experience something very close to fear. But that feeling soon disappeared as she sought her objective.

I see this place is as busy as ever... Oooh.

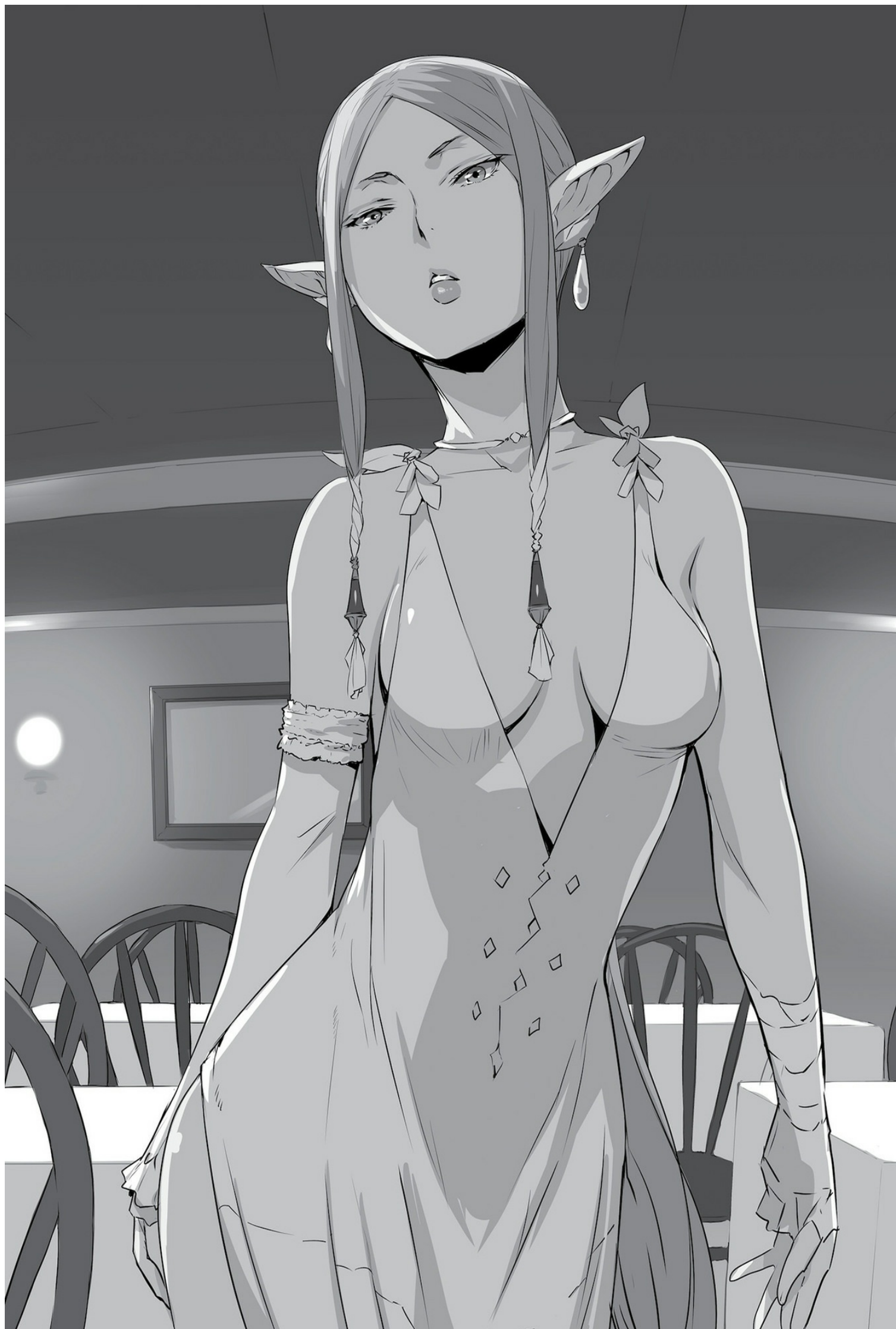
Elves saw little change in their surroundings over the span of ten to twenty years, but this place was almost constantly evolving. However, Selena still managed to spot someone she knew eating quietly in the corner of the restaurant. She went over to greet him.

"Long time no... Oh, well, it hasn't been so long. Hello, Christian."

"Well, well, if it isn't Lady Selena! It's been a year, hasn't it?"

Christian responded politely to the legendary elf's casual greeting. Selena was almost ten times older than he was.

Some thousands of years ago, Selena had vanished from society, leaving the elves to wonder what had happened. Had she died? Or become a lich? Nobody really knew. Judging by her appearance now, it was quite clear that she was doing rather well.



Christian had first run into her right here at the restaurant, which meant he'd never seen her outside of it. As to where Selena actually lived, he hadn't the slightest clue.

"Mm. I see things remain unchanged for you... Or not."

Selena spoke in old tongue. She noticed something different within her friend.

"Now, then. I don't recall there being mochi here with that sort of seasoning."

She directed her gaze at the mochi Christian was eating, topped with natto sauce.

As far as she could remember, the last time she saw him he had been eating mochi seasoned with sugared "soy sauce" and wrapped in black sea grass.

"Ah, this? I got a tip from a new friend."

Christian explained what he had learned from his friend's daughter some half a year ago.

"Natto goes wonderfully with wheat noodles, but I also discovered that it pairs with rice as well. So I figured, wouldn't it taste great with mochi? It's made of rice, too, after all."

...And so when he tried making the order, he discovered that in the other world, eating mochi like this was fairly standard. The master brought it right out for him: mochi topped with a soy sauce that was slightly richer than usual, and natto.

The unique flavor and stickiness of the natto fused perfectly with the soft, chewy mochi, leaving Christian extremely satisfied.

"Hm, well that certainly explains it..."

Selena was compelled by this natto mochi, but she had to stay focused on her primary objective.

She called for the young lady wearing an otherworldly uniform, who was carrying plates to the various diners. She must be one of the workers.

"Young lady, excuse me, but may I make my order?"

"Of course! Hold on one second," the waitress called out, scurrying over.

“Sorry for the wait! What would you like?”

“Mm. I’d like a bowl of sweet red bean soup to start with.”

This was the special dish she’d come all the way here for, only served on the first Day of Satur of the year. Something she could only get at the Restaurant to Another World.

“No problem! We’ll get that right out for you!”

The young waitress replied energetically, leaving to fetch Selena’s food. The girl hadn’t been here last time, so she must be new. And judging by the horns on her head, Selena determined she was of the demon race.

“Now then, Christian. Tell me. Has anything interesting happened as of late?”

“Let’s see... I’ve been doing some research. I was inspired by a visit from a friend’s daughter.”

Christian skipped the small talk, getting right to his most recent research discoveries.

The year he first met the great sage Selena, he’d learned that she quite enjoyed this manner of conversation.

“Oh, and what would that be?”

“I’m sure you recall that over the past few years I’ve been doing research on fermentation. It’s a technique humans use to rot certain kinds of food. I had a theory that depending on the state of the food, there would be differences in how they rot. So I’ve been doing all kinds of tests.”

Christian continued.

“Looking back on it, I accidentally stumbled upon the recipe for miso when I boiled elf beans in sea water. And then I came across natto by boiling elf beans in freshwater.”

Selena listened intently to Christian’s explanation. It reminded her of a time thousands of years ago, long before the awful ritual turned her friends into horrific lichens. A time when she and her close friend, both of them in the bodies they were born to, used to discuss their findings excitedly.

There's nothing like conversing with others... Not that I dislike letting my mind sink into the oceans of my own memory.

The other waitress, carrying food to and fro throughout the restaurant, quietly agreed with Selena's thoughts.

And so after they'd spent a few minutes conversing about a variety of topics and theories, the demon girl came to the table with Selena's order.

"Sorry for the wait! Here's your sweet red bean soup!"

Before the elf was a deep, round bowl of red soup, with white mochi floating on top.

"Mm. It's time to eat."

Before she actually picked up the spoon, Selena took a moment to savor the steam wafting off of the soup. The sweet scent filled her lungs, making her stomach rumble—preparing itself to welcome the soup for the first time in a year.

Selena lowered the spoon, bringing the first taste of soup to her mouth.

"Oh..."

The wise elf couldn't help but exclaim at the sweet flavor filling her mouth.

It was the gentle sweetness of the beans, so different from the fruits of the forest or honey harvested from a beehive. This soup was also unique among other sweet flavors in the restaurant, containing no milk or eggs (always a plus for elves). This was the flavor that Selena had looked forward to, which she could savor only once every year.

Selena grabbed the nearby chopsticks and started on the mochi. She gently brought the tips of the sticks together, cutting the mochi into two sizable pieces. The elf brought one piece directly to her mouth; grabbing a whole piece of mochi with chopsticks was extraordinarily difficult.

Mm... Mmm.

As she chewed into the soft mochi, the sweet red bean soup spilled out of its

insides, filling her mouth with warm liquid.

The sweet soup fused with the flavor of the white mochi, causing Selena's expression to change.

Chewing into the mochi gave birth to another kind of sweetness, amplifying the dish's flavor once again.

This really does taste delightful.

Selena's verdict was the same as it had been when she'd first tried the soup. She was thoroughly satisfied by the meal she could only access once a year.

"Phew..."

And so after emptying an entire bowl of sweet red bean soup, Selena turned her attention to the salted kelp that came with it to cleanse her palate. She then took a sip of the brown rice tea.

After taking a moment to collect herself, Selena called out to the waitress.

"Now then... Young lady, might I have a word?"

"Yes! How can I help you?"

"I'd like to make an additional order. One seaside mochi, one mochi with roasted soybean flour, and one of those natto mochi like my friend here is eating."

Thanks to the forest's magic energy, Selena's body was in perfect shape.

Considering she only ate this once a year, she could afford to indulge.

"Tonight, I feast. I'm gonna eat until my stomach bursts!"

And so Selena's new year started off on a high note, once again.

Chapter 53:

Hamburg Steak

On the eastern edge of the Western Continent was the Ocean Nation.

It was composed of a main coastal city, along with multiple small islands offshore that were home to humans, beastmen, and demons alike.

Each island of the Ocean Nation had its own animals and crops worth harvesting. But that didn't mean there was a lot to go around.

And so since time immemorial, the islands had traded their harvests amongst themselves, while strengthening their shipbuilding skills until they were able to raise vessels that could cross the wide ocean.

This legacy of trade and seafaring was still present in the Ocean Nation. After the war with the demon race ended and the Eastern Continent was at peace, the Ocean Nation became a prosperous trading nation through its dealings with the continent far across the sea.

Of course, while many of the islands had all manner of intelligent life living on them, there were also many that remained uninhabited.

Roukei was but a young fisherman who had set off on his own on a small boat he'd received from his father. He made a living catching fish, drying them, and selling them. But today he found himself on such a lifeless island. Arte had guided him there.

"Um..."

Bathed in the early morning light, Arte turned to the puzzled Roukei. Her body was slender; her skin bronze in the manner of the Sand Nation. Her eyes were deep blue, like the ocean, and the lower half of her body was a fishtail. Indeed, Arte was a mermaid from the southern seas. She looked at Roukei, her expression unmoving and serious.

"What is it?" Arte asked.

"It's just, er, is this really the place?"

Roukei's cheeks turned bright red as the mermaid's enchantingly blue eyes fixed on him.

"Yes, it is. When I first found it, I didn't have any currency on me, so I couldn't buy anything. I'm so grateful to you, Roukei."

Arte bowed her head. Her expression was filled with confidence; she was so beautiful. Roukei had come from a town of fishermen, and the only women he'd ever known were the tough, battle-hardened types. Meeting someone this beautiful had been somewhat of a shock to his system.

Roukei had first met Arte three days earlier in the middle of a vicious storm, when the powerful waves knocked the young fishermen from his boat. It was Arte who had saved him from the verge of death, swimming effortlessly through the ocean waves to pull the drowning Roukei up and back to his boat. Then she'd offered a prayer to the Lord of Water—who she called the Lord of Blue—to calm the waves.

After the storm cleared, Arte all but carried the boat on her beautiful back, guiding it all the way to the island and saving Roukei from the darkness of death.

The young fisherman of course expressed his gratitude. But he was also falling for the mermaid's kindness and beauty. He was willing to do whatever it took to repay her, and he told her as much.

...Even if what she requested was money. Ten silver coins to be exact. While this was a bit of a letdown, Arte had saved his life, and she was becoming someone increasingly important to the young man.

And so after he gave her the promised ten silver coins—a cheap enough price to pay for his life—Roukei posed a question to the mermaid girl.

"What are you going to spend them on?"

Roukei didn't consider himself terribly knowledgeable of the world and how it operated. But he did know that mermaids typically had no need for money;

they didn't shop for things the way humans did.

And this wasn't limited to mermaids. Most monsters didn't seem to think of human coin as something "valuable."

Coins weren't edible, and they couldn't be used as weapons. When it came to decorative accessories, stones, flowers, scales, or fangs were much more beautiful.

The monster races couldn't wrap their heads around why humans, elves, and dwarves so desired the strange metals. Goblins had a habit of collecting them—they liked pretty and shiny things—but most monsters who attacked humans would take their weapons, clothes, and lives, and leave the money behind.

But this mermaid girl was different. Apparently, in her hometown, she and her people interacted with humanity fairly regularly. There, they were "fellow believers of the Lord of Blue." So Arte understood the value of coin.

Yet in this northern sea where she'd found herself on a training journey, the mermaids didn't worship the same deity. Nor did they interact with humans. And that meant there wasn't anything for her to spend her money on. Well, except for one very specific thing.

It was for this reason that Arte guided Roukei to the empty island.

"It's in the forest up ahead," she said.

"But..."

Arte tilted her head at Roukei's confused expression. He glanced at her tail; it was sitting below the surface of the water, gently swaying back and forth with the rocking of the waves.

