

Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind

6



STORY BY
Kiri Komori

ART BY
Yamigo

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Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind, Volume 6

Kiri Komori

Translation by Roman Lempert

Illustration by Yamigo

Title Design by KC Fabellon

Editing by Tom Speelman and Charis Messier Proofreading by A.M. Perrone

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Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind

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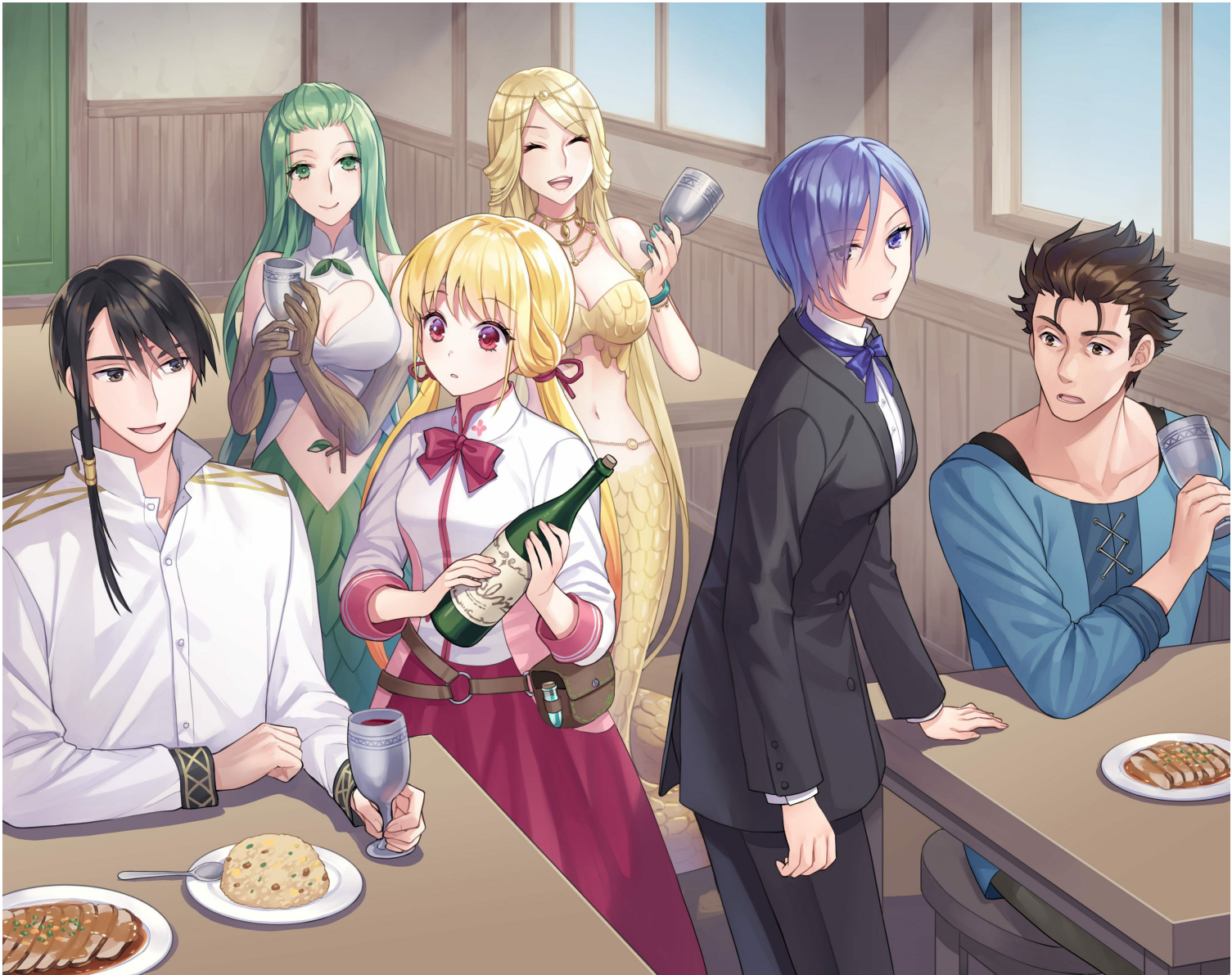
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♣ Me at Age Seventeen – Part 1

“AHHH! I can see the sky! It’s so blueeee!” I shouted, standing on tiptoe and looking up at the sky.

But who could blame me? The Sugula was gone. Our world—Wisty Air—was saved. And for the first time in recent memory, I could see a clear, blue sky and a brilliant, glowing sun. I basked in its glory, taking a deep breath.

Aaah, it’s all so wonderful!

“I see we have fine weather today, Holy Woman,” one of the workers in Fort Deshmel said as she walked past me.

“Yes, we do!” I agreed.

“We can *finally* hang the laundry out! It’s all thanks to you and Lord Renge. How can we *ever* show our gratitude?”

“O-Oh! Don’t mention it!” I responded. “We still have to deal with all the monsters, after all...”

Yes, I was still here in Fort Deshmel, purifying monsters drawn to my power. But the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own was defeated and completely destroyed thanks to Renge’s power: “Hell Flame—Concept Erasure.”

Admittedly, it was a little hard to wrap my head around. But apparently because of this attack, neither the Kaguya with a Will of Its Own nor the Sugula could ever be made or come into existence again. Renge always lamented his power was only good for destruction. But thanks to him, our world no longer had to live in fear of those terrifying threats.

And now that we were free from spending our days afraid of the world ending, we could all go back to the lives we’d led before the Sugula appeared. The sky was blue for the first time in years. Only now did I appreciate how blissful that was...

“Hmmm... Maybe I should make a tonic today,” I thought aloud as the worker

walked past me. "It's been a while..."

Going back to my roots, as it were. The first medicine I'd ever made was a low-grade tonic, good for treating minor wounds. After that, I'd made medicine to relieve Grandpa's illness.

Since we always needed low-grade tonics, I usually made them in huge batches. Yet today, I thought that maybe taking my time and carefully making a small bottle or two would be a good idea. *It could even be relaxing...*

"Holy Woman, someone's here to see you," another one of the workers called out to me.

"Huh? Ah, all right. I'll be right over."

A guest?

Feeling curious, I went back inside and headed down to the first-floor reception room, where I always had the workers lead the guests. After exchanging a few words with some workers outside the door, I entered the reception room to see five knights, each from different countries but all charged with defending Fort Deshmel.

"Hello... Is there a problem?" I asked.

"W-Well..." said Nelt, one of De Marl's Crimson Knights. "We heard you make medicine often, Holy Woman. We were wondering if you might be able to help us with a...*problem*."

"Yes...?" I prompted.

I realized their expressions were all quite grave. There was an unusual air about them that made me a bit anxious. *Just what's troubling them?*

"We're feeling...stuffy," Nelt went on.

"Stuffy...?" I repeated.

"Our armor!" he cried suddenly. "It's so hot and stuffy! We keep breaking out in heat rashes!"

"H-Heat rashes?!" I parroted, taken aback.

"That's right! And it's not just us! All the knights here are in so much *pain*! We

can't even *bathe* from all these heat rashes!" Nelt complained tearfully.

He looked so agonized, I was convinced he was telling the truth. Dad had told me the various countries had all selected handsome knights to send to the fort with the intent of seducing me to their side, so I'd initially been wary of them.

But now, I believed Nelt's story. The knights probably really *were* tormented by heat rashes from their armor. And since he'd said they were speaking for all the knights in the fort, it meant this was a problem they *all* had! I had to find a solution to their problem.