It was perfectly adapted for swimming but not so great for walking on land.

"Oh, this? It's no problem."

The mermaid girl caught on to Roukei's concern. She offered a prayer to the Lord of Blue, a special skill practiced only by priests and priestesses who worshiped the great Lords of Six Colors. With her incantation, Arte's tail suddenly began to transform.

Before Roukei's very eyes, the tail morphed into what, at first, appeared to be

human legs. However, from her shins down, her skin morphed into blue, lizard-like scales. Her feet became claws that looked like they could rip metal apart.

“Huh?!”

“Oh, I can pray to the Lord of Blue to transform my tail into dragon legs,” Arte proclaimed to the stunned Roukei, somewhat proudly. “I can’t get wings yet, though.”

She was a talented priestess of the Lord of Blue, one who had spent many hours training in the underwater shrine in order to summon dragon legs. It was a skill she learned to better interact with the land-dwellers.

“Let’s go. It can get crowded if you don’t get there early.”

Arte took the surprised Roukei by the hand and guided him forward. After pushing through the island’s forest for a bit, they finally arrived at their destination.

“We’re here!” Arte exclaimed, standing before a large door. It was the same door she’d once found in her hometown, cat illustration and all.

“Come on.”

Arte placed her hand on the knob and turned, opening the door...

The young man and the mermaid walked through the entrance and were greeted by the sound of ringing bells.

“Welcome... Oh? Long time no see, Arte!”

The master was somewhat surprised. Arte used to drop by in the early mornings, but she hadn’t been to the restaurant in some time. But he didn’t recognize the boy who was with her today.

“It’s been a while. Can I order?”

After their greetings, Arte immediately jumped to order-making mode.

“Of course!” the master said. “Will you be getting the usual? Oh, what should I do for the young man there?”

Arte almost always ordered the same dish, so the master turned his attention

to the new customer. Instead of her usual companion, a woman who was a few years older than Arte, here was a tanned young man with black hair. Definitely a first-timer.

“Two demi-glace hamburg steaks with rice.”

Arte made her usual order, as expected. Not the fish she was so accustomed to eating in her world but rather the cooked meat of animals that were raised on the surface. After she’d learned the prayer to acquire dragon legs, one of the senior priests brought her to the Restaurant to Another World as a “reward” for her good work. Ever since then, she’d become one of its many loyal customers.

“You got it! Hold on to your butts,” the master said as he left for the kitchen.

“Let’s sit.”

Arte made her way to one of the many open tables.

Roukei followed his new mermaid friend. After she caught him up about what was happening, he asked the question that had been on his mind ever since they walked in here.

“Um, what is this place?”

It was surprising enough that Arte could suddenly grow legs, but then they were wandering through a forest, walking up to a weird door, and were now sitting in some strange room.

To be quite frank, Roukei had no clue what was going on.

“This is the Restaurant to Another World,” Arte said calmly, simply stating the name of their present location and explaining its purpose.

“It’s a place where you can eat demi-glace hamburg steak.”

...Well, its purpose as far she was concerned.

After watching Arte skillfully make her order and following her to the table, Roukei took a moment to look around his new surroundings. The room was filled with all kinds of stuff he’d never seen before. Perhaps more surprising, customers of all shapes and sizes were sitting around him, many of them

inhuman. For a fisherman like Roukei who lived inside a fairly small bubble, this place would have been fascinating even without the food.

“Huh, so this is another world? Wow... Hm? Is something the matter, Arte?”

He noticed that Arte had a puzzled expression on her face.

“No. It should be fine...”

Arte was tilting her head, glancing over at the black-clad being carrying food to customers. But in that moment, their orders arrived.

“Sorry for the wait! Here are your demi-glace hamburg steaks!”

A young waitress girl placed their orders down on the table. She was wearing a pretty uniform that left her legs exposed.

On each plate was a large, round piece of meat topped with an egg and dark red sauce. Off to the side were cobbler’s tubers, a common food from the Eastern Continent, along with bright orange karoots.

As far as Roukei could tell, it was a ball of minced beast meat, something that he rarely had the opportunity to eat.

The meat sizzled atop the metal plate. Next to it was a bowl filled with what looked to be high-quality white rice.

“Whoa...”

Roukei gulped loudly before the sizzling meat and its appetizing aroma.

“Um, this is...”

The young fisherman had all kinds of questions. But as soon as he saw that Arte was already digging into her “demi-glace hamburg steak,” he gave up on asking them.

“Dewishous. Yull uberstad omce you twry it,” Arte attempted to explain, chewing into her portion of meat.

“...Okay.”

Roukei, now getting used to Arte’s unique way of communicating, took the unfamiliar knife and fork in hand.

He followed Arte's example and started cutting into the ball of meat. Since the knife was made of such sturdy metal, he assumed that the meat would be tough to cut into, yet it was more tender than he could've imagined. The knife went right through with little resistance.

"Wow, this is pretty easy to cut through."

In fact, Roukei surmised that the meat was so tender that he could've probably used chopsticks to eat it.

"Here goes nothing..."

Roukei stabbed his fork into a piece of the meat, brought it to his mouth, and started to chew...

"What the heck?!"

The young man was stunned by the flavor of the meat.

After all, this was beast meat, something that up until now, he thought he could never get used to eating.

But in this form, it lacked any of its normal gaminess. This was undoubtedly high-quality meat.

With each bite, the delicious juices of the meat came pouring out into his mouth. And those juices mixed with the sweet and sour sauce on top...

I-I need rice! I have to try this with rice!

Roukei reached for the bowl next to him, driving his fork into it.

Ah! This is incredible!

Combined with the meat juice and the sweet and sour flavor of the sauce, the faintly sweet and sticky rice became something else entirely. Something magnificent.

The hamburg steak was delicious on its own, but when combined with the rice, it ascended to a new level of deliciousness.

After making sure that he was looking her way, Arte taught Roukei the special way of eating hamburg steak that the senior priest had shown her.

"Try it with the yellow of the egg."

Thoroughly enchanted by the flavorfest in front of him, Roukei took his companion's advice.

"You're right. The egg makes it even more tasty!"

Indeed, by combining the gentle-flavored egg yolk with the complex flavors of the sauce and meat, the entire dish awakened its true potential.

Roukei looked up at Arte and smiled. The mermaid girl couldn't help but feel strangely satisfied.

And so eventually, once they'd finished their meal, the pair left the restaurant and returned to their world.

On the way back through the forest, Roukei finally understood the reason for Arte's original request.

"So that's why you wanted those silver coins, huh?"

"Exactly." The mermaid nodded in return.

Roukei could feel his cheeks turning bright red as he worked up every last bit of courage to ask Arte the question on the tip of his tongue.

"Um, so...every now and then, would you like to go back with me? I'd gladly treat you."

"Are you sure?"

Arte tilted her head ever so slightly at this proposal.

Roukei replied with a big smile. "Of course I am!"

Chapter 54:

Sausage & Potatoes

Glenn let out a sigh of relief. He could feel the morning light cross his face over the magic helmet he wore that allowed him to see in the dark.

“It’s over.”

“Yeah, time to switch.”

Glenn nodded to his partner Ignis, who was sitting beside him, clad in the same kind of armor. He took off his helmet. The cold winter wind blew through, caressing their cheeks.

Being on watch from evening to morning was nothing if not boring. The two men were sleepy. That said, Glenn relished the feeling of freedom at the end of a long shift.

Especially when he had something to look forward to afterward.

“Now then... I hope our replacements hurry up,” Ignis muttered. Glenn’s partner, and friend, was a demon. His two large boar-like tusks were jutting out from his lower jaw, his cold white breath swirling around them as he exhaled.

When they had an all-night shift like this, they typically got the next day off. All they had to do now was wait for their replacements, and they’d be free as birds.

It didn’t take long.

“Yo, sorry ’bout the wait!”

“Good work, gents. Leave the rest to us.”

A dwarf soldier about half as tall as Glenn approached. He wore imperial-style armor with a large axe slung over his back. Walking beside him was a half-elf soldier with pointed ears, carrying a spear.

“Great. Good luck!”

Glenn and Ignis greeted the new arrivals and headed for their lodgings.

In the Empire, it wasn't particularly rare to see soldiers of all different races. As the saying went, "As long as you have the brains to understand law and order, and an able body, you can be a soldier."

It wasn't as lucrative as being an adventurer or a mercenary, but it was much less dangerous. They were only ever deployed to deal with big monster attacks or encounters with enemy nations. But there was always some battle going on somewhere; as long as you served in the army, you would always have food.

And so being a soldier of the Empire was a fairly popular job. Men who lacked trade skills or education, or perhaps wouldn't be inheriting their family's wealth or business, often found themselves enlisting.

A little while later, the day still young, Glenn and Ignis were walking through the streets. They were unarmored but wore their swords at their waists.

"This place is as empty as ever," Glenn said.

"Ayup," Ignis nodded.

"Though I guess we're pretty lucky it even exists."

"Ya got that right."

They looked over the ramshackle town beneath the fortress, a small settlement built up when the old place had been partially torn down during the demon wars. The Empire had since spruced it up and now sent soldiers to it to hold as a defensive line.

In terms of entertainment, your best bets were to head to the brothel (full of unrefined country bumpkin girls), grab some food and drink at the local bar (better than the fortress at least), or blow your pay on overpriced goods imported from the capital. But it wasn't like soldiers had many ways to use their money, anyway.

However, the pair wasn't headed for any of those locations on this early morning.

They continued to walk through the quiet streets. Most of the townsfolk were still asleep.

“All right!” Glenn exclaimed when they came to a certain alleyway. “I knew it’d still be here this early in the morn.”

“Ayup.”

Sandwiched in the alleyway was an oak-wood door.

Apparently, there were other folks in town who made use of the door. The mornings after Glenn and Ignis had overnight guard duty all night were the only times they could use it consistently. This was their secret spot.

The friends nodded to each other as Glenn wrapped his fingers around the handle and opened the door.

The sound of ringing bells echoed throughout the sleeping town as the pair passed through the door to another world.

“Ah! Welcome! I see you two are as early as always.”

Since it was so early, there were barely any other customers at the Restaurant to Another World. Aletta had just finished her own breakfast and begun to clean when she noticed the two soldiers come through the door.

Glenn and Ignis had only recently started dropping by the restaurant, typically on early mornings. Aletta recognized their faces.

“Hiyo, Aletta my dear. You’re as adorable as always!”

“Ayoh, it’s been a while.”

The young waitress was wearing a uniform that exposed her legs—scandalous, yet somehow still innocent-looking. But the outfit was spotlessly clean, and Aletta wore it like a pro. Glenn greeted her cheerfully, while Ignis’s face turned bright red.

“Hee hee, thank you very much!” Aletta giggled. “What would you like to order?”

Aletta handled the two friends like a champ as she prepared to take their orders.

“Let’s see... We’ll have some sausages and a large order of potatoes. Make

the sausages half boiled and half grilled. Oh, and I'll have two mugs of beer, thanks."

"And I'll have two mugs of cider, thanks."

Aletta skillfully repeated their orders back to them.

"All right! That'll be right out."

The pair watched the young lady head to the kitchen and found themselves a table.

"Phew..."

"Phew..."

Glenn and Ignis parked their butts on the comfortable padded chairs, letting out sighs of relaxation. While they waited for their food, they might as well chill for a minute.

Keeping watch through the night was a fairly tiresome job. Perhaps that's why it felt like it took a thousand years for their food to come out.

"Sorry for the wait! Here are your drinks and food!"

Aletta brought over the four mugs and food on a giant tray.

"Heck yeah!"

"That's what I'm talking about!" the pair exclaimed in excitement before the large plate of food she set down on the table.

It was packed with pork sausages and fried cobbler's tubers, cut into pieces with the skins still on.

The freshly cooked food gave off a tremendous aroma on the winds of its hot steam. It was a full-blown attack on their stomachs, which were entirely empty after an all-night shift.

And then there were the drinks—two large mugs for each of them.

"Take your time and enjoy, gentlemen!"

Aletta vanished, leaving the men ready to enjoy their food party.

"Shall we drink?"

“We shall!”

The men picked up their large glass mugs and gulped heartily. Glenn’s was filled with a golden foamy liquid: the ale of the other world. Meanwhile, Ignis’s mug was filled with a different kind of foamy drink, transparent and delightfully sweet.

They both downed their respective libations.

The alcohol and cider passed through their throats smoothly—one liquid bitter, the other sweet, both deliciously foamy—and headed straight for their stomachs.

Each man’s drink seemingly healed their exhaustion.

“Woohah!”

“Woohah!”

The men couldn’t help but let a little air out as the carbonated beverages shocked their systems.

“The booze here really is the best! This beer stuff in particular. It’d be a crime not to drink the alcohol here.”

“No, no. The cider is where it’s at! We can drink all we want on the other side, but sweet water this good is damn hard to come by.”

The pair began arguing over which was the superior drink, each of them steadfast in his belief that his preference should rule. They never managed to come to an agreement on this subject, but they still had to bring it up every single time.

“...Anyway, let’s eat.”

“Ayup.”

And so, placing their mugs down, Glenn and Ignis reached for food that happily paired well with both beer and cider: wiener sausages and oil-fried cobbler’s tubers, also known as French fries.

Despite the bounty of food, the prices here were very reasonable, perfect to

tuck into with a good drink in hand. This was a pretty common dish throughout the Empire, but the stuff here was on a whole different level.

Glenn brought his fork over the French fries almost immediately.

The metal utensil smoothly stabbed through the thickly cut tuber, skin and all.

As soon as he took a bite, his mouth was met with gentle saltiness, the tuber's mild flavor as it crumbled to pieces, and deliciousness greasiness.

God, I can't get enough of this stuff!

Glenn took another big sip of his beer.

He thought back to the days when he was just a kid, running to the local french fry vendor with his bronze coin in hand under the cold, winter sky.

That had been his treat back then, fries and hot breaded croquettes sizzled crisp in darkened oil that had been used God knows how many times. The fries at the Restaurant to Another World were on a different level, but Glenn couldn't help but feel nostalgic as he ate.

Meanwhile, Ignis reached for the sausage first.

It's about them fried sausages, if you know what I mean!

He loved the feeling of biting into a boiled sausage and having its delicious juices come spilling out, but Ignis preferred the crunch of the fried skin.

The soldier thrust his silver fork into the crisped sausage and took a bite. He was well aware that the red sweet-and-sour sauce as well as the hot, yellow mustard went amazingly with the meat. But his first sausage had to be eaten as is.

The sausage has to be made with the good stuff.

The flavor took him back to his homeland.

While the Empire now recognized demons to a degree, only seventy short years ago, all that demon-kind had known was war. The farming villages founded by the formerly belligerent race were poor places that didn't produce much in the way of good crop. How could they? They had no experience in the

matter.

Because of the need for food, the men of the village would occasionally pick up their old swords and bows from the war and head into the mountains to hunt wild beasts. When the hunt went well, they'd treat everyone to feasts of meat.

Just stripping the meat of its blood, roasting it over fire, and salting it was more than delicious enough to satisfy their stomachs. But the sausages they made from wild boar and horse were fantastic.

"Ayup, cider was the way to go."

Ignis took a sip from his mug. The sweet flavor stung his tongue, washing down the meat juice from the sausage.

He wasn't particularly fond of the bitter flavor of alcohol, so he felt cider was the best pairing for the meal.

Ignis had sampled cola, and rather liked that as well, but he preferred cider and its deeper sweetness.

And so for a time, the pair quietly enjoyed their food and drink.

The ketchup-covered French fries and mustard-doused sausages slowly began to disappear from the plate...

"Hey, can we get seconds on this?"

"More beer and cider, too, please!"

Just as they emptied their first plate, the two men made their next order. This was how their little day-off feasts always went. Glenn and Ignis wasted no words, simply digging into their food.

They simply ate, and ate, and ate their fill.

A little while later, Glenn and Ignis noticed the restaurant starting to fill up. They stood from their seats.

"Ah, it's about time to go."

“Ayup. Sorry, but could we get the bill?” Ignis called to the master

“Aye, you got it.” The middle-aged man waved them over. “Here’s the bill. That’ll be a total of three silver coins and six bronze coins. So one silver coin and eight copper coins per person.”

The master calculated how much the meal cost with a businessman’s speed, and the pair handed him the corresponding coins.

“Take care!”

“We’ll definitely be back.”

It would be too sad to just up and leave after paying, so the two guards made sure the master knew they’d be returning.

“Aye! We’ll be looking forward to your next visit!” The master smiled warmly.

By the time Glenn and Ignis returned to town, the sun was far up in the sky, and people were bustling through the streets.

“Shall we head back?”

“Ayup. Time to get some shut-eye till the evening.”

The two men passed by a knight, clad in higher-quality armor than theirs. He was probably out on patrol.

Anyhow, they’d sleep until the evening, hit up the brothel after that, and then head to the bar with the usual suspects. The typical day-off routine.

For now, a wave of drowsiness had started to settle on them both.

And so Glenn and Ignis returned to the old fortress with full stomachs.

Chapter 55:

Seafood Pesto Pasta

After finding the door still standing in the alleyway, the imperial knight Graham Beltran let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness,” he said under his breath. “Nobody’s used it today.”

Seven days ago, under the pretense of going out on patrol, Graham had tried to visit the door only to find that it was already gone.

This wasn’t the first time this had happened. Graham realized that somebody else in town must be using the door, too.

He didn’t particularly like the idea of some unknown using the door, but it wasn’t his place to complain.

Either way, today the door was all his.

Graham put his hand to the sturdy handle and opened the door. His ears were met with the sound of ringing bells, something he hadn’t heard for fourteen long days. And so the knight stepped through to the other side.

The room Graham walked into was a closed-off basement of sorts.

The space was brightly lit, although there wasn’t a single window in sight. Hell, it was the middle of the winter and yet the room was pleasantly warm. There wasn’t even a fire on. It was truly a strange place.

“Welcome to Western Cuisine Nekoya!”

Graham was greeted with a smile by the demon waitress, carrying food to and fro.

“Greetings. I’ll be eating in.” The knight found himself a seat at a table.
“Excuse me, but could I get a menu?”

“You got it!”

Settling in, he accepted the menu from the young waitress. This menu thing

was a book filled with all the different dishes the restaurant had to offer.

“Whenever you’re ready to order, just let me know!”

“All right.”

Graham looked down at the open menu as the waitress went off to tend to other customers. What should he have today?

Seafood is clearly the only choice.

The imperial knight was well aware everything the restaurant offered was delicious in its unique way. But today he had his heart set on seafood. Fish, krakeen, shripe, shellfish, and the like.

How ironic. When I still lived in my hometown, I refused to eat anything other than meat...

Graham reflected on his youth as he perused the menu.

The imperial knight had grown up in a port town that had been absorbed by the Empire years ago.

Every day, trade ships from other ports on the Eastern Continent, and even from the far-off Western Continent, would drop anchor to do business. The whole place had smelled of saltwater.

Graham came from a family of knights. When mealtime came around, there was always seafood on the table. As a young man, Graham had far preferred the meat brought into town by traders. Yet now, as an adult living in the inland Empire, he never spent any time by the ocean. And so after eating meat and cobbler’s tubers every day, he often developed a craving for fish.

It certainly didn’t help that within the Empire, and more specifically in the imperial capital, seafood was an extremely important and valuable food. As someone without many accomplishments under his belt, who had just passed the knight exam (in the Empire, anybody who could pass this exam could become a knight), there was no way he could get his hands on fish.

That’s why the Restaurant to Another World was such an important place to Graham. It was the one place where he could get seafood and booze at an affordable price.

Now then, shall I go with fried food, gratin, or pilaf... Oh, or perhaps pasta of some kind?

The Restaurant to Another World had it all.

There was the fried option. This was particularly beloved by a certain knight, a man who wore high-quality military armor and always had his trusty blade at his waist, and whose strength likely far outstripped Graham's.

Then there was shripe topped with Kingdom-styled knight sauce, the favorite of a certain commoner girl.

And then there was the Western Continent-style rice dish, beloved of a noble woman of the Sand Nation clad in an imperial-style dress.

Last but not least was the Kingdom-style pasta prepared not just with seafood but with all manner of ingredients and seasonings.

This was the challenge Graham faced every single time he visited Nekoya. To make matters worse, depending on what dish he ordered, he'd have to adjust the alcohol he paired it with.

But after struggling for a time, Graham made his decision.

All right! Today I'm going with white wine and pasta.

He finally beckoned for the waitress.

"Excuse me. I'd like to order now."

"Of course! What would you like?"

"Could I get a bottle of white wine, please? I'll be having that with pasta... Let's see, I'll start with a dish of seafood pesto pasta."

This was a green pasta dish with a fragrant herb seasoning.

"No problem! That'll be right out."

"Mm."

The waitress girl left for the kitchen, leaving Graham to lean back comfortably in his chair while he waited.

Surrounding him were the voices of the other customers.

At one table two friends enjoyed a conversation. At another there was a lone diner like Graham, quietly waiting for their order to arrive.

These customers came in all shapes, sizes, and races. Graham found himself surprised by this every time he visited.

I suppose that just goes to show how delicious the food is here.

He totally understood what brought so many different people to this place. Graham had first discovered Nekoya about half a year ago, and ever since then he'd made it a point to come here every Day of Satur.

"Sorry for the wait! Here's your food and wine!"

And so it was time to dine.

The wine came in a beautiful green bottle, a perfect visual pair with the herby pasta.

"Take your time and enjoy!"

"Indeed, I shall," Graham replied politely. He then turned his full attention to the meal at hand.

I'll start with the wine.

Graham gently unsealed the bottle and poured the liquid into a beautiful glass the waitress had brought out for it.

It was a faintly yellow, transparent alcohol. The fragrant scent of the white wine filled the knight's nostrils.

Mm, what a wonderful scent.

Graham took a moment to enjoy the white wine's aroma before tasting it properly.

He took a sip and the flavor spread through his mouth, slightly sweet but sour overall.

The white wine here had none of the unpleasantness of the swill he drank in the other world. In fact, it was of such high quality that it seemed crazy to be selling it for only two silver coins.

If this stuff ever did the rounds in the Empire, liquor stores would go out of business.

While Graham was in fact a knight, he had been born and raised in a town filled with merchants. It was easy for him to picture what would happen if affordable wine like this ever became widely available.

Everything at Nekoya was of abnormally high quality for how much it cost. If that annoying “door” wasn’t the only way to get here, this place would be a lot more popular.

I suppose I should dig in before it gets cold.

Now that Graham had the chance to enjoy the flavor of the wine on its own, it was time to eat.

The bright pasta was topped with colorful green herbs and a sauce garnished with high-quality oil. Mixed in with the pasta were pieces of various seafood.

The pasta comes first.

Graham gently drove his fork into the pasta, twisting some around the utensil. The noodles colorfully reflected the light of the restaurant, thanks to the sauce’s glistening green coat.

The knight couldn’t help but gulp, smelling the wonderful aroma and beholding the beautiful presentation.

He finally took a bite.

Mm! This is it! This is why pasta is the best!

The boiled pasta was neither too tough nor too soft—“al dente.”

The dish’s various ingredients melded together perfectly.

The savoriness of the fish, krakeen, shripe, and shellfish. The rich aroma of the herbs in the green sauce and the flavor of fried nuts. And then there was the spiciness of the chili pepel that brought it all together.

All of these different flavors and ingredients fused into one, creating seafood pesto pasta.

Mm, mm...

The deliciousness moved Graham to silence as he focused his entire being on eating. He'd twirl some pasta around his fork, eat it, and occasionally take a bite of the delectable pieces of seafood.

After every couple of bites, he took a sip of his white wine, repeating this cycle over and over again.

Graham was still a young man, with a young man's appetite, and it wasn't long before his plate was empty.

Hmph... I suppose that's a fairly decent start.

Now that he was nice and relaxed, he gently rubbed his stomach.

Time to get serious.

It went without saying: a single dish of pasta wasn't nearly enough to satisfy a hardworking young man like Graham. He once again turned his attention to the menu.

What should I order next?

Graham's eyes scanned Nekoya's seemingly boundless menu. He slowly ran his finger across each dish as he tried to determine his next order.

Chapter 56:

Pork Chops

In a small, remote country nestled in the high mountains of the Eastern Continent, Albert, the third prince of this nation, kept a cautious hand on his ancestral mythril sword. He was making his way to the “vegetable garden.”

This was an old ruin, where long, long ago, during the ancient times, the elves had grown rare plants from around the world.

Yet over a thousand years had passed since the overseers of the garden vanished. In their absence, the garden was ruled by the golems once designed to monitor it, along with the beasts and insects drawn by its lush plant life. There were even dangerous plants that killed and ate humans for nutrients. And so the garden had become a terrifying place filled with horrors.

“Geez, what’s wrong with that old man?” Albert muttered to himself, hacking away the viney arm of a plant monster as it reached for his thick neck. “Why would you ever open a shop here?”



He had come in search of something very strange.

It was an oak-wood door he'd discovered when he first journeyed into the garden in an attempt to prove his bravery. Now, every seven days, Albert came here in search of the door—and what resided beyond it.

“Phew, I’m finally here.”

He hadn’t traveled far from the garden’s entrance when he came upon the door. Albert cupped his large hand around the handle and pulled it open.

Albert stepped forward into the restaurant with all the courage and dignity of royalty, to the sound of ringing bells.

“Yo, old man! I’m back for some grub!”

“Aye, welcome.”

The old man greeted Arnold, real live royalty, as if he were any other customer. The guy might have a head of gray hair and a face full of wrinkles, but he still had quite the aura.

“I see you’re as energetic as ever... Sit wherever you like and call me when you’re good to order. Here’s the menu.”

“Got it!”

Albert found a seat for himself, paying little heed to the old man’s word choice. While he was in fact royalty, he was the third son in his family. It was highly unlikely that he would ever be king. And besides, what point was there in pushing his world’s customs on the inhabitants of the “other world”?

This place always has the weirdest customers...

Albert perused the menu, glancing at the people sitting around him.

There was a group of old men indulging in mugs of cold, golden ale, refreshingly bitter. Their table was covered with all manner of dishes, and they were spiritedly debating whether the mincemeat cutlet or croquettes were the best.

There was a warrior clad in the garb of the Western Continent quietly

enjoying some kind of meat along with a bowl of white rice.

There was a large knight devouring some dish smothered in brown sauce, wearing clothes that had once likely been quite expensive but were now in tatters.

Beside him, a wealthy looking merchant was digging into a plate of pasta covered in bright red sauce.

Elsewhere was a giant lizardman, its expression impossible to read, as it silently ate some sort of giant egg dish with a silver spoon.

Sitting at another table was a positively stunning priestess of the Lord of Light, downing “ginjo sake” like it was water. Albert recalled that particular alcohol being delicious but extremely strong. Who *was* this woman?

At the table next to her sat an older dwarf woman, likely from the Western Continent, enjoying a glass of alcohol infused with some kind of delicious fruit.

One of the other tables was playing host to a group of hard-partying adventurers. All kinds of food and drink were spread out before them. What were they celebrating?

It feels like this place is getting more popular.

When Albert first started visiting the restaurant, it had been significantly quieter. But with each subsequent visit, it seemed like it was getting more crowded.

“Now then, time to dig in,” Albert said to himself, watching everyone around him delightedly indulge in their foods of choice. His stomach was beckoning its master to fill it, posthaste.

“Yo, old man! I’m good to go!”

“Aye,” the old man walked over. “So what’ll it be?”