That said, all I can really do is make medicine. And just healing the rashes won't really solve the problem overall. I needed a more comprehensive solution. The first thing that came to mind was to make the armor more breathable somehow. *But I don't know the first thing about armor!*

Is there a way, then, to keep the armor cool without chilling people's skin? A cold body towel was the only thing that came to mind. *But that doesn't agree with some people's skin.*

Hmm...

"Can't you just...take off your armor...?" I finally asked, out of ideas.

"H-Huuuuh?!" Nelt gasped. "Y-You're giving us permission to strip?!"

"What?! N-No, I mean...I don't get to decide things like that! I don't know *anything* about armor! S-So I just thought maybe dressing more lightly would help! Was that a bad idea? And wait...wh-why do you need my permission to do anything?! And especially to strip?!"

"W-Well, you see... For us, our armor is kind of like a means of identification. If we dress light, there'd be no way of knowing who's affiliated with where. And it'll also lower our defenses! Our countries sent us to *guard* you, Holy Woman. And such a move, as nice as it'd be, could get in the way of doing that. We can't do it without direct approval from Deshmel's master. In other words...you."

"I-I see..."

They *were* here to guard me, after all. But if the knights were all in so much pain, I had to do *something* to improve their work environment.

In that case...!

“Understood!” I said. “I’ll make you medicine and have it distributed. And if that doesn’t help, feel free to use lighter equipment. Prioritize your health and take breaks if you need to! And if you *do* need to, then...yes, all the knights could discuss and pick representatives, like captains and vice-captains, that’ll alternate every week or month. People you can speak to in case you need to take time off. How does that sound?”

Is this all too much? Or maybe it’s a bad idea? Maybe...I can’t call these kinds of shots?

Nelt and the other knights exchanged looks, which made me even more nervous that I’d said the wrong thing.

“But if we *do* that,” Nelt said at last, “won’t that...mean we’re affiliated with Fort Deshmel?”

“Well...” I hesitated. “C-Can’t you ask your countries for approval to form a united unit within Deshmel? We’ve had trouble with the chain of command in the past because of this. If you’re going to keep working here, you should decide on commanders who’ll manage and organize your formations. And they’ll be able to monitor each other’s actions, too. It’ll help prevent the issues we’ve had before too...”

“H-Hmm... True,” Nelt replied. “You’re sure to become an important presence in the future. All the nations of the world should cooperate to keep you safe until the monsters are eradicated.”

He said this calmly. But the knights seemed to be looking at each other with suspicion. Dad had said the knights were all loyal to their countries, and while I wasn’t clued into any of the issues, there was apparently a lot of friction between the different knights.

But for now, I gave them my advice and left the primary job of organizing the knights to the experts.

“I’ll get to making a cure for those heat rashes, then,” I said firmly as I picked up my skirts and made to leave. “I’ll try to have it done as soon as possible. Once it’s ready, I’ll deliver it to the representative. So once you decide on the

captains and vice-captains, let me know.”

“Roger that,” Nelt said.

“We’re counting on you for the medicine!” another knight finally spoke up.

“Thank you!” said another as he bowed hastily.

“S-Sure thing...” I said, trying not to blush as I turned and left the room.

Their enthusiasm was impressive, and I could feel their sincerity. *I’ll get this medicine ready as soon as possible!*



I hurried back to my room and opened my recipe books. Surely, I’d find a cure for heat rashes in these pages. But this time, I was dealing with a specialized medicine. I needed to make something that’d be good for inflammation symptoms, like anti-itch cream.

But since this’ll be used by men, they surely won’t want to use creams, so ideally, it’d have to be oral medicine. But then again...if they have sensitive tongues, a syrup might not be a good idea...so maybe it’ll be gelatinous and quick to dry on skin...? Ah...!

As I flipped through Grandma’s recipe book, I suddenly found a page titled: “Heat Rash Medicine—Good for Knights.” *Of course, she’d have something like this—she made medicine for the knights of De Marl! Yeah! This is exactly what I need! Thanks, Grandma! Now...let’s see what the ingredients are...*

♣ A remedy ♣ Collagen ♣ Earth Turtle Dragon Scale ♣ Water Spider Silk ♣ Colvo Leaves “I think I have all of these in my ingredient storeroom,” I mused aloud, “so I can make it in time. But I’m running low on the amounts. What to do...? How long until Mister Giyaga drops by?”

I only had 500 grams of each ingredient in my storeroom. Colvo leaves I could pick from my herb garden. But I was running short on Water Spider Silk and Earth Turtle Dragon Scales. But since I knew Mister Giyaga would be dropping by soon, I decided to try making it with what little I had left.

“Hmmm...it *looks* fairly easy to make,” I muttered as I read the recipe over. “You use the remedy as the base, crush the Earth Turtle Dragon Scale and

Water Spider Silk into powder, refine the Colvo leaves into an oil and mix them together. Okay, let's get started!"

I got the ingredients from my storeroom, put the remedy in a pot, then put scale and silk into the mortar and started grinding them down with the pestle.



Grind... Grind... Grind...

I applied mana as I crushed the ingredients into powder. Once they were properly pulverized, I put them into the pot with the remedy.

“Next, I need to mix this thoroughly and add the collagen to give it a gelatinous state. Okay...time to mix!”

Swirl, swirl... Swirl, swirl... Swirl, swirl... And...!

Good, it looks well-mixed. The color's pretty grotesque, though... It's kinda purplish. Do I have any coloring agents lying around...?

I dug out some white coloring agent and added it in, making a color that wouldn't look *bad* when you rubbed it on.

“Now to add the collagen...”

Here in Wisty Air, collagen came from the fruit of a Collag tree. Back in my past life, you could extract it from other things but here, the fruit's insides were all you needed.

I added it to the mix. Now, all that was left was the final touch. I poured in mana and stirred, stirred, stirred... It turned out this took quite a bit of mana, so I drank a restorative as I kept at it.

Stir, stir, stir... Stir, stir, stir...

Poof!

“Yes! It's finished!” I poured the finished heat rash medicine into glass jars.

It ended up making enough for five jars. But just giving the knights this would've been a bit lackluster, so I decided to include a snack. There were about thirty knights on wall duty, so I figured I'd make something I could make heaps of, like cookies or scones. *Then again, if I make something that's too big, it'll be less of a snack and more of a meal...*

I decided to go with the safe option—cookies—and went down to the second-floor dining hall kitchen to get started. The ingredients were wheat flour, butter, sugar, and eggs. I added the sugar and eggs to the melted butter and mixed them all together. I incorporated plenty of mana into the mixture since it

made them a stamina restorer. But since this wasn't alchemy, the mix didn't glow or *poof*.

Once I was done mixing, I sieved the flour and added it in. I then stirred the mixture until the flour lost all its powdery texture. Once it cooled and hardened, I spread it out to an oblong shape and cut it into small, bite-sized pieces.

While the mixture cooled, I heated up the oven and, after setting the pieces onto a large plate, I put them in the oven to bake. While they baked, I relaxed in the kitchen, flipping through Grandma's medicine recipe book. As I did, an appetizing smell wafted up.

I ended up making more cookies than I'd initially planned. But I decided I'd store some of them on the top shelf for when Renge would show up! I also decided to keep a separate batch for Lord Revireus, who *also* had a huge sweet tooth. He had a bad habit of pilfering snacks from our storehouse, which I'd only find out about when I needed something and found it gone.