“I’ll have the pork chop with white bread and soup.” Albert requested his favorite food.

It was a meat dish with a special sauce made from “marmett,” a red fruit available only in his country.

After a time, the old man came out from the kitchen, food in hand.

“Sorry for the wait. Here’s your order.”

This was the only time the old man had ever used an even somewhat polite tone with Albert. But the prince didn’t mind in the least. After all, he was delivering him the greatest gift of all.

The old man placed a black metal plate before Albert. In its center was a sizzling piece of fatty pork topped with dark red sauce.

“Enjoy the food!”

“Will do.”

The words went in and out of the prince’s ears as he slowly picked up the silver knife and fork.

First comes the meat...

Deciding to leave the various vegetables decorating the plate for later, Albert directed his fork toward the mass of meat.

Albert cut off a large piece of the pork chop with his silver knife. While the meat was undeniably thick, it was also incredibly tender; the blade cut through it effortlessly. The prince brought the fatty piece of pork to his mouth.

Mm, I could eat this otherworldly pork forever.

Albert nodded quietly to himself, tremendously satisfied by the flavor. The pork was fatty but lacked all gaminess. He could taste the very sweetness of a fall-fattened pig—a flavor that was impossible to achieve in a pig that had grown thin through the cold winter months.

Bringing out the flavor of the meat was the sour red sauce topping it all. It was composed of all manner of vegetables fused with vinegar and paired with the fatty pork perfectly.

I never realized marmett could be used like this. The other world sure is full of surprises...

The key to the sauce was undoubtedly the marmett. Originally discovered by

Albert's ancestors in the vegetable garden, the red marmett was a special crop that could only be found in his home country. The red sauce that brought out the taste of the meat was filled with the sweet and sour flavor of ripe marmett. Albert's country may have been a small one, but as a royal, he had access to all kinds of rare foods. And yet the combination of pork and marmett was a pairing that he could only experience at the Restaurant to Another World.

I suppose it's about time I start eating everything else.

After having eaten about half of the pork chop on his plate, Albert turned his attention to the soup, bread, and vegetables.

The otherworldly vegetables were cooked in oil and lightly salted; crunchy on the surface but satisfyingly soft on the inside.

The boiled karoots were tender all the way to the wick, their sweet flavor providing a counterpoint to the sourness of the fruit sauce on the pork chop.

Let's see. Next is...

Chewing on the green stalk-like beans, Albert decided to add some extra flavoring to the proceedings. He took some of the marmett sauce from atop the meat and slathered it on the vegetables.

Mm, this is it right here.

The sour sauce paired well with the lightly flavored vegetables.

They were undoubtedly delicious on their own, but the sauce took it to a whole other level.

And so after making a good dent in the sides, Albert finally reached for the bread. He dipped a piece into the milky soup and composed a bite with it and some of the yellow vegetables.

The sweet, soft bread soaked up the soup. With each bit, the liquid poured out into his mouth.

"Hey, old man. Another serving of bread."

"Aye."

As far as the prince was concerned, this bread was far too small. The white

lump of deliciousness had disappeared into his stomach almost immediately.

All right! Time to get this done.

The old man brought him bread, fresh from the oven. But now Albert turned his attention back to the main course.

He drove his knife into the remaining meat, cutting off a large piece. He then took the silver utensil and sliced the fresh bread about half-way open. Albert's next move was to insert the meat into the bread itself.

And eat it in a single bite.

The rich flavor of the sauce and the fat of the meat melded with the sweetness of the bread.

Albert was dazzled by the fusion of flavors exploding in his mouth.

He felt tremendously fulfilled and incredibly grateful to the master who had taught him this particular otherworldly method of eating.

Pretty much all of the meat dishes at the restaurant were delicious on their own. Yet eating them with bread took it to another level.

"Yo, old man! Another order of bread!"

Albert's voice echoed throughout the restaurant.

"Whew, now that was some good eatin'!"

Albert mopped the remaining sauce from the plate with his bread, finishing it all off in one big bite. He let out a satisfied sigh and indulged in a cup of "coffee," a sugary, otherworldly black tea.

The knight had eaten so much that he didn't want to work just yet. He would relax and enjoy the full feeling until his stomach finally digested the feast.

"Now if only there were a door in a more accessible location..."

Considering how delicious the food and drink was here, it was rather unfortunate that Albert had to go through such dangers to find the door. Once Albert re-entered the vegetable garden, he would have to be on high guard once again.

And so until he regained the ability to do any kind of work, Albert relaxed in the restaurant, full stomach and all.

Chapter 57:

Tiramisu

On that particular Day of Satur, the great priestess Katalina, servant of the Lord of White, turned to the boy who had summoned her.

“Oh, son of the Great One, child of white. What is it you need from me on this occasion?”

Truth be told, Katalina was more than aware of the reason she had been called upon this morning. But she made her polite inquiry nonetheless.

Among the priests and priestesses of the Lord of Light, master of the light and growth, Katalina was of the highest caliber. She had the power to transform into a dragon. There were few humans in this world who she truly respected and held in reverence.

The boy in front of her was one of those very few.

“Enough with the pleasantries. You know why I summoned you.”

The boy’s skin was so white that he appeared otherworldly. Below his silver hair were two pairs of golden dragon eyes, vertical pupils and all. He paid no heed to Katalina’s respectful attitude, proceeding to give his orders.

The boy knew that he had been chosen by the merciful Lord of Light. He was the “child of white” who had been sent before the Lord’s followers.

The merciful Lord of Light, one of the almighty Ancient Six who governed the world, loved humans.

This love persisted, in spite of the fact that of all the races who lived on the continents and worshiped the Ancient Six, humanity was the weakest both physically and magically.

It was for the benefit of those weak humans that once every hundred years, the merciful Lord of White would descend to greet their followers.

To prepare for the day, the Lord of White would select a newborn child to

infuse with their own blood. This child would have no awareness of its condition.

If it was given to a grown human, the Lord of Light's blood would cause their soul to be torn apart, turning them into a raging beast. Yet if the blood was given to a newborn child whose heart was still empty, they'd be able to age and live like other children.

And so the "child of white" would be born, possessing powers of the Lord of White that even the greatest of priests and priestesses could never hope to wield. It was this "child of white" who would guide the believers.

And the child of white born ten years ago was obsessed by a certain otherworldly confection.

"Nekoya." The boy addressed Katalina, pronouncing the name of the sacred place. "You must go there and obtain 'tiramisu' for me. What a troublesome door... How dare it reject me."

The child turned his gaze toward the door, clicking his tongue in disgust.

Approximately three years ago, the child of white, infatuated with the restaurant's confections, had ordered its master to follow him out of the door and come into the other world. Yet as soon as the man attempted to step through, a red-clad woman appeared before him, tossing him out as if he were a cat that wasn't allowed indoors. Since that day, the door had rejected the child of white.

If he tried to touch the door, his hand would simply pass through the knob. The child of white could not open it, no matter how hard he tried.

The child of white became fearful.

Apart from his beloved mother of white, there were no beings on the planet who could stand against him. And yet the red-clad women had overpowered him, as if he were an ordinary human.

And so the child of white was sending a priestess he trusted (for the most part) off to the foreign land to obtain his favorite confection.

“Understood,” Katalina nodded. “I shall be on my way.”

Katalina couldn't help but be pleased about the mission, as her black human eyes began to transform into golden dragon eyes with vertical pupils, and her back sprouted two white dragon wings covered in slender feathers.

She took to the air.

“I'm counting on you,” said the child of white. “Ah, and I believe the yearly celebration known as Valentine's Day is soon. Should it happen to be that day in the other world, acquire some chocolate.”

With her objectives known, Katalina soared toward Nekoya's door.

Thanks to her wings, Katalina was capable of traveling distances in moments that would take normal humans two days. The priestess descended upon the wastelands.

The mid-summer sun shone down upon the arid lands, where spiky cactus plants hoarded water in their huge leaves. It was a wasteland so barren that even corn and sweet potatoes couldn't be grown in the soil.

While there were proper roads relatively nearby, there wasn't a traveler in sight. That helped to keep this wasteland's secret, well, a secret.

“That boy can be such a handful sometimes...” Katalina muttered to herself, landing before the oak-wood door. She retracted her wings, and her eyes became human once again. She sighed.

The door was protected by an illusion spell that the child of white had cast, powered by the light of the sun. If Katalina hadn't had dragon eyes, she would never have been able to see through it.

That said, he'd gone a bit too far with it. Any who approached the door unprepared, high-level priests and powerful monsters alike, would be bathed in the light of judgment.

It was a tad much.

Katalina stealthily undid the dangerous spell.

The Lord of Light was a merciful being. It was doubtful that they would ever want to bring about such a tragedy.

Katalina knew the child of white would eventually recast the spell, only to have her undo it again.

“...All right, time to get going.”

After making sure the deadly spell had been totally disarmed, Katalina reached for the handle and opened the door.

In the arid desert, she was the only one present to hear the sound of the ringing bells. The priestess stepped through to the other side.

Just beyond the otherworldly door was a dining room. As usual, it was filled with all manner of customers loudly enjoying their meals.

Aw, too bad. I guess it's still early.

Katalina noticed that there were no signs signifying it was Valentine's Day. The observation briefly sent a chill down her spine. How unfortunate; the child of white would be disappointed.

She took her time looking around the dining room. Before Katalina even found an open spot, a young lady clad in an otherworldly uniform came up to greet her.

“Welcome to Nekoya!”

The young lady before her had natural goat horns, not dragon. This identified her as a follower of the abominable million colors of chaos. Where Katalina came from, her kind were its worshippers.

But this was another world. Any kind of altercation was against the rules of this establishment; Katalina was well aware of this. So she addressed the waitress politely.

“Hello. I'm actually ready to order.”

“Of course! What would you like today?” Aletta responded.

It wasn't particularly rare for customers to come in and immediately place an order. Aletta figured that the woman with the cocoa brown skin and cream-colored hair was simply one of those customers who preferred takeout.

“I’d like a whole tiramisu to go, thank you. But I’ll also be having some here—could I get a slice along with some kalao bean...er, cocoa?”

“Absolutely! Thank you very much. Those’ll be right out!”

Watching Aletta retreat to the kitchen, Katalina’s attention suddenly caught on a terrifying presence in the restaurant. There was a being carrying food to and fro to diners, a waitress like Aletta, but with a darkness around them like an encroaching shadow. Who was this strange being?

Katalina managed to regain her focus and started looking around the restaurant.

Where should I sit...?

Katalina wasn’t just any priestess of white. She was the great priestess tasked with attending to the child of white.

Over there’s a Blue... Hm, I should probably avoid sitting next to Lucia as well.

There were two places she definitely couldn’t sit. The first was a spot beside a priestess of Blue, a woman with dragon legs eating some sort of meat dish beside a human man in strange clothes. And she certainly couldn’t sit near the great priestess of Red, a lamia that Katalina had crossed fangs with many times in the past. The follower of Red was accompanied by a male human priest, indulging in some sort of meat dish with eggs.

She didn’t want to assume that priests who worshiped the gods of other lands were automatically her enemies. But Katalina couldn’t afford to let her guard down.

Which means...

After thinking it over, Katalina identified where she wanted to sit and made her move.

“I’m sorry, Celestine, do you mind?”

She walked over to a group of priestesses of the Lord of White, who she’d seen here many times over the years.

At first glance, these priestesses didn’t resemble the Lord of White’s typical followers. They wore thick, strange ritual garments, although it was the middle

of the summer, and odd necklaces of gold or silver.

Yet the power of light they held within their bodies undeniably marked them as priestesses of the Lord of White.

It was clear to Katalina that these women were among their lord's most powerful servants.

"Oh, of course. We'd be thrilled, Lady Katalina."

Celestine, the senior priestess of the group, smiled. Around her neck she wore a golden necklace. Katalina could sense incredibly strong power from her.

In Celestine's eyes, Katalina's light garb in the middle of winter indicated she was a priestess of the Sand Nation, always prepared for the powerful heat of its sun.

She'd also never seen Katalina with a Sigil around her neck. Celestine surmised that, like herself, Katalina was embarrassed of the fact that she couldn't resist the sweet allure of Nekoya's confections. Yet even without the Sigil, Celestine would have been able to tell she was a high priestess, based on her powerful aura.

Perhaps that's why she felt such a sense of camaraderie with her.

"Lady Katalina, will you be having the usual?" Celestine asked.

"Yes. What about you?"

The pair smiled at one another knowingly.

"Sorry for the wait!" The waitress bustled over. "Here's your pound cake and black tea set! And here's your Tiramisu and cocoa!"

These priestesses shared another kinship: They had both been defeated by the evil known as "cake."

The waitress gently placed a plate and a cup before Katalina. Atop the plate was a square confection with overlapping layers of white and black—soft, black cake with kalao powder kneaded into it, and white "cream cheese" made from cow's milk. It was truly beautiful.

Sprinkled on top of the cake was a topping of ground kalao beans stripped of

their oil.

It's about time I get started. After all, I have to make sure this is good enough for the child of white!

Excusing herself to her dining companions, the priestess began to eat.

The first thing she reached for was the cup filled with brown cocoa. Katalina carefully took a sip of the still steaming liquid, inhaling its sweet aroma.

The scent of warm milk infused with kalao beans blended perfectly with sugar.

Mm. The lack of oiliness is just wonderful.

The great thing about this kalao milk tea was that it didn't taste particularly oily, although it had a higher oil content than milk by itself.

The kalao beans that Katalina was familiar with were naturally very oily. This did mean the plant had nutritional value and could even be used as a type of medicine. Yet it was simply a bit too rich to be used in an everyday drink. Katalina wasn't particularly fond of it.

But this cocoa milk tea was different.

After the oil was squeezed out of the kalao beans, they were then ground to dust and blended with milk. This made it extremely easy to drink.