As I flipped through the book, I happened upon a nice recipe for red-hand-curing cream. I had all the ingredients in my storeroom and considered making some ahead of winter. *I can imagine the women handling the laundry would be pleased to have it! Oh! I could set up a large jar for everyone to use for free! And if someone uses it a lot or really needs a cure or preventative for red hands, they can just buy some hand cream from me!*

"...I wish I could set up a storefront," I said wistfully.

So far, when people here asked me for something, I'd made it on demand. But after three years of living at Fort Deshmel, I was well aware of what people needed on a daily basis. There was an unused storeroom on the first floor, near the west gate. Mister Giyaga always said it was a waste no one was using it. *But maybe now's the time!*

If anyone else wanted to set up a store there, we could let them... If it took off, we could have them pay rent. If they caused trouble, we could have them evicted and so on and so forth... I could ask Mister Giyaga and Sirius to help us draft a contract...

But before all that, we'll need to clean up the block, so it'll be usable to set up stores in...

Who could help me with that? Hmmm....

Ding, ding! said the internal timer in my head as I suddenly smelled cookies. “Oh!”

They were ready. I opened the stone oven and took out the freshly baked cookies. Once they cooled, I put them and the medicine in a basket and headed to the knights’ guardroom by the walls. I saw Nelt outside and approached him.

“Hello! I’m sorry it took me awhile,” I said. “I made you the heat rash medicine and some cookies as an extra treat!”

“Goodness!” he said. “You made it so soon? That’s a huge help, thank you! And thank you for the cookies too!”

“I’m not sure I made *quite* enough,” I admitted, “but a merchant should be passing by soon. Once I have the ingredients restocked, I’ll make more.”

“Thank you. We’re not quite done reorganizing our forces just yet. But I was elected as the representative for the time being. I’ll distribute the medicine to the more severe cases.”

“Oh yes, go right ahead!” I said, handing him the basket.

Severe... Gosh, severe heat rash sounds really miserable. I hope they get well soon...

“Also, I’ve received word from De Marl. Worshipers of the Gods of De Marl are asking to see you, Holy Woman,” Nelt said.

What? Oh...oh no... I realized I’d made a bit of a blunder. I was in the reception area of the guardroom used by *all* the knights...and it was just Nelt and I!

Dad, Renge and the others had all warned me not to be alone with any of the knights because either, they’d try to seduce me or talk to me about religion. *They warned me and yet, here I am...*

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but please talk to my father about such matters. I was told to turn down all requests for meetings.”

“P-Please, can’t you find it in you to oblige?!” he pleaded.

“I’m sorry. I-If that’s all, I’ll be leaving now! Goodbye!”

Time to run!

Having delivered the goods, I fled the reception area. *I don’t like the way that went! Since it’s clear I’ll be hearing a lot from Nelt in the future, I’ll need someone to act as a mediator between me and the knights going forward. Which means I need to have the storeroom cleaned up and a commercial block set up there, so the knights can purchase their heat rash medicine without having to come to me!*

Better strike while the iron is hot!

I made my way to the fort’s west gate block. The place was packed with stacked wooden crates full of who-knows-what, the floor was covered in a thick layer of dust, and the air was chilly. There were windows near the ceiling...but overall, the area was dark.

That said, the place being chilly meant that foodstuffs and medicine that needed cold storage would last long here. Plus, it was spacious. *If a store’s roughly twenty feet long, we could set up twenty storefronts in here!* I thought as I walked around. *We could set up a passage, make supply spaces in the back of each store, and use the remaining space at the very back as a place for the merchants to drink and talk shop. Just like back home in the Rofola Lodge, where they can order alcohol at night...*

Yeah...I’ve got a clear image of what I want. That said...what’s in these crates?

They were each about three square feet and quite large, with ten rows of four crates stacked atop each other. I couldn’t pull one down myself.

“Tina, you probably shouldn’t be walking around on your own,” a voice suddenly said.

“Wh-Whoa!” I turned around and gasped. “Renge!”

And there he was! In his familiar cloak and fluffy scarf. I looked around, but no one else was with him.

J-Just the two of us...in this empty storeroom...?! I started to panic.

“I, umm...I was hoping to rent this space out to people interested in setting up

stores within the fort...to make like a small shopping district..." I stammered as I told him my plan.

"Oh...interesting idea. Like where we first met in De Marl?"

"Ah, yes! Like that!"

That brought back memories. I first met Renge in De Marl five years ago. Nowadays, we could ask Renge to deliver us any rare ingredients on demand, so much so that Mister Giyaga's stock became full of things from the demi-human continent.

Right! I thought suddenly. *If there was a store here that deals in medicinal ingredients, it'd be a huge help! I should ask Mister Giyaga if that's possible...*

"Yes," Renge mused, "for how spacious this place is, it's a shame it goes unused. I think it's a good idea."

I smiled for a moment, then frowned again. "So, I was thinking of getting this place cleaned up first, but... It's too big, so I'd need help to do it. Plus, I don't know what's in these crates."

"Why not look and see?" he suggested.

I pointedly glared up at him; he was almost a foot taller than me. "Could *you* check?"

"Sure," he said, maybe a little too hastily like he'd realized his mistake. "Give me a second." Renge floated up and opened the lid on one of the top crates. Peering inside, he shook his head and said there was nothing in it.

"They're all...wait!" I clapped my hands together. "If they're empty, we can use them to store merchandise!"

"True," he said as he floated back down. "They should be useful. But they're a bit moldy."

"That's nothing we can't wash away, and we'll put them to use once they're dry. If the other crates *are* all empty, they can be used in the stores. Now, we'll need to buy some lumber to build foundations for the stores... Maybe make scaffolding for stalls... Oh, yeah, can we call a carpenter over?" I asked, rambling off one thought after another.

“Well, the buildings are one thing. But won’t we need other merchants here?” Renge pointed out.

“O-Oh, right!”

I was excited about setting up an apothecary store. But that’d just make for *one* store out of twenty. *We’ll need to find nineteen other people interested in this venture. One store won’t make a commercial block, after all.*

“Oh, right!” I said as a bolt of inspiration struck. “I could tell the women devoted to the fashion show and have them set up a clothing store. People could buy the clothes designed for the shows in their own sizes! And *that* way, the women would be able to support Fort Deshmel. And *that* way, I could sell cosmetics at my store, too! Yeah, that seems profitable! But wait, that’s still only two stores. Some eateries seem like a good idea. But my only option for *that* is to spread the word and hope prospective vendors step up to the plate. Maybe I could make a poster for that?” I muttered as I paced back and forth, buzzing. “Oh, gosh, there’s so much to do...!”

“*You* look like you’re having fun, Tina,” Renge remarked.

“Huh?” I stopped. “I... I do?”

“Yeah...” he smiled warmly. “Seeing you enjoy yourself makes me happy, too.”

Gah!!! I felt my heart skip a beat. His smile was so cute. Ever since I confessed my feelings, Renge stopped being as clingy, perhaps out of consideration for my erratic heart. But well...since he’d *accepted* my confession, I’d have liked him to stay at least a *little* clingy. But Renge, being a Mythical Beast, didn’t seem very interested in that. And I’d known so little of love in my past life...

How do people normally handle romance? How does Nakona? She mentioned going on dates with Shida and now they’re married... Maybe I should ask her....

“Oh! Right, Tina,” Renge said suddenly, “messengers from De Marl are here to see you. I told them to speak with Marcus instead. But they came all the way to the fort anyway.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve heard.”

That must've been who Nelt was talking about earlier. They came here before Dad could tell them off. I thought that since they were here now, I should make an effort not to run into them.

"Given their presence," Renge went on, "I'd prefer it if you stayed on the fort's second floor. Ideally, they'll just give up and go back to De Marl."

"I hope we can talk this out," I replied, "but...there's religion involved, right?"

"Yes. They demand that you acknowledge the Gods of De Marl."

"Oh... I was afraid that's what they'd want..." I sighed.

I couldn't do that because of how this world worked. The only true god in this world is Air, the creator deity. All other gods were made up. Belief in these nonexistent gods produced Camilla.

The only other form of acceptable worship was worship of the Holy Woman (aka...me). Since that wasn't worshipping a god, it didn't produce any Camilla. And when Camilla built up, it became the Kathra that created monsters and zombies. When Kathra built up and achieved a certain size, it became a planet-eating Sugula that floated in the sky. *And we've all seen the terror and despair that causes...*

Renge had burned away the very concept of the Kaguya with a Will of its Own, so *that* could never be born again. But that wasn't true of the Sugula. Sugula was a product of this whole wacky system Air had set up, so Renge could never use Concept Erasure on the Sugula entirely.

In other words, if the world kept repeating its mistakes, the Sugula would come back over and over. This was something Dad and Renge's group were trying to teach humanity about with the help of the demi-human continent's representatives. But De Marl's religionist cliques were dead set against banning all worship of their gods.

I didn't think faith was a bad thing in and of itself. People look to religion for support, after all. But things like demanding donations to the point of threatening people's livelihood, threatening non-believers with eternal damnation, or forcing one's faith onto others were all bad things we could do without.

It all hinged, I reflected, on faith being free. And I *did* think people having something to believe in was better than them having nothing to hang on to.

But here in Wisty Air, there was only *one real god*—and that was Air. Faith in any other gods became Kathra, which meant worshipping the Gods of De Marl was objectively a bad thing. And that wasn't limited to just De Marl's gods, but *all* gods. Everywhere. I got letters every week from people in every country, begging me to acknowledge the legitimacy of their gods.

They sent me these letters because they feared the Mythical Beasts. For centuries, the Mythicals had rejected mankind, only admitting those who could reach the Mythical Continent into their lands. But now, the whole world had seen the spectacular way Renge had destroyed the Sugula. To humans, he was like the King of the Mythical Beasts: a legend to be regarded with awe and fear.

I even remember Dad telling me that when he first met Renge, *he'd* thought the same and feared him. That's how mighty and fearsome the Mythical Beasts had become to humans.

But asking the Mythicals for freedom of religion was difficult. After all, the demi-human and Mythical continents only worshipped Air and the Holy Woman.

So, humans believed that by asking me for freedom of their religion, they'd get the permission they needed. But of course, I couldn't do that. My giving them permission wouldn't overturn the rules of this world Air had set. If they wanted to protect their religion *that* much, they'd need to speak to Air directly.

But I've no idea how anyone can do that...

"I'd like to acknowledge their gods...but that's just not possible, is it?" I asked Renge thoughtfully.

"No, it isn't," he replied firmly. "Through looking into the history of other worlds, Air's learned that religion only sparks wars and conflicts. That's why Air decided to be the one and only god of this world. If humans keep making up gods to worship, it'd defeat the purpose of Air's decisions. De Marl and every other country would be much better off tossing all their faiths aside and worshipping Air instead."

He's really adamant about this, I thought. But then again, it was the only thing that could protect each nation—protect the world.

“To begin with,” Renge continued, perfectly calm, “the reason magic isn’t commonly used on the human continent is precisely *because* every country worshipped their own gods. The Kathra became too dense, which kept lowering Air’s density. It’s not getting any better. Even *with* the Sugula destroyed.”

“Oooh...” I hummed.

Which means monsters will only keep manifesting naturally, too. I thought I’d be back in Rofola in a decade. But what if this takes longer than that...? I didn’t like that thought one bit.

“If humans keep being so stubborn,” Renge stated a bit bitterly, “Air might decide to take away their capacity for magic. Now maybe that won’t bother humans at all. But a whole third of the world not being able to use magic on a continent where monsters appear easily is something neither us Mythicals nor the demi-humans are going to be happy about.”

“Yeah, that’s true...”

And I needed Air’s power to make medicine, too. So, I simply couldn’t afford to let its concentration drop anymore. Humanity would just have to convert to worshipping Air. Full stop.

Oh... But now that I think about it...

“Say, Renge,” I asked curiously. “You mentioned Air said that religions trigger wars. But I’ve heard it’s possible for people to feud over different interpretations of the same religion. If they fought over how to worship Air, would that be...less of a problem?”

I knew from my past life that humans saw war as a profit source and that included wars between different factions of the same faith. For example, technological progress being at odds with either tradition or the present day’s ideologies. In cases like that, people all followed the same faith and still fought... *What does Air think of that?*

“Well...” Renge thought for a moment. “...A war would just produce more Camilla. And to begin with, do enough people worship Air to even *cause* a

difference in interpretation? Even if it did, they'd still be presuming to know what Air is thinking. And that'd only make Air angry..."

I hesitated, then asked, "You...said you've personally met Air, right...?"

"I trained under Air, yes."

So...if humans presumed to know Air's intentions, they'd only incur Air's wrath... Air sounds like a difficult god to worship.

Given that, I realized why worshipping the Holy Woman—like the late Lady Akari and myself—might sound like a much easier option for humans. But I didn't *like* being worshipped!

Not that the people of Fort Deshmel really did, of course. Probably because they saw me every day. But it was just so...off-putting when worshippers came from the Mythical and demi-human continents to visit me as part of a pilgrimage.

Back in Rofola, I'd been happy to have more customers as a consequence. But really, just being worshipped period made me feel icky. Like...there was nothing *about* me worth worshipping. *I'm just me!*

Still...compared to people worshipping gods that don't exist and perpetuating Kathra, it was definitely a healthier alternative. And if the Holy Woman was an idol people were allowed to follow, that was acceptable in my eyes.

"I'll try to convince these De Marl worshippers about the truth of things," Renge said firmly, looking at how deep in thought I was. "If they won't reform, they're the world's enemies. If they're willing to put their lives on the line and doom the world all for their faith, we'll eventually have to treat them as heretics. I'd rather not burn another country to the ground, especially since De Marl *is* Marcus' homeland. If I can help it, I'd prefer not to have to do that."

"Yes..." I agreed. "But forcing people to change their beliefs is difficult."

"Yes, that's why I said we'll have to treat them as heretics if they don't." His jaw was set. "Air acknowledges no other gods to begin with. Air had the option of creating gods to help manage the people, but refused because multiple faiths would just cause oppositions and wars. Holy Woman worship is the sole exception, since they—*you*—aren't gods, but humans being lent Air's power."

“R-Right...”

At this rate, De Marl’s faith would be marked heretical and that wasn’t what the believers wanted. But if they *didn’t* cast their faith aside, the Mythicals would brand them as heretics whose worship doomed the world—as enemies to be eliminated. *And all the Gods of De Marl’s believers would die...!*

The laws of the world made it so they couldn’t worship any god *but* Air. The whole balance of the world depended on whether the human continent was willing to convert to worshipping Air.

But can’t they admit their gods are false but just...worship them some other way? Like...yeah! Like in my past life when people cheered on idols they loved. Couldn’t that work?