Next up is the tiramisu.

Katalina took her time enjoying the hot cocoa before turning to the main attraction. Picking up a shining silver spoon, she scooped just a bit off the top of the cake—a spoonful of white cream sprinkled with kalao dust.

The moment she put the spoon to her mouth, her face lit up.

I'll never get over this taste... I just wish we could make this stuff in our world.

She loved the sweet and sour taste of cheese blended with sugar. It had a soft, melt-in-your-mouth texture.

Katalina also detected a bittersweet note—the kalao dust on top of the white cream, serving as an accent to the other flavors.

And so Katalina bit into another spoonful, almost as if the cake was beckoning

her.

This time, she made sure to scoop up a big piece of the black cake that made up the inner layer of the tiramisu. The actual cake was infused with some sort of otherworldly bitter tea called coffee that Katalina was unfamiliar with. Unlike the kalao beans, the cake itself was simultaneously sweet and bitter.

When it comes to cakes, tiramisu is the way to go. No doubt.

All the cakes at Nekoya were incredible, but tiramisu and its plethora of flavors knocked them all out of the park. Each layer was a different experience; and when you ate all the components together, the whole flavor profile transformed.

The layer beneath the coffee-infused cake was some kind of egg-based custard cream.

A dash of alcohol had been introduced to the mix, its unique hot, bitter flavor fusing well with the custard's extreme sweetness.

And then there was the bottom-most layer, supporting the whole dish. It was a crunchy, aromatic fried dough of some kind. Given how soft the cake and cream were, it provided a pleasant contrasting mouthfeel.

All of these different layers came together to create the ultimate flavor. This complexity was what made tiramisu so bewitching, Katalina thought to herself. The cake was quickly vanishing from her plate.

Without a moment's hesitation, Katalina drew the waitress's attention.

"Could I get another plate of tiramisu, please?"

"Of course! Coming right up."

Now she was completely in her element.

After enjoying her cake and chatting with the Lord of Light priestesses, Katalina returned through the door, tiramisu in hand.

"I suppose I should hurry home."

She let out a sigh as the dragon wings sprouted from her back. She'd chatted

with her friends for far too long; quite some time had passed since the child of white ordered her to bring home the cake.

He was undoubtedly furious. Katalina would have to hurry.

“What a handful that boy is. I can’t believe he’s making me, a great priestess, run around like an errand girl.” Katalina shook her head. But she smiled.

The reason for that smile wasn’t just the “special bonus” she got by doing this errand.

“...I suppose this is the only way I can be a mother to him, after all. There’s only so much you can do when your child is an all-powerful being.”

Katalina rose into the air on her dragon wings. She was flying home so that she could give this treat to her son, the child of white. He might have become someone terribly important as soon as she had brought him into this world. But at the end of the day, he was still her beloved little boy.

Chapter 58:

Pork Soup, Once More

After stuffing his face for the first time in two long days, Tida let out a long, satisfied sigh.

“Phew...”

He had stumbled upon this mysterious place after searching the island high and low for food in the middle of a raging storm.

Its entrance was a strange Eastern Continent-style door, sitting inconspicuously on the beach, unshaken by the wind and rain wreaking havoc all around it.

Tida passed through the door. That’s how he found himself in the otherworldly restaurant.

“Yo, pal. You’re soaking wet! Ah, I see. A typhoon, eh? That’s no good! Well, fortunately for you, this here’s a restaurant. You can just pay me back whenever you get the chance, so c’mon and grab a bite!”

An otherworldly restaurant... And as luck would have it, the master was a kindly older man.

When Tida first stepped through the door, he was an absolute mess: clothes disheveled and soaking wet, disoriented and stumbling around like he had no idea where he was. But when the master saw him and heard what had happened, he offered to feed Tida for free.

The master served him pan-fried rolled eggs with finely minced meat, oranie, and rice so white that only nobles of the Ocean Nation would ever be able to get their hands on it.

But that wasn’t all. Along with the other two dishes were a side of pickled vegetables (strongly salted to stay preserved) and a bowl of pork soup.

Pork soup.

According to the master, it was a special celebratory dish only served on “Meat Day.” It was packed with meat and vegetables, and further flavored with salted elf beans.

Tida ended up requesting multiple servings before his once-empty stomach was full.

I feel really bad about eating all this on my own...

Alongside his feelings of satisfaction came a sudden recollection.

All the other passengers on the ship—the captain to the rest of the crew—were probably still just as starving as he had been minutes ago.

And so Tida’s full stomach became the source of great guilt.

I know it’d be shameless to ask, but I wonder if he might let me take a little bit back.

Yet before Tida could say anything, the master approached.

“Here. Take this back with you.”

The older man placed a strange see-through bag on the table, containing some kind of package wrapped with a beautiful purple cloth.

“U-um, what exactly is...?”

“Ah, it’s no big thing. You said you were a sailor who got caught up in a typhoon, right?” The master smiled as he explained his logic to the puzzled Tida.

“I figured that must mean you got friends in the same situation. Normally we don’t do pork soup takeout here, but I’ll make an exception this time.”

“...Y-you’d do that?”

Tida was overwhelmed by the older man’s kindness. When he’d set foot into this restaurant, he didn’t have a coin on him.

In other words, he had no money to pay for this “takeout.”

“Hey, what kinda monster would I have to be to charge you—this is a matter of life and death! You don’t gotta pay me for any of this, so just take it. Be careful, it’s heavy.”

“Th-then...”

Tida timidly took the package with both hands. He could feel the warmth of the contents within.

Wafting from the package was the aroma that he’d lost himself in just a little while ago. Even though he was full, Tida couldn’t help but gulp loudly.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me and my friends. Thank you so much.”

“Aye, ain’t nothing! We’ll be looking forward to your next visit!”

The master bowed deeply in response to Tida’s gentle nod.

The sailor exited the restaurant and once again ventured into the raging storm, warm package in hand.

Three days had passed since the ship got caught up in this bastard of a storm. They had been forced to lay anchor on this barren island—where there was nothing edible to speak of.

This is real bad.

Fen, captain of the trade ship, could feel the mutiny building in his sailors. He would have to make his decision, and soon.

After the great demon war came to a close, the demon race’s power was significantly diminished, and the citizens of this peaceful world finally began to look toward a happier future. Trade between the two continents began to truly prosper.

There was the Kingdom, the nation that had flourished the most out of all of the domains on the Eastern Continent. And then there was the Ocean Nation, a country that spanned seemingly endless small islands. Marine transport had always been a prosperous business there, but now ships passed through more frequently than ever. Trade was booming.

Fen and his crew were sailing one of the Ocean Nation’s many trade ships.

Damn it all. Just when we’d finally rid ourselves of the cursed master of the

sea.

In retrospect, Fen probably had lowered his guard too far. Up until very recently, the kraken, also known as the master of the sea, had been the end of countless ships and their crews.

But a few years ago, the the great beast had washed ashore, its rotting carcass covered in countless arrow wounds and damage from magical attacks. Rumor had it that a battleship carrying a famous Duchy general had been ordered to take it down. On its way to the Ocean Nation, the ship encountered the beast and managed to defeat it once and for all. Unfortunately, the ship and its general were lost to the sea.

And so with the demise of the kraken, their troublesome master, the ocean monsters that once served as its prey kept their heads low. It was hard to believe, but the once perilous ocean had become a safe route of passage.

This was just one element that had mislead Fen on this journey. Five days earlier, although he could sense the incoming storm, he'd decided to forgo a detour to a nearby port and rush onward instead.

"I'm so hungry..."

"Well, Tida left saying he was gonna try and find some grub."

"Like he's even gonna find anything. This place is a desert island."

"At least we got plenty of water, right? But in terms of food, we ain't catching any fish or birds anytime soon."

"Dammit all! Look, our only option is to get out of here! We could hit port in half a day if we get moving!"

"Impossible. If we sail out into this storm, it won't be long before we're a wreck at the bottom of the ocean. All we can do is wait."

The captain could hear the voices of his crew mingling with the sounds of heavy rain outside. Their frustration was palpable.

They were panicking.

The place they'd laid anchor was one of the Ocean Nation's many small islands. Yet it had no real plant life to speak of, which meant no animal life, never mind any settlements.

Fortunately for them, there was plenty of water raining down from the skies. But that didn't solve the food problem. After what they'd eaten last night, they'd pretty much polished off all the rations on the ship.

Catching fish or birds would be an impossible task in this storm. One of the fresh-faced sailors in training, Tida, had left in search of food. But it went without saying: nothing would come of his search.

In other words, they would either wait until the storm let up and starve, or risk danger and death by sailing out into its fury. Those were their only options.

Curses...

It was just as Fen was struggling with this no-win scenario that one of his most trusted sailors came rushing up to him.

"B-boss! Big news! You gotta come here!"

"What is it? What happened?"

"W-well, you see..."

The man took a deep breath, smiling widely at the captain. He was starving like the rest of them, but right now he bore an expression of pure joy.

"Tida found food!"

It was the best news Fen could have possibly received.

"What in the almighty...?"

The young sailor brought forth a large gold pot with black stone handles. Its contents were still steaming hot, drawing all of the sailors' eyes.

"It's food! And lemme tell you, it's delicious!"

Tida grinned and took the lid off.

The moment it came off, the whole area filled with a delicious aroma.

It was a unique scent that none of the crew had ever experienced before, and it incited an incredible response from their stomachs: a massive, collective rumbling.

“This ain’t the end of it, either! Check this out!”

Tida opened up a strange transparent bag (*What was it made of?* the sailors wondered), removing several containers of white rice balls.

“I’ve already had my fill, so dig in, guys!”

The sailors crowded around the food.

“Delish!”

“This is the best! Holy crap!”

“We gotta thank God for this one.”

“You did damn well, Tida!”

“I’ve lived for many years and seen many things, but I’ve never had food this good before.”

The men exclaimed as they devoured the food with incredible fervor.

The young sailor in training had brought back an otherworldly feast.

It had been a lot of food for one person to carry. But the sailors made quick work of the meal.

The golden pot must have been expensive by itself—and it was filled with meat and vegetable soup. And then there were the balls of high-quality rice.

Bowls were scrounged up from around the ship as the men packed the food into their stomachs.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, c’mon now. Even if I wasn’t starving, this’d be damn tasty!

Since he was the captain, Fen got a little bit more soup than the others. He found himself stunned by the quality and flavor as he downed his portion.

The food that Tida found for them was extraordinary in every way: warm rice

balls and the fresh, still-hot soup in its beautiful, expensive-looking pot.

After their ordeal, the captain would have been grateful for any kind of edible food at all. But this was far more delicious than any ordinary ship's fare.

The rice is great, too... But man, this soup.

Fen took a sip of the soup from his metal bowl.

It tasted of salted hishio paste, with a hint of elf beans.

The flavoring is incredible, but so are all the individual ingredients.

The soup was filled with pork and all kinds of chopped vegetables. As far as Fen was concerned, the star of the soup was the pork that was cut into thin, fatty pieces.

The meat was delicious by itself—and the savory pork fat melted into the broth, making the strongly salty soup a bit gentler to the tongue.

The other ingredients were all spectacular as well.

The well-boiled oranie were sweet and delicious, while the thinly sliced karoots and radishes soaked in the broth of the soup. Each bite into these vegetables unleashed delicious juices.

Meanwhile, the soft, bright yellow vegetables fell apart in Fen's mouth, leaving behind a warm aftertaste. Whatever the strange white square was, it was also extremely soft and easy to eat.

After taking another sip of soup, Fen reached for a slightly cooled rice ball. The salty soup fused with its mild, sweet flavor.

It was a flavor that left Fen feeling satisfied, but he couldn't stop there. This was partially because his stomach was still relatively empty. But that wasn't the only reason.

The food was just delicious.

Even if he was full, he could probably pack more of this down, no problem.

I'm gonna have to get Tida to give me all the details.

It should have been impossible to obtain such high-quality food on a deserted island. Fen needed to know how Tida had found it.

But for the time being, the captain's priority was the food in front of him.

By the next day, the dreadful storm had finally passed, and the crew's ship coasted along the water under blue skies.

"All right! We should be able to see the island soon!"

"Finally! I need to get my hands on some booze!"

"Damn straight! The food yesterday was delicious, but it sucked that we didn't have any drink to go with it."

"My word. Never thought I'd try something so good, at my age. I suppose it pays to live a long life."

A full day had gone by since Tida brought back the feast.

The crew were hungry yet again, but they were in good spirits. After all, they'd be arriving at a populated town soon enough. Once they got ashore, they could enjoy all the food, booze, and women they wanted before they set sail again for the big city where they'd trade their wares.

Their journey ahead was filled with hope.

Once we sell the goods, we need to grab pepper and coral...

As he stood among his excited crew members, Fen was already beginning to plot their next journey. He thought about the things they'd need to buy, and put together a course.

Once every seven days, eh? Well, it'd be great if the timing lined up.

His finger was pointed at a little island inscribed on his map that, until the day before, held no meaning or purpose.

Nekoya Island.

As of yesterday, that was its brand-new name.

Chapter 59:

Sake-Steamed Clams

Before he got to cooking them, the master made sure that today's special menu items were clean and completely sand-free. And he did a taste test, just to be sure.

"Mm... That's good."

He nodded his head, savoring the taste. Then he turned to Aletta.

"Could you bring this upstairs for me?"

The master handed the tray to his employee. Balanced on it was a deep dish piled with today's special appetizer, along with another plate of freshly baked bread and butter.

"Of course! I'll be right back!"

Taking the tray from the master, Aletta got into the magical transportation device known as an elevator. (In her eyes at least, it was magical.) After working at Nekoya for such a long time, she was accustomed to operating all of the restaurant's strange devices.

It was late afternoon on a Saturday. Leonhart, the bar on the second floor, would be open for business soon.

Around this time of the day, Leonhart's master often placed a dinner order, before he set in for his long evening shift.