Maybe having them direct their faith towards something tangible would work. Something that’d offer a clear benefit, like praying to a harvest god to improve the crops!

No, that won’t work. Air doesn’t tolerate other gods. We can’t turn local gods into idols. Wait...local gods...maybe we can make them into mascots? That way, they won’t be worshipped. But everyone will still love them!

Surely mascots wouldn’t upset Air. And each mascot would help its country by drawing in tourists!

“Renge,” I finally said, smiling. “I have a great idea! Why don’t we make local mascots?”

“Mas...cots? Huh? Wh-What’re those?” Renge stared at me, completely baffled.

...Drat, I have to explain what mascots are...!



A few days later, the messengers from De Marl had left to consider my idea. Well...so I was told. I wasn’t there when Dad and Renge ironed things out with them. I was forbidden from speaking to anyone about religion, since there was no telling *what* might happen. They could get upset and try to hurt me. And if they did, they’d be immediately branded heretics.

And that's the last thing we want!

Still, I *was* curious about how Renge and Dad had explained it to them in a way that'd convince them. And honestly, it would've been funny to hear Dad explain what *mascots* are.

"Ughhh, today was just so extra exhausting..." said Dad—who was staying here for the night because of the talks—as he and Renge ambled into the second-floor dining hall, both of them clearly tired.

"Oh! Welcome back, Dad! Renge!" I greeted them. "But...you *did* convince the messengers, right?"

In response, Dad heaved a deep sigh as he slumped into a chair at one of the tables and sunk in. I joined him at the table and noticed Renge collapsing into his seat in the same way as Dad.

"Well..." Dad finally said, "I don't know much about these mascot things, but... the idea of a local tourism ambassador went over well with them. But I thought I was going to faint when Renge just smiled and asked them, 'Well, which do you prefer? This or being branded heretics and destroyed?'"

Whoa! I gaped at Renge briefly. *You didn't have to be that harsh!*

"They can't worship the Gods the way they used to," Dad went on, "but I agree that they need something to replace it. I used to worship those Gods myself, so I appreciate that you tried to find a way to keep them around, Tina."

"I hope it works out..." I responded. "I only hope Air feels the same way."

I looked again at Renge, who simply said moodily, "Air will probably allow that much..."

Oh dear, I thought as I looked at his sour face. *His expression is making me feel a bit anxious... Is everything really going to be all right?*

"I hope we *can* convert the gods of my and other countries into mascot characters, but...it all depends on negotiations," Dad said, sighing again.

"I'm sorry!" I said quickly. "I ended up creating more work for you, didn't I?"

"Mm? Oh, don't worry about that, Tina. Besides, it's not a bad deal for the worshippers who want to keep their gods around. Assuming Air agrees, of

course..." Dad glanced at Renge.

Something about Renge's vague responses probably feels off to Dad, too, I thought. It'd be nice if Air said as much himself. But he never appears directly in front of people, right? If only Renge could see and talk to Air, we could use him to translate for us as we explained.

Dad looked at Renge expectantly, as did I. But Renge simply met us with an unpleasant look of disappointment and despair.

Well, what's that face supposed to mean?!

"...You *do* understand, right?" Renge asked us gravely. "What it *means* for the people of the human continent to ask Air directly for permission?"

"Y-Yeah..." I said, swallowing. "I guess gods like Air don't just...descend to the surface?"

"No, since 'descend' wouldn't be the right word to begin with. Air is at the planet's core, so there's really no 'up' or 'down' for him. Air *could* appear here right now if he wanted to. But since he has no love for humans, he won't be so accommodating. Unless you *want* mankind wiped away in an act of forced evolution, you might be better off not doing anything so reckless. Air can be merciless...even to those most virtuous to him."

"H-Huh...?!" Dad and I were both shocked.

Air hates humans that much? Why?!

Renge cradled his head. "Just give up on this idea! Just mentioning human gods to Air is asking for trouble..." He looked so defeated, it was clear to me that even asking him to handle it and ask for permission was just as tricky.

"But...you really *did* talk to Air directly...didn't you?" I pleaded.

"Air was my combat instructor. I spent centuries in the world's core, learning combat and magic from him. We spoke plenty then, sure. But like I've told you before, Air's my father's uncle. And since I'm half human and Air's...far *beyond* human, you can't exactly say we're closely tied by blood."

I was shocked. "You're... You're saying you're *related* to Air...?"

"Yes..." he sighed. "I guess that's the easiest way of putting it."

Yes, he did tell me that before, but it's still impressive! Being directly related to Air. And, I reflected, Renge wasn't just strong because of that. He'd trained under Air directly! And it's because they are so close that Renge can tell just how much Air hates humans...

"Oh!" I said as a thought suddenly occurred to me. "By the way, any requests for dinner tonight?" I asked as I poured both of them some water. "If not, I was just gonna make Hamburg steak."

"Hamburg steak sounds great!" said Renge, his mood instantly brightening.

"I love Hamburg steak!" Dad chimed in.

Adorable! Apparently, men just love their Hamburg steaks no matter how old they get. I get it, though...!

It was still a *bit* too early to eat dinner. And since the merchants weren't here yet, it was just me, Dad, and Renge in the second-floor dining hall. After I'd come up with the idea of turning the storeroom into a shopping block, I had Jiril and Mirage start doing the actual work. Right now, they were down in the storeroom, cleaning it out. There was a lot of stuff left there and the room was huge. So fully cleaning it out would take those two a few days.

The two Mythicals also took charge of who'd get to set up shop in the storeroom, since a lot of people were interested. We'd called out to other merchants to establish distribution channels. Some of them were interested in setting up shop, too. With all that interest, we'd begun considering putting stalls outside the storeroom as well.

And of course, more merchants coming here meant they'd need places to live. Deshmel was already a residence for the ex-slaves and a knights' barracks, but we honestly had more empty rooms than we could use. Cleaning the whole fort right now was quite the problem. So finding the merchants a place to sleep wasn't a problem. No, the issue was that we'd need to establish a separate block for them, away from the workers.

After all, everyone living in Deshmel were all technically my guards and caretakers. We didn't really *mind* anyone leaving, assuming they had somewhere to go. But with Edesa Kura now destroyed, they were stateless refugees. Rebuilding Edesa Kura wouldn't be easy, and most people had just

given up on ever returning.

But if we could set up more fields around Fort Deshmel and houses and stores, I reflected as I, out of a desire to keep my hands busy and do more than just sit around and think, decided to start prepping the Hamburg steak, people would gather here and this would become a trade spot. And that way, we'd also get lots of customers back home at the Lodge!

Before the day I can finally go back to Rofola arrives, I thought smiling as I got out the meat and supplies, I hope we can make Fort Deshmel a new home for everyone here.

"What're you doing?" I heard Renge ask as I started chopping the meat.

"Oh, this?" I replied, my head still down. "I'm cutting minced meat up and mixing it with fried onions."

"And what's this stuff?"

"Those're breadcrumbs. You wet those with milk and a beaten egg then mix all that in with the meat and onions before stirring it some more. Like this..." I said as I put the pan over the fire to warm up, "and then you just...ball it into shape and fry it on a low fire."

"Why low fire?" Renge asked behind me as the pan heated up.

"Well, since the steak is so thick, you want the heat to reach *all* the way in. If you fry it on high heat, you'll just end up burning the surface and the heat won't go all the way through. But if you cook it carefully over low flame, then it will!"

"Oohhh," I heard him say as I finally brought my head up to turn around and look at him. But...