He typically ordered whatever struck his fancy—but whenever this season came around, there was one specific dish he always went for.

The master of Leonhart was fond of sake of all types. And so it made sense that the dish he craved had this specific alcohol as a key ingredient.

"Ah, I know. I'll bring this out for appetizers today—since I already made some and all."

The master knew of some customers who loved this stuff.

"Those little old guys'll probably be thrilled."

The “little old guys” in question were some gentlemen of small stature—who could potentially drink the master out of business if they tried.

The two of them hadn’t been by the past few weeks, but the master had a hunch that they’d probably be dropping in soon enough. And ten years in the business meant his hunches were usually correct.

The dwarf artisans, Gard and Guilhem, climbed the paths of the mountain. Though it was deep into the spring, snow still layered the ground.

“My word, it’s cold up here!”

“C’mon, quit your bellyaching. We’re almost there!”

Even if it was the middle of the spring, they were on top of a mountain, and dressed for it, too. The two dwarves wore thick-muscled armor and bearskin coats. They were sweating as they trekked along, and still they were freezing.

“It’s finally nice and clear up here! If we let this chance go, we’re gonna be miserable, ya hear?!” Gard cried out.

“I know, I know!” Guilhem nodded. “Why’s it gotta snow on every single damned Day of Satur?! I was starting to consider switchin’ from the Lord of Fire to the Lord of the Sky!”

It had been a full twenty-one days since they’d had a chance to sample the booze at the wonderful place beyond the door.

In the winter, Gild and Guilhem always went out of their way to climb the mountain in search of “that place.”

Like most dwarves, they were willing to persevere through cold, snow, and wind if it meant getting their hands on some delicious drink at the end of it all.

That being said, today they were facing a perilous climb. If they traversed the mountain during a snowstorm, their lives would be at risk. Even the dwarves—so tough that they were said to be born from stone itself—were not invulnerable to the dangers of a mighty blizzard.

And much as they loved delicious drink, it wasn’t worth sacrificing their lives over. In the afterlife, they’d never be able to partake in the holy liquids ever

again.

Due to fierce snowstorms, the pair had been forced to give up on their visit on the last two Day of Satur.

But today, the sky was as clear as it was blue.

The perfect Day of Satur.

And so the two dwarves happily shouldered their bags, put on their heavy coats, and began the long trek up the mountain.

“Ah, I can see it!”

“Aye, we’re finally here.”

After they’d been climbing for a time, Gard and Guilhem came upon their destination: a small, sturdy building made from stone, a layer of snow coating its roof.



The two dwarves had worked together to rebuild the place, using a winter path rarely traversed by others.

“C’mon, hurry your boots!”

“Stop rushing me!”

The pair entered the building with a loud gulp, heading straight for the tough steel door in the back, so heavy that it would have taken the strength of multiple average humans to pry open. This door opened to a room so small that there wasn’t even enough space for someone to lie down.

Yet once every seven days, a mysterious second door appeared in this tiny room.

“All right! Let’s go!”

“Aye! That delicious otherworldly booze be waiting for me!”

Pushing past the metal entryway, they came upon an oak-wood door decorated with an image of a cat. Gard put his hand to the brass knob and turned it.

Bells rang out suddenly and then were hushed just as quickly as the pair walked through.

In the warm, brightly lit dining area beyond the door, the dwarves dashed over to an open table and sat their buns down with such ferocity that the chairs trembled beneath them.

“Three mugs of beer, stat!” they cried out in one voice.

There wasn’t anything quite like a cold beer enjoyed in a warm room. After climbing the freezing mountain, it was just what the two dwarves needed.

They each downed two beers in what felt like a single breath. Then Gard and Guilhem took their time on their third drinks while perusing the menu. The first thing they decided upon was what drink they’d indulge in next.

“Let’s see... After a cold beer, nothing beats something warm.”

“Sounds to me like hot sake is the way to go. The only problem is that it comes in such a small quantity.”

The pair of dwarves settled upon a warm drink brewed from rice, an incredibly important beverage on the Eastern Continent from whence they came.

They'd downed their icy beers to quench their thirst, but after the freezing trek up the mountain, that just made them colder. What they needed now was a warm drink.

"Then what to eat..."

"That's the question, my friend. Hey, little lady! What appetizers do you folks have today?!"

Gard remembered something he'd learned as a regular at the restaurant: Hot sake paired better with fish rather than with fried food.

Appetizers were dishes prepared specifically for customers of the Restaurant to Another World who liked their drink as much as they enjoyed a good meal. The appetizers offered changed from day to day, which meant that you could try something new every visit. The dwarves had made it a point to start ordering some whenever they dropped in.

"Oh, today's appetizer is sake-steamed clams!" Aletta was familiar with the dish, so she explained further. "Clams are a type of shellfish—the master boils them in sake!"

"Oh! Don't that sound good?!"

"Then we'll have that! Two plates for each of us, little lady!"

Clams boiled in sake. There was no way the dwarves could hear that and not be tempted.

Aletta smiled; it seemed like the waitress instinctively knew they'd want some.

"Understood! Those'll be right out!"

Cheerfully accepting their order, she headed back to the kitchen.

A short time later, she returned.

"Sorry for the wait! Here are your sake-steamed clams. Um, the master said

that the soy sauce over there pairs well with them! Please take your time and enjoy!”

Before Gard and Guilhem were large plates piled with clams, a small ceramic jar of sorts filled with hot sake, and some small ceramic cups for drinking said sake.

“Ah, the time has come!”

“If this ain’t enough, we’re probably gonna order more! Just a heads up!”

Gard and Guilhem called out to Aletta as she ran off to deal with the other customers. They turned to the pile of food in front of them.

“So this stuff’s been cooked in sake, eh?”

“It definitely smells like it! But I don’t smell alcohol!”

The two dwarves inched their faces closer to the strange shellfish.

They were smaller in size than oysters, but they were all opened up, stacked atop one another in the deep dish. Diced green herbs were spread across the topmost layer.

There was a scent of melted butter wafting from the dish, as well as the faintly fruit-like aroma of sake.

However, the burning scent of alcohol itself was nowhere to be found, perhaps as a result of the heat.

“Let’s hurry up and eat!”

“Aye yo!”

The pair gulped loudly in response to the aroma wafting into their noses and began on their food journey.

In their left hands, each dwarf held a hot jar of sake. Thanks to their thick, tough skin, they had no problems holding the piping hot container. With their right hands, they attended to the shellfish.

Dwarf teeth are tough as they come, but that didn’t mean Gard and Guilhem were going to crunch through the clams’ exteriors. The dwarves brought the shellfish to their mouths, only slurping out the insides.

“Mm! Delish!” they yelled in unison, nodding furiously.

The fresh shellfish meat was dripping with the butter and sake broth.

It had only been seasoned with salt and some basic spices, which allowed the briny taste to really shine.

But most importantly...

“This’ll go damn amazing with hot sake!”

“Aye!”

Certain of this course of action, the two dwarves proceeded to alternate between bites of shellfish and sips of sake.

They tossed each finished shell to the side before reaching for the next. Then, with the savory clam flavor on their tongues, they both took measured drinks of the hot sake.

“Whew! That hits the spot!”

“There ain’t nothing like drinking hot sake while eating something *cooked* in sake! This is the best!”

The combined experience was everything they could have dreamed of.

The faint fruity sweetness of the hot sake, still warm with the flavor of alcohol, heated the dwarves’ cold bodies as it traveled down their throats. There, it fused with the herby, savory flavor of the shellfish. It was a totally novel dining experience—like drinking a savory alcohol.

Alternating bites of food and sips of booze was a technique the two dwarves had learned from an old seishu-loving samurai from the west. In this case, it turned out to be just the ticket.

It wasn’t long before Gard and Guilhem devoured the clams, finished off the soup, and guzzled down all the hot sake.

Just as soon as they had, the next round of hot sake and clams showed up on their table. And so the friends picked up their feast where they left off without missing a beat.

This was an increasingly common phenomenon at Nekoya these days.

“Oh, shall we try that thing the little lady mentioned?”

“You mean that soy sauce stuff? Aye!”

The dwarves doused the new plate of hot clams in the dark sauce before resuming their food journey.

“Oh, this soy sauce totally changes the taste!”

“You’re right. It really makes the flavor stand out! When it comes to seafood that ain’t fried, soy sauce is the way to go!”

The soy sauce brought back a strong, salty taste to the diluted shellfish flavor of the clams. Soy sauce paired magnificently with seafood in general. Sake-steamed clams were no exception to this rule of rules.

“I can’t get enough! I just want more!”

“There just ain’t enough on one plate! Hey, little lady, keep the clams and sake coming!”

Before Gard and Guilhem had even emptied this plate, they were making their next order.

It was their first feast at the Restaurant to Another World in exactly twenty-one days. And so the pair of dwarves celebrated their delicious new discovery loudly and happily, a party that extended well into the evening.

Chapter 60:

Croquettes

Long ago, there were four heroes on the Eastern Continent.

There was Leonard, the venerated saint of the Shrine of Light, one who was loved by the Lord of Light more than any other on the Continent, and thus blessed.

There was the genius sage Altorius, the most talented human magic user in the Kingdom—nay, the entire world.

There was Alexander, god of the blade, a half-elf who spent over half his life on the battlefield and who had brought down the demon king in one-on-one combat with only his sword.

And then there was the one who possessed the magic skills to rival Altorius, who could go head to head with Alexander as a samurai, and who was as beloved by the Goddess of Darkness as Leonard was by the Lord of Light.

Using all of her powerful attributes, she put an end to the great war against the demons that some thought would be endless. In exchange for her life, she defeated the dark lord dragged forth into the real world from the depths of chaos by the demon king.

Her name was Yomi, and she was a true hero.

Thanks to collective actions of these four heroes, the dreaded demon kings and the dark lord they called their god were defeated. The demons were robbed of their powers, and an era of peace dawned for the humans of the Eastern Continent.

This all happened nearly seventy years ago.

Apart from Yomi, who sacrificed herself in the final battle to defeat the dark lord, the heroes all managed to survive the war. In the aftermath, Leonard, Altorius, and Alexander all walked their separate paths, parting ways in life.

As he had shown he was capable of accomplishing feats no other could, Leonard became the pope of the Shrine of Light. He guided students in the teachings of the Lord of Light, strengthening the Lord's authority.

Altorius, with his great intellect, became a renowned sage whose name will be remembered throughout history. He pursued the magic arts and truth of the world in the Kingdom.

Alexander wandered endlessly from battlefield to battlefield, continuing his journey as a legendary mercenary. After a time, his whereabouts were lost to the wind.

Much like a halfling, the warrior journeyed widely and freely. He had beautiful looks that could make any man or woman blush, and he created scandalous rumors wherever he went. He also used his legendary swordsmanship to battle monsters and bandits for money.

The swordsman had gone on countless epic adventures worthy to be sung of by the bards. Yet on one fine winter day, he decided to visit an old friend of his in the royal capital, someone he had not seen in quite some time.

Since he was a half-elf, Alexander possessed a considerable amount of magical power. But he cared little for the magic arts and didn't have the skills to use them to begin with. And so it was somewhat of an irony that he was paying a visit to the royal city's proud headquarters of the magical arts.

"Yo. I got some biz with Al," Alexander said as he arrived. "You're his students, right? Could you go call him for me?"

It went without saying that, before the great sage Altorius could be summoned to greet his old friend for the first time in years, chaos unfolded.

"Alex, I never thought I'd see you here... I see you're still as rambunctious as ever."

Although he jested with him, the great sage Altorius was genuinely happy to see his old friend Alexander. It had been some ten years.

The old companions convened in Altorius's personal chambers, a place that

the average mage would never in their life have the chance to enter.

The space was filled with the smell of dusty paper and strange potions. Bizarre instruments lined the walls.

Alexander laughed.

“Yeah, glad to see you’re uh... Well, to be quite honest, you got damn old. You’re literally an old fart now!”

Alexander didn’t hold back with his old friend, the legendary sage Altorius.

Seventy long years had passed since the final battle. An entire human lifetime. Yet here stood the genius great sage, thin and fragile-looking in his aged body. To think that during the war, he had been nearly as handsome as Alexander himself.

Altorius chuckled. “You really never change, do you?”

Alexander hadn’t. At the time of the final battle, Alex had technically been older than Altorius. And yet here he stood, looking entirely unchanged.

The great sage recalled how when they were young, he and Leon would always get into arguments with Alexander about his attitude.

Alex didn’t seem to have a care in the world. He was irresponsible and took nothing seriously. Altorius had magic on the mind forty-six hours a day and couldn’t help but take interest in the smallest details of his craft. Meanwhile, Leon himself had been quite the ruffian, constantly smoking tobacco despite being a high priest of the Lord of Light. Yet he retained a strangely serious side. It was no wonder that the sage and the high priest didn’t get along with Alex at times.

But now, far removed from their days of adventuring, Altorius couldn’t help but think back fondly on those days. There was no anger left. Perhaps that’s what it meant to “grow old.”

Altorius focused back on his friend and finally posed the question that had been on his mind.

“And so? What business brings you here? I can’t imagine you coming to see an old friend without something in mind.”

When they still traveled together, the man before him had once boasted about how he “laid with a real princess” once. When it came to earning money for his pastimes or seducing a beautiful woman, Altorius knew that Alex was willing to put in some measure of effort. There was no way that the Alex he knew would have come here without a purpose.

And there was little doubt in the great sage’s mind that his friend hadn’t changed in seventy years.

“...I’m glad you get me. That will make this easy.”

Though his friend had aged, Alexander could see Altorius’s mind was still in tip-top shape. He went on to explain why he’d come to the capital.

“Actually...I’d like to drop by that restaurant in another world place. There’s a dish I wanna try.”