...Huh?!

Renge was still seated at the table with Dad! *Wh-Who's behind me then?!*

I turned around and saw a black-haired man who looked (and clearly *sounded*) a lot like Renge standing there. Well...he was *probably* a man, anyway. But his shoulder-length hair made him look quite androgynous. And he was tall. *Really* tall!

His right sidelock reached down to his waist. But his hair was cut short in the back. He was dressed simply in a white shirt and black pants.

He *looked* like a normal guy. But...something about him felt so...foreign and fearless. Hearing the meat sizzle and realizing it was done, I instinctively put out the fire and turned back to face him.

"Wh-Who are you?" I asked.

I'd never seen this guy before...and Dad and Renge didn't seem to notice he was here. He just looked at me with a soft smile. But then I noticed the pattern on his forehead. *It looks a lot like Renge's... Wait a minute...!*

"A-Are you—" I stammered in shock, *"Air?!"*

"Correct," he said, smiling at me gently. "I'm glad to see you're not *completely* incompetent. Good. Very good. Of course, you wouldn't be. Since you hold part of my power."

His smile was nice. But I still swallowed the lump in my throat. I was *scared*. Not in any rational way, either. I could just instinctively...*feel* that I was looking at something far greater than me. Someone I couldn't oppose.

"C-Can I help you...?" I stuttered, not knowing what else to say. "A-Are you here to ask me to give the Stella back...?"

Is he upset I didn't come to thank him for his power? Because I would've, if I'd known where he was! Should I have asked Renge, then? Would he have told me?

"Hmmm...no?" Air replied, clearly a little bemused by my question. "I don't have any business in particular. There are...*difficult* conditions one must meet to bear the Stella's power. If you were capable of containing it within your mortal

body, then it's yours to keep. Since it's the power of a god, someone with no divine blood holding it would be dangerous."

"Yes, Renge did mention that..." I remembered. "I can only contain the Stella because I'm a Spherit Folk."

And since I was the last remaining Spherit Folk in the world, *only* I could contain the Stella. That's why I stayed in Fort Deshmel. A monster-attracting barrier had been set here, so they'd be drawn to me, and my power would purify their Camilla. But this process was starting to wind down.

Of course, Camilla can accumulate from even the smallest things. But Renge had predicted that, if we solved the world's religion problem, the amount of Camilla produced would be cut in half and I'd be able to safely return to Rofola. That's why I'd taken over this role...with the expectation of being able to go home eventually.

"Ummm," I asked. "If you have no business with me, then, *erm...*"

Why did Air come here, then? Wait, could it be...?!

"Are you here to help us resolve our problem with human religion?!" I asked excitedly.

"No," he said simply. "That's not why."

"It— It's not?!"

"I don't like humans," Air said flatly. "If they want to drive themselves to ruin, I don't particularly care."

"Seriously...?"

"Humans aren't *my* creation in the first place. They sprang into existence on their own. But since they're already *here*, I'm not going to do anything about that. As a god, I'll provide *all* life with a place to live. So me summoning you from another world was...me offering salvation, to put it in your terms."

I gasped. That's *the reason I was reborn here...! Then my suspicions were right... Air was the one who brought me here!!!*

My head was spinning with a thousand thoughts. But all I could say softly was just "But...why? Why *me*?"

“Because your soul was similar to Akari’s. And yes, humanity’s whole situation here is mainly *this* world’s problem. But the border between here and your world was growing weaker. Because of that, your soul escaped your world’s cycle of transmigration.”

“The cycle of...transmigration?” I repeated.

“Yes... You probably didn’t realize it. But you spent thousands of years in human time drifting between worlds,” he said plainly. “Normally, that kind of exile’s reserved for those who committed a great many sins.”

“What...? I, uhh, I...”

Did... Was I that much of a sinner in my past life?!

I felt all the blood drain from my face and went cold down to my fingertips. *Looking back on it, maybe hating my father and dying ahead of my mother count as sins...*

“Oh no,” Air said, detecting my discomfort. “Your past life wasn’t *nearly* so sinful. Those exiled to the interstice normally have to have killed thousands or be hated by tens of thousands for hurting their country. It’s a heavy punishment given only to the most accursed and accused. But no, in *your* case, it was an accident.”

“An accident...?” I gaped.

“I picked up your soul,” he went on, “because I could tell it was pure. Not *completely* spotless, of course, since all humans commit at least *some* sin in their lives. But you clearly weren’t meant for damnation. A sinner’s soul couldn’t be as beautiful as yours.”

“S-So you...you *saved* me from there, Air...?” I ventured.

“Yes. I have no love for humans. But seeing a soul being treated unfairly does not sit well with me. Even if it *is* a human soul.”

He really hates humans, doesn’t he? But why? Still, I’m in no position to complain. Air’s personality being what it is saved my soul...literally.

“Thank you for saving me,” I said, bowing reflexively.

“No need for thanks,” Air said simply as I straightened back up. “You only

need to live your life properly. After all, you're not human anymore. But a demi-human."

"So, um," I began hesitantly, "did you...*intentionally* make me a Spherit Folk rather than a human again...?"

"Who's to say?" Air mused idly. "But you're still half human. It just so happened the Spherit Folk princess became pregnant at the same time I saved you. It really *was* just a coincidence..."

The Spherit Folk princess... So my mother really *was* the Spherit Folk king's daughter. A princess. *I heard about that before. But this definitively confirms it!*

"By the way," Air said suddenly, "aren't you going to finish cooking? I'd love to try some of your world's cooking."

"*Ahh!*" I cried, blushing with happiness. "You can tell it's from my world?!"

"To an extent. I'll admit part of the reason that I called you to this world was because I was hoping you could introduce some of *your* world's cuisine here. Doing this has become something of a trend among us Planetary Gods lately."

"I-It *has*...?"

Apparently, these gods have some network or community of sorts. I suddenly recalled seeing things like that in the manga and anime of my past life. *Maybe those were really all based on true stories...?*

I guess it's not that strange. I mean, I got reincarnated...

"But some gods can be pretty vicious..." Air went on.

"Vicious? How?"

"Well," he said simply, "you have gods of various forms and natures. But lately, us Planetary Gods have had a tendency to make blunders involving beings from other worlds and getting them killed."

"Huh...? Ummm, not that I know all the details," I said quickly, "but isn't that incredibly irresponsible?"

Air nodded. "It very much is. To a God like me, who takes pride in properly managing his planet, it's outrageous."

I guess there's all sorts of gods out there... I thought, then suddenly realized I now had four waiting on dinner instead of three, so I soaked breadcrumbs in a mixture of milk and eggs and then put the finished steak clumps in the mix. Mixing them will prevent all the ingredients from falling apart during cooking, and it will also keep the meat from hardening. But it'd come out bland as is, so I added salt and pepper for flavor.

"Oh, erm, Air," I asked, feeling a bit silly as I did so. "Can you drink alcohol?"

"I have an immunity to toxins, so I should be fine, yes," he said nonchalantly. "Are you going to use alcohol?"

"Yes. After I apply oil to the frying pan, I'll pour in red wine to give it more of a fragrance."

"You mentioned frying it on a weak fire?"

"Yes! You fry it slowly over a weak fire. Some of the meat's juices *will* leak out, yes. But if you fry it over a strong flame, it'll make the patties crack and fall out of shape. Frying them on a small fire should avoid that."

"*Hmmm,*" Air said, intrigued.

But before I fried the meat, I had to shape it. I did so now, molding it into palm-sized patties. Once I had them in the right shape, I beat each one a few times to get as much air out of it as possible. Having too *much* air in the patties could also make them crack during the frying process. But since the recipe required them to have at least some air, I was basically punching the meat down without making it completely flat.

I made two large patties for Dad and Renge. I started by frying them over a small fire. I made sure to use lots of oil, since the meat sucks it in. I waited until the patties changed color until halfway through, then flipped them. I waited until the other side also changed color and then turned the fire up until the meat became fully, properly grilled. Once it was, there was no need to cook it over a small fire for much longer. Then I plated the meat.

I moved the meat juice mixed with the oil into a smaller cold pot and added ground dekon (daikon radish) and soy sauce I'd made from dajeez beans and ground carrots to create Japanese-style sauce.

Lastly, I added some sage leaves atop the soup for garnish and it was all done. I'd have liked to have served them fried potatoes too. But I figured Renge and Dad would be drinking later, so I didn't want them to be too full. I also poured out some onion soup I made for lunch into bowls and quickly made a basket of baguettes, as well.

"Finished!" I said in triumph and turned to Air. "Ummm, I have to go deliver this to my dad and Renge. Would you mind waiting a minute?"

"Oh, that's all right. After all, I've made it so only you can see and hear me."

"O-Oh, right..."

I wondered why neither of them had come over while I was talking to Air. *But there it is...I guess being a god does let you get away with doing whatever you want.*

"Ummm, should I keep the fact you're here a secret?" I asked Air.

"Oh no, it doesn't really matter," he said. "But I would like Renge to start working on his deification. Could you let him know I expect him to start training?"

"Y-Yes, of course..."

Deification? What's that? Is Renge going to have to train to get stronger?

I placed the plates with the steaks and eating utensils on a tray with the soup bowls, which I carried to the table. I then brought the breadbasket and dinner was served!

"Sorry I kept you waiting, good sirs," I said. "Here are your Hamburg steaks. I could make some fresh bread if you'd like, though that *will* take me awhile to make. What do you say?"

Yes, they were my family, but in the dining hall, I treated them like customers (out of habit, I suppose). Dad replied to my polite customer service speak with an enthusiastic "Fresh bread sounds great!"

I already had the dough prepared, so all I'd have to do was set it in the oven. "Then wait forty minutes, please," I smiled. "I'll bring you your drinks once you're done eating!"

“Ooh, looking forward to that already!” Dad grinned.

“Don’t drink too much, though,” Renge chided him. “You become *reckless* when you’re drunk.”

“Ughhh...” Dad rolled his eyes mockingly.

He’s referring to the way Dad proposed to Lico, I thought as I watched them start eating. Did they even make any progress on that? I guess they’re both pretty busy...

Lico had told me in a letter that she was close to quitting her job as a knight and State Alchemist. But she had her hands full preparing her successor. She was a De Marl noble, after all. And since she was both divorced *and* not getting any younger, she was getting political marriage offers all the time.

Since she was such a talented alchemical apothecary and a knight, De Marl was hesitant to let a noble like her go. But Lico was determined to retire. *Still, the question remains: what’s she going to do after that? Will she marry Dad? And if so, will she move to the Rofola Lodge or here to Deshmel?*

I had every intention of going back home. But I had to admit that Deshmel’s location as the world’s navel made it very alluring as far as trade centers went. I could get so many ingredients easily that were hard to find back in Rofola.

I haven’t thought about it really, since me going home isn’t on the table just yet, I considered as I turned around to go back to the kitchen. But as the number of monsters goes down, and if the shopping block takes off, Fort Deshmel could become an even bigger trade spot. In which case...we could build a second Rofola Lodge right here...

“Oh, right, Tina,” Dad said suddenly. “I have something important to talk to you about. Can we talk later, after dinner?”

“Hm?” I snapped to attention. “Oh yes, all right.”

Is he going to talk to me about Lico?! Oh, wait...!

“Um, actually, Renge...there’s something I need to tell you,” I said, suddenly remembering Air’s message.

“Huh...? Right now?” Renge asked, a little annoyed at being interrupted while

eating.

“Air came here. He said he wants you to start training for, um...deification?” I relayed.

“What?!” Renge instantly went pale, jumped to his feet, and looked around. “Air’s here?” he cried. “He came *here*? Where *is* he?! Why do you hide yourself from me, Air?!”

It seemed even Renge, with all his powers, couldn’t sense a god actively masking themselves. *At least, it seems that way.* I pointed at the kitchen just as Air walked out of it and into the dining hall.

But just then, I saw Air pass through what looked like a thin, transparent membrane. Then Renge suddenly gave a startled “Ugh!”

D-Did you really just “Ugh” at him...?!

Air smirked. “I haven’t seen you in so long and that’s how you greet me, Renge? Can’t you greet your foster father with more of a smile?”

“N-No, I, it’s just...” Renge sputtered. “Isn’t this all just a bit sudden?! You were totally indifferent when the Sugula appeared. So why are you here *now*?!”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Air said, smiling more fully now. “The Sugula is just part of the system I created. Even if the planet’s surface were to be destroyed, it would only increase its lifespan. I *am* the world, and the lives inhabiting my planet’s surface either eat away at me or are meant to be my nourishment. That’s all *they’re* ever worth.”

A cold shudder ran down my spine. *Did...did Air just say he didn’t mind if the Sugula ate not just the humans, but the demi-humans and Mythicals, too?* Despite his graceful smile, he truly looked totally neutral as he spoke. *Renge said Air hates humans, but...maybe he doesn’t care for any lower form of life? There’s a world of difference between that and just hating mankind!*

“This time,” Air continued casually, “there just happened to be a potential Holy Woman who could inherit the Stella in Akari’s stead. But this will surely recur in a millennium or two. Even with long-lived individuals like you around, Renge, humans keep repeating their mistakes once every century or so. Unless their civilization is culled every so often, their sciences develop too far, and they

destroy their environment. And for all the *trouble* they cause, they hardly offer any sustenance... *Aah*, what a bothersome race they are,” he said chidingly.

“Air...!” Renge growled.

I quickly glanced at Dad, who was watching this whole exchange with a tense expression. *All the problems we face are totally inconsequential to him, I thought. Air thinks in terms of millennia—of the whole depth of history all at once. We can’t even begin to imagine what things will be like after we die. But Lady Akari left behind the Stella out of concern for the future.*

If the monsters finally diminished in number—if there’d be less Camilla and this whole issue of humanity’s religions could be resolved—I’d be able to go home to Rofola. But while I’d always had that plan in mind, I’d never considered what would become of the Stella after that.

I’d likely just pass down the Stella to someone else, so there’d still be a means of fighting off the Sugula should it appear again... Just like Lady Akari did before me. But I had no idea how I’d do that.

Lady Akari stored the Stella’s power inside a Stone of Daybreak the Spherit Folk gave her and entrusted it to the Great Curalius. So maybe, once I die...I’ll just leave the Spherit Stone in my forehead to Renge?

...I don’t want to do that. Renge has always been left behind by those he cherishes. He said so...

Am I...being selfish and forcing my feelings onto Renge?

In all the excitement of our becoming betrothed, I’d never considered Renge’s future...or what might happen later down the line. *After I die, won’t Renge be left all alone?*

I also had a duty to consider what I’d do with the Stella after I was gone. Just like Lady Akari did. And while there was no rush for me to do so—given the Spherit Folk were a long-lived race—I’d certainly do well to keep that duty in mind.