Alexander was a pretty famous fellow; he knew all manner of folk around the world. He’d heard the rumors from halflings and other adventurers about the mysterious restaurant that only appeared once every seven days and the delicious otherworldly foods you could get there.

He’d also heard that if you went there, there was a good chance you’d run into a frail-looking grandpa of a mage. The one said to be the living legend himself, the great sage.

“...I see.”

Altorius immediately understood what Alexander was getting at. Looking back on it, over the last thirty years, he’d never actually run into his friend at the Restaurant to Another World.

Alexander had never actually been there before.

“If that’s the case, I’d gladly take you there myself. Tomorrow evening, actually.”

This was a request from an old friend, a man he had once trusted to watch his back on the most horrific of battlefields. How could he possibly turn him down?

“Tomorrow night? Why the wait?” Alexander tilted his head in confusion.

“Mm... There are certain customers there that I’d prefer for you not to run

into. It'd be a mess. We'll wait until they go home."

Two specific regulars came to Altorius's mind.

Given how much of a skirt-chaser Alexander was, he might try to make a move on the imperial princess and get himself embroiled in a duel to the death with the prince from another nation. And then there was the demon warrior with the lion head, a regular who Altorius had known for quite some time now. He'd heard that the reason he was forced to become a gladiator was because he lost to Alexander in combat.

If those two got into a brawl, it'd be a gigantic problem. The restaurant was an extremely important place to Altorius, and he didn't want to cause trouble for the master.

The following evening, using the magic circle engraved in Altorius's research room, the pair stepped through the large black door. The sound of ringing bells filled the air as they arrived in the other world.

"Welcome... Oh? I didn't think you'd be dropping by today."

The master regarded Altorius with surprise. The oldest customer among his regulars usually dropped in around lunchtime, or else didn't come at all.

It was rare for him to show up at this time in the evening.

"Well, today I've got someone with me."

Altorius coughed, prompting Alexander to introduce himself. The half-elf smelled of women's perfume. Just where had he been all day long?

"Yo! So you're that otherworldly chef guy, eh? I'm... Uh, I'm not one to introduce myself to other men. Anyway, nice to meet ya!"

"Y-yeah, likewise."

The master lightly nodded his head, unsure of what to make of this flaky introduction.

"...He's not a bad guy, I promise you that much," Altorius said. But Alexander's tone was making him nervous.

“No worries,” the master said. “I know how young folks are! Oh, what do you want to do about your order?”

The master didn’t even consider that the young-looking man before him far outstripped Altorius in years. The middle-aged man asked about his order, something he normally skipped altogether.

Altorius always ordered pork loin cutlet and a beer.

But this time, he had a friend with him. As far as the master could tell, he was another otherworlder. He had no way of knowing what this guy’s tastes were.

“Ah, I’ll be having the usual, but...” Altorius, too, was unsure of what to order for his companion.

“Get me a croquette. Oh, and I’ll have the same drink as the gramps here,” Alexander stated with certainty.

“...That’s right. You did say there was something you wanted to try here.”

Alexander’s quick response reminded Altorius of their conversation yesterday.

Croquettes.

A certain Nekoya regular, now sadly deceased, had made a habit of telling everyone he knew that croquettes were the absolute most delicious fried item on the restaurant’s menu.

According to the rumors, croquettes has been brought over to the Empire when this regular devised the recipe on the other side.

I see. So he was pining for an otherworldly croquette, eh?

It all made sense to Altorius now. Alexander was such a curious person that he sometimes questioned whether he really had been born of an elf; he had the inquisitiveness of a halfling. It was that curiosity drawing him to sample the otherworldly croquette, a food he had never even seen before.

“You got it. A croquette and an order of pork loin cutlet. Those’ll be right out.” The master repeated their orders back to them and retreated to the kitchen with a nod.

“Now then, follow me.”

Altorius guided Alexander to his usual spot.

“Sure...” The half-elf followed Altorius, his guard suddenly raised by something he’d spotted in the restaurant.

“What’s wrong? Something on your mind?”

Alexander realized that Altorius hadn’t even noticed it yet. The warrior strengthened his guard.

“...So that elf girl carrying food? She’s a real problem.”

Altorius followed Alexander’s line of sight.

“Wh-what?! She’s here again?”

Alexander had his eyes trained on an elf girl clad in otherworldly black clothes. She was carrying food to the various tables. When she’d first slipped into the dining room, her presence had been so innocuous that even the professional warrior, “Curry Rice,” didn’t notice her.

It was likely that no one but Alexander was able to sense her presence.

The girl said nothing, simply transporting food and drink to and fro like some kind of ancient magical automaton.

And judging by the fact that the customers accepted the food that appeared at their tables without a word, the waitress was probably taking their orders by reading their minds.

“Yeah, she’s a problem. You definitely don’t want to make an enemy out of her...”

As someone who spent over a hundred years fighting across countless battlefields, Alexander had strong instincts. And right now, his instincts were blanketing him in cold sweat.

He was right to be concerned. The elf girl before him—the waitress in question—was a force that he could never hope to triumph over.

“I figured as much,” Altorius said.

He agreed with his friend. He knew what she—what it—was capable of. He’d

seen the consequences not long ago.

This was the sort of being that they had to avoid making an enemy of at all costs. It was more powerful than the dark lord they risked their lives to defeat all those years ago.

If only they hadn't noticed its presence in the room. A heavy silence set over the pair until their food arrived.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your croquette and your pork loin cutlet, plus two beers." The master broke this tense atmosphere, setting down their plates.

On the tray were a pork loin cutlet over green vegetables, a croquette, and two golden beers.

"G-great. Shall we eat?"

"Y-yeah, sure. Wow, this looks good."

With the delicious-looking food before them, the pair deigned to forget the presence of that "thing" in the restaurant.

There was no need for them to make any stupid moves. If left alone, it would simply continue to work. It didn't seem to even remotely care about them.

Realistically, the only people in the restaurant who even knew that waitress was present were the master, the other waitress girl, Alexander, and Altorius.

And so at long last, Alexander came face-to-face with the food he had longed to sample.

"Huh, so this is what a real croquette looks like?"

He regarded the brown, oblong croquette before him. As far as he could tell, it was still freshly cooked, the warm scent of oil wafting off it. Alexander could still hear it faintly sizzling.

"Let's see what you're made of..."

Gulping, Alexander took fork and knife in hand and cut a piece off of the edge of the croquette.

The knife slid satisfyingly through the croquette, revealing the mashed

cobbler's tubers and small brown bits inside, the glistening white and brown substance leading Alexander to gulp once again.

Then he took his first bite.

The subtly sweet flavor of the salted, seasoned, and buttered cobbler's tubers filled the half-elf's mouth, along with the taste of the high-quality fried breading. As it turns out, the brown bits were actually meat, and their fattiness helped bring the flavor of the croquette to a new level.

Yeah, this is a whole different tier of delicious. For sure.

Alexander washed down the greasy food with a sip of golden beer, his cheeks lighting up. This was better than he could have ever anticipated.

The "croquettes" that Alexander was familiar with from the Empire were round balls of mashed cobbler's tubers mixed with salt and fried in a water-flour dough.

It was the sort of food that you bought from a stall; a real commoner's dish. There was something extra special about eating a freshly fried croquette on a cold day out beneath the winter sky.

I totally get why that guy was so crazy about them.

With each bite, the chunk of croquette in his mouth fell apart, and Alexander began to reflect on his past.

The reason Alexander had sought a croquette at the Restaurant to Another World in the first place was because of a story he'd heard from a middle-aged halfling in his acquaintance.

Once while they were drinking together and swapping stories, the halfling spoke of the long-gone customer who loved the croquettes at the Restaurant to Another World.

The halfling smiled as he recalled the tale.

"I know the world is vast and anything is possible, but Croquette's probably the only guy who's ever been crazy enough to go and build a whole castle around one of those doors when they appeared. Hahaha."

His words hit Alexander like a ton of bricks. He must know the true identity of the man referred to as “Croquette.” That’s why the half-elf came traveling all the way to the Kingdom: so that he could ask his old friend for guidance on this urgent matter.

“C’mon, Alex. Croquettes are all about the sauce!”

Caught in his reverie, Alexander was pondering what to order next, when Altorius exclaimed in exasperation.

“Sauce?”

“Mm-hmm. Whenever you eat something fried here, you absolutely have to try it with this sauce.”

Alexander tilted his head in response to this unfamiliar word as Altorius passed him a small bottle.

“Try putting some of this on top. You can’t eat the fried food here without this flavor.” Altorius smiled, shaking his head.

There was one exception: tartar sauce, the rival condiment that paired perfectly with the fried seafood. But for everything else there was simply no other choice.

“Huh. Then let’s give it a try...”

Alexander nodded, taking the bottle from his friend. When he angled it down, a brownish black liquid poured out. It slowly fell from the mouth of the container and onto the brown coating of the croquette, staining it a darker color.

Alexander once again took a bite.

“I get it now. It tastes completely different with and without the sauce.”

The core flavor of the sauce was a vinegar-like sourness, but that wasn’t all. It was also intensely salty, with just a dash of spiciness, all the while being ever so slightly sweet. Overall, it imparted an incredibly complex taste.

By itself it’d be just a tad too intense. But when combined with the flavor of the croquette and breading, it was the perfect balance for the taste buds.

Alexander came to a conclusion as he munched on the darkened croquette.

I see... You can't eat a croquette without this sauce. It's the only way.

Admittedly, the fried treat was delicious on its own, but when combined with this sauce, it became a new dish entirely. As far as Alexander was concerned, he preferred the fusion of flavors.

"It's too bad we don't have this stuff on our side, eh?"

"Mm. Yomi said the exact same thing. She didn't think this stuff was going to make it to our side anytime soon," Altorius cheerfully replied. But his off-hand comment had revealed something important.

"Yomi...?"

The moment Alexander heard the old man say her name, his hands stopped moving.

Alexander stared at Altorius, his eyes filled with shock.

Why would he bring up the name of their friend who died so long ago? Why here and now? Altorius sensed his friend's questions in his serious expression.

"Ah, yeah... Yomi survived."

Altorius was comforted by Alex's surprise. He was reminded of the chance meeting he'd had the first time he visited Nekoya some thirty years ago. The old mage explained further.

"Seventy years ago, after she managed to stop the dark lord's rampage, Yomi didn't actually die. She apparently got blown away to this other world. When I met her, she had already perfectly adjusted to living with the folks on this side. She even said she had a grandson over here."

Altorius glanced over at the master, busily going in and out of the kitchen.

His old friend's gesture was enough for Alexander to put the pieces together, but he posed the question anyway.

"...Are you telling me the master of this place is Yomi's grandson? It sure doesn't look like he can wield a sword. Or use magic, for that matter."

The half-elf thought back on meeting the master earlier. After the croquette

he just ate, it was undeniable that the man's cooking skills were excellent. Yet his build wasn't that of a warrior's, and his magic powers must have been weak. He was an ordinary chef, no matter how you sliced it. How could someone like that be Yomi's grandson? She was a genius of the sword and magical arts.

"Well, of course he can't. In this world, swords and magic serve no purpose. What would be the point of her teaching him that stuff?"

Altorius smiled wryly, remembering Yomi's words on that fateful day he ran into her. She'd uttered them with a completely serious expression on her face:

"On this side, swords and magic are useless... But I'd like for him to at least inherit my cooking skills."

And those words came to fruition. Yomi's grandson, the master of this restaurant, may have had zero swordsmanship or magic skills, but he was one helluva chef.

"Seems to me like Yomi had a grand old time on this side."

Altorius recalled the incredibly natural smile on Yomi's face, those thirty-odd years ago. No longer was she hollowed out like a dragon fang soldier. No longer was she the woman who could think of little but killing monsters. She was not the same person she had been when she journeyed with her comrades in arms.

It was as if she had simply become a "normal human." Altorius couldn't help but feel overwhelming joy for his old friend, tinged with loneliness.

"I see... So Yomi made the most of it, huh?"

Much like Altorius many years ago, Alexander felt at ease hearing about his old friend's final years.

"I was made in order to destroy the demon kings."

Yomi would always say this with a straight face. All she had ever known was killing demons.

After defeating the dark lord summoned by the demons, she just up and vanished from the world. No trace of her was left behind. At least that's what Alexander thought had happened to his beloved friend.

But Yomi survived and found happiness in this other world. The half-elf was filled with warmth hearing this happy news.

“...You know what? Let’s drink! To Yomi’s survival.”

Altorius nodded in response to Alexander’s proposal.

“That’s a great idea. Our way of thanking this world for taking her in as one of its own, you know? Excuse me, Master,” Altorius called. “Could we get seconds on the pork loin cutlet and croquette?”

And so the pair of old friends ate and drank until the break of dawn.

The day after they visited the Restaurant to Another World, Alexander and Altorius parted ways.

“I appreciate everything you did for me, buddy. Thanks.”

“No need for that. Come by whenever you want. Hell, make it on a Day of Satur.”

Alexander had settled a matter he’d been curious about for years. And he’d gotten a bit of tremendously happy news on top of that, something he could never have anticipated. It was time for him to set out on his journey once more.

His destination? Well, that depended on where the wind was blowing. That’s how Alexander lived.

The half-elf gave it some thought, abruptly coming to a decision.

“Now then, I suppose I could swing by Addy and the boy’s grave. Now that I think about it, I’ve never actually been.”

His destination was the capital city of the Empire.

While the country was less than a hundred years old, its capital city was jam-packed with interesting things and places. Alexander had pretty much seen it all...except for two gravesites.

Alexander had always believed that the worlds they inhabited were too different. The beloved woman he was with for one night and the son she gave birth to... He used to think there was no point in going to see their graves.

He was sure his son would have been annoyed.

“I have no father,” the boy had said once when he was younger. “My mother Adelheid is the only parent I’ve ever had and the only one I’ve ever needed.”