“Well, we can discuss your training later, Renge,” said Air with finality. “Forget about that for now and hurry up and eat. Your food’s getting cold.”

"Hmm..." Renge scowled as he sat down.

"Well, Holy Woman Tinaris?" Air asked, turning to me expectantly. "What about *my* steak?"

"O-Oh! Uh, y-yes... I'll get it! What kind of bread would you like?"

"I agree with your father. Freshly baked would be nice."

"All right. Then take a seat and I'll have it ready soon." A bit shocked, I ushered him to the table and returned to the kitchen.

I guess...Air eats, too...?

I started kneading the dough I'd prepared into round shapes and put it into the preheated oven. While it baked, I fried some more big Hamburg steaks and placed them on the plate along with the sauce.

"I never imagined a g—uhh, that Air—would eat just like humans do..." I could hear Dad say gingerly as I cooked, voicing the thought I'd had.

"I don't need to eat. It's more of an...indulgence for me," Air answered with a smile.

My Hamburg steaks are a luxury, huh...? I thought drolly as I walked back out and placed the plate in front of him.

"I hope it's to your taste," I said, reflexively bowing—an old innkeeper's daughter habit.

"I don't think you have to worry about that," Air said with a grin. "Food from other worlds is typically delicious. And honestly, that's half the reason I summoned you here. So go ahead and try to recreate whatever other dishes come to your mind."

"You what...?" Renge asked, shocked.

He did say he saved me because my soul was in need. But he had an ulterior motive, it seems. Well, he wasn't wrong, I suppose. I *was* putting all I had into recreating dishes from my past life. Because once you experience and get used to something, letting go of it isn't easy; that's especially true of cuisine! Given I'd been able to recreate soy sauce and miso, I'd say my efforts were paying off.

"*Hmm...it's good,*" Air said as he tasted his Hamburg steak.

"I-I'm glad to hear you like it," I replied.

"I try," Air reflected almost as if we weren't there, "not to waste energy letting civilization develop too much. But I would like to see the field of cooking advance."

"I... I see..." I murmured.

I guess gods do have to think of everything...

I was headed back to the kitchen to check on the bread when suddenly, I saw what looked like three merchants by the dining hall entrance.

I approached them and said, "Umm, excuse me? Can I help you?"

Unfortunately, I noticed these men were clutching large necklaces shaped like the symbol of the De Marl faith. *Oh no! Worshippers...*

My stomach sank, but they'd noticed me, so it was too late now. They began talking earnestly.

"Ahh, so you're Tinaris, the Holy Woman! We *finally* get to meet you!"

"Please, Holy Woman, won't you publicly acknowledge our faith in the Gods of De Marl?! There are vile rumors that our faith is heretical! People are acting like our Gods are evil!"

"Please help us, Holy Woman!"

Oh, jeez, here we go...

I turned around timidly to see what everybody else was making of this. As I expected, I saw Renge eating stoically, his eyes fixed on Air. I was glad Air didn't seem that interested in them, because these people just *had* to find me right now.

"*You three...*" Dad said in annoyance as he put down his fork, stood up, and moved around to the front of the table. "I *told* you you're forbidden from seeing the Holy Woman. Get out!"

"But why?!" one of them protested. "*You're* the Azure Demon Wolf of De Marl! Why are *you* denying our gods too?! If she doesn't acknowledge our faith,

the gods will be seen as evil!”

“I believe I’ve explained myself enough times already,” Dad snapped. “Why won’t you *listen*? The creator deity, Air, does not acknowledge other gods! How many times do I have to tell you? There’s no room for debate here! Tina *isn’t* the one you should be negotiating with.”

Dad was unusually impatient for the simple reason that Air was right behind him. *If they make the same demands of Air, who knows what might happen? The most important thing right now is to get them to peacefully head back to De Marl.*

“Well, actually...we have a good solution to your problem! Right, Dad?” I asked, looking at him pleadingly.

“Oh— Yes, right! Assuming Air will allow it...”

Dad and I glanced over at Air, curious to see his reaction. Renge was also eyeing Air, who was enjoying his Hamburg steak and seemingly not listening to any of this. *Which I kinda doubt, given who he is...*

“...Are you implying that that person over there is Air himself?” asked one of the men.

“What?!” the other two exclaimed in disbelief.

“Is this true? Are you *really* the creator deity, Air?”

“Then...please, your holiness! *Please* acknowledge the Gods of De Marl! Tell us that they exist!!!”

They actually asked him?!

They were more composed in front of Air than around me. It was almost weirdly impressive.

“Is the bread ready, Tina?” Air asked me as if none of this was happening.

“N-Not yet. It’ll be thirty more minutes,” I replied.

“I see... Could I have another Hamburg steak, then?”

“O-Of course!”

I think Dad and I were more confused by Air’s indifference than these De Marl

believers were. Still, I felt compelled to comply with his request.

As I hurried to the kitchen, I peered back, only to see Air get up and turn around. He probably didn't want me to hear whatever he was about to tell them. Concerned, I glanced quickly over at the tables as I prepared the meat. The believers looked up at Air with clear terror and fear in their eyes.

Will they be all right? Renge's really glaring at Air...

As I began frying the steak, having to break my concentration to do so, Dad walked in with his and Renge's plates.

"Dad, are the believers all right?" I asked.

"Yes, well... Renge said Air intimidated them using his Divinity...or something like that."

"Divinity..."

"As Renge puts it, gods are basically the highest form of life. So they can make other living things yield to their Divinity. Renge said even *he's* powerless in the face of that. I think those men felt that for themselves."

I got chills. *It must've been like a stronger version of that imposing feeling I had earlier.* I looked over at them again. The believers were now prostrating themselves in front of Air and trembling. Yet, I could still hear them shouting and begging for Air to acknowledge the Gods of De Marl. *Their obstinance is getting ridiculous!*

"Renge *did* try proposing that mascot idea of yours to Air," Dad said.

"Whoa, he brought that up in front of Air...? Did...did he accept the idea?"

"Well...he said it sounded...interesting. So humans can try it. He can't accept them worshipping these gods. But it sounds like if they just want to cherish them, then he doesn't mind."

"O-Oh. That's...good...?" I said, unsure.

Does this count as Air giving us permission to try it? That's great...!

But the problem was still these De Marl worshippers who were refusing to change. *If they keep provoking Air, he could end up blowing them to bits! That*

must be why Dad's here with the plates, hoping that a Hamburg steak might distract Air.

Right! I'll get right to it, but... Oh man, it'll take a while to fry them on a small fire...

"Y'know, I've gotten used to surprises," Dad reflected as I cooked. "But frankly, I never imagined I'd get to meet Air face to face...or eat dinner with him!"

"Ahaha, I get it! I can't believe it, either..." I said.

It still didn't feel real. Air—this world's one, true creator God—was intimidating these De Marl believers in the flesh with just a smile. *Still, with Renge beside him, surely the worst won't happen. And if Air accepted the mascot idea, then...*

"Oh, right! Dad, could you carry this over to Air and Renge?" I asked, pointing to a plate on the counter. "It'll take a while until the steak's ready."

"Huh...? What's this black, jiggly stuff?" he asked.

"Haha! *That*, Dad, is chocolate pudding!"

"*Chocolate* pudding...? I know pudding. But chocolate always looks a little... you know..." he trailed off.

"What's *wrong* with how chocolate looks?"

Dad—and most people in this world—had a hard time eating chocolate