Alexander decided that he’d apologize to Addy. She was an adorable young lady who knew little of the world and had likely gone through all manner of troubles thanks to his behavior. Today he would tell her that he was sorry for everything.

And perhaps he’d tell them both that he’d gone to eat the delicious croquettes from that restaurant his son loved.

I’m allowed that much, right? I mean, he’s the one who had to go and kick the bucket before his old man. Jerk.

And so Alexander set off on his next journey, his mind murmuring with these thoughts.

He hadn’t seen the woman and boy since he helped them flee from the old capital with his comrades, when it was attacked by the demon king.

Finally, Alexander was going to see his lover and his son.

Special Chapter 3:

Curry Bread

It had been 150 days since I started working at Western Cuisine Nekoya in the country of Japan. In the other world.

The promised time... I confirmed that six days, eight hours, thirty-two minutes, and forty seconds had passed, and opened my eyes.

I turned my gaze to the door in front of me, using my magic powers to take the shape of an elf. This was one of the humanoid races, and the form I took when I first visited the restaurant. One of my scales became a black waitress uniform; the rest of them turned into long black hair that draped past my waist. Transformed, I opened the oak-wood door.

The sound of ringing bells filled my ears as I passed through the entrance.

Good morning.

“Yo, top of the morning. Punctual as always, eh?”

“Good morning! Let’s do our best today!”

As soon as I announced my arrival, two creatures greeted me in return—the master of the Restaurant to Another World, and Aletta, a girl who was contracted to work under him like me.

The looks in their eyes were so different from the faces I remember gazing with amazement on our battle with “it” so many years ago. So different from the eyes that, after the battle, looked upon us in fear and resented us. And so different from those who bathed in our blood and transformed, worshipping us with intense passion.

Instead, they looked upon me as if I was their equal.

“I got your breakfast curry all ready for you,” said Aletta. “You’re gonna eat, right?”

Yes.

For some reason, I could sense something odd in their eyes. While not

altogether unpleasant, it made me feel something I'd rather not feel. I bowed my head.

I didn't understand. What was this thing I was sensing?

However, there was nothing more important than the aromatic chicken curry sitting in front of me.

I decided to stop thinking about the strange feeling and sunk my spoon into the curry's brown sauce.

My old comrade of 35,688 years, Red, introduced me to the master here. That was the reason I started working as a waitress at the Restaurant to Another World.

When I discovered that the food here—specifically the dish called “chicken curry,” made with a type of bird meat called chicken and a variety of herbs and fruits—was served in exchange for currency, Red made a proposal.

Red, who had visited me at the end of the sky, made their intent clear.

“I want you to work there as a waitress and protect the restaurant from any who might do it harm while I'm not around,” Red told me.

The master, who was a being of another world, in addition to being my boss, and Aletta, my coworker at the restaurant, were apparently both extremely weak. They would be in danger if they were not protected.

According to Red, one of White's pets had tried to start trouble here in the past.

And so Red, sensing trouble, had dealt with the problem themselves. But if the master had died before they could step in, the restaurant would have ceased to exist.

“I know that if someone were to cause trouble, you would at least be able to head them off until I arrived... Plus, when I take care of things, they tend to become a big deal,” Red explained.

In that sense, I was the optimal guardian for this restaurant. I could easily hide my magical powers. I could almost entirely erase my presence.

So I agreed with this plan and went to work at the restaurant in exchange for chicken curry.

Western Cuisine Nekoya operated under the calendar system devised by this world. There were seven days in every week. Every seven days it opened to our world, apparently.

The master used the day after it opened to our world as a break, then spent the remaining five days serving people from his world. As far as I was aware, that was a fairly standard practice for businesses on this side. It seemed to work well.

This impression was all based off of information I gathered from the customers at the restaurant, as I carried food to and fro.

According to what I'd heard, it did not appear that our world had been discovered or detected by the residents of this world.

Elves had invaded this world in the past, and so while the concept of a different world existed here, it was treated as a product of the imagination. As pure fiction.

Additionally, humanity, the race that most resembles the elves, had a very low threshold for magical power. There were very few humans who could use magic, if there were any at all.

In spite of this, Nekoya had a magical door that connected it to locations all throughout our world—the world on the other side. Why that was, nobody knew.

If I'd searched Altorius's memories—he was one of the humans who frequented Nekoya—I might have discovered the truth. But I did not think that was necessary for the time being, so I didn't attempt it.

In any event, I decided that there was no need to learn more about this world outside of the confines of Nekoya. I concluded that I could put off my investigation of this world for the next one hundred years, until the master's natural life reached its end.

With that thought in mind, I attended to my work. My actual job was not that difficult.

I read the orders from the customers' subconscious minds, informed the master so that he could prepare the dishes, took out the food, and then cleaned up any dishes left behind.

Because I wasn't particularly skilled at communicating with customers the way Aletta was, I left the first order taking to her.

I only needed to operate in the background. Considering the request that Red made of me, it wouldn't be good if too many people were aware of my presence.

On occasion, there were customers who noticed me in the restaurant. But they recognized what I was, to some degree, and they didn't take any hostile action.

That being said, fights of any kind didn't happen here.

Red was the final customer of the day. As I watched them exit the restaurant, I noticed the master doing something strange, not his usual end-of-day routine.

He took out an oblong white object with a rough-looking surface and proceeded to start preparing to cook.

It was a type of food I've never seen before—certainly something I've never seen the master here make.

"Hm? Ah, good job today, Kuro."

The master noticed my curiosity watching him cook and offered some words of encouragement. He then turned his attention back to the white food.

"Oh, you're wondering what this is, eh?" The master said after a few moments. "This is curry bread."

Curry bread?

I had never heard of this food before. I was aware that bread was a type of

food made from grinding a sort of plant into powder, kneading it together, and baking it. Much like the rice, which was also made from a kind of cooked plant, bread was a common side dish here.

I knew full well what curry was, but I did not know of this curry bread.

“I got these from Kimura’s place because they liked our chicken curry so much. Apparently they’re best when they’re still hot, so I’m getting ready to cook ’em up,” the master said. “To be honest, there’s way more than I can eat here, so I was thinking this could be our dinner tonight.”

The master started chucking the white oblongs into the oil-filled pot.

The oil bubbled and the sound of sizzling filled the air. When the master eventually took the curry bread out of the pot of oil, they were golden brown like the various other fried foods he served. Wafting from the curry bread was the faint smell of curry itself.

Are they tasty?

“Heck yeah they are. The curry bread at Kimura’s place has been super popular for ages. Everything they make is great, to be honest. Would you like to try one, Kuro?”

I immediately nodded my head.

My sense of curiosity was alive and well. *Just what does this curry bread stuff taste like?* I wondered. *Will it be delicious like chicken curry?*

Altogether, the master fried twelve pieces of curry bread. He placed them in a cage wrapped in paper to drain the excess oil, then set them down on the table, still sizzling.

“Wow!”

Next to me, Aletta smiled with wide eyes when she saw the bread.

“For drinks, I decided to go with lassi,” said the master. “If you want refills just pour some more for yourself.”

The master placed three glasses in front of us, each filled with white,

translucent liquid. Nearby was a pitcher filled with more of the lassi.

“Curry bread is good cold, but it’s best when eaten hot, so get to it!” the master said. “Let’s eat!”

As the master finished setting the table, Aletta offered a simple prayer to her deity. “Thank you, oh god of demons, for this, my daily bread. I offer you my gratitude!” She then took one of the curry breads.

Aletta puffed her cheeks out, letting out some steam. She had tears in her eyes as if she’d burned herself, but nonetheless announced from a full mouth that the curry bread was delicious.

“Eeee! It’s so hot and spicy! ...Bhut it’s goof!”

The master, apparently used to eating curry bread, showed no signs of being burned. “Yup. Ain’t nothing like freshly fried curry bread from Kimura’s joint.”

Watching the pair eat, my interest was piqued.

I reached out and took one of the breads for myself.

I could feel the freshly fried curry bread’s warmth through the palms of my hands, smelling of both curry and cutlet.

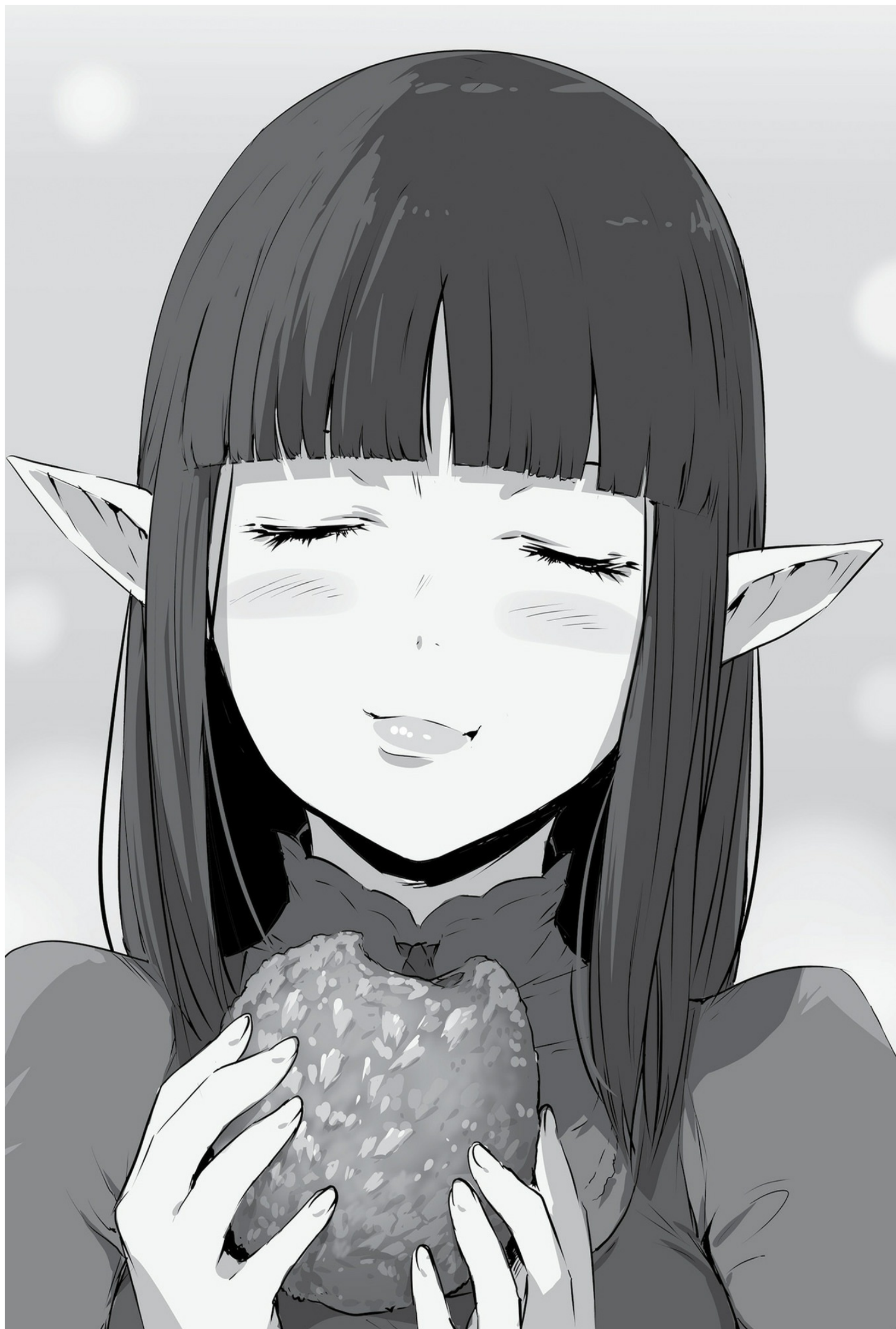
After enjoying this aroma for a time, I finally took a bite of the curry bread.

The oily, crunchy surface of the bread popped as I bit into it. The breading was thicker and slightly harder than that of the other fried foods served at the restaurant, but its insides were as soft as anything.

The slight sweetness of breading and oil was immediately contrasted by the interior of the bread.

Curry.

The amazing, hot sauce that I’d fallen in love with completely erased the sweetness of the bread, changing the entire flavor profile to spicy deliciousness.



The curry inside of the bread was filled with ground herbs and meat (likely from a cow). It also contained all manner of plants, which had been cooked down and added into the gooey sauce. It wasn't as spicy as the chicken curry I was familiar with.

Overall, I thought I preferred chicken curry.

...However.

"Freshly fried curry bread really is the bee's knees," the master said, chewing.

"You're right... May I have another one?" Aletta asked.

It would be a shame if I just let the master and Aletta finish off all of the curry bread in front of me.

I stealthily reached for another one.

And after inspecting the white liquid briefly, I took a sip of the drink that the master referred to as lassi.

The sweet and sour flavor of the drink, seemingly made from cow's milk, washed over the taste of the curry and settled in my stomach.

Now I can enjoy more curry bread!

With the aftertaste of the curry bread gone from my mouth, I was prepared to enjoy another piece, like it was the first time all over again. I sunk my teeth into the bread.

...This continued, over and over, until the curry bread was all gone.

After our meal, my work day came to an end.

"I'll be countin' on you both next week!" The master bid us goodbye.

With all the remaining chicken curry gone, my contract for the day was complete. The time for me to return to the end of the sky had arrived.

Aletta changed out of her uniform into the clothes she normally wore, accepting both a bag of silver coins and a bag filled with cookies (which were some sort of confection) from the master. She then prepared to head home.

As I myself readied to leave, Aletta called out.

“Of course, Master! And Kuro, be careful on the way home, okay?”

Her concern was unnecessary. I was the only living creature that called the end of the sky home. And there were only a handful of beings on this planet that can do me harm.

Nonetheless, I didn't correct her, and instead responded in kind.

I will. You too, Aletta.

All the while, I was thinking about how I kind of didn't mind being worried about.



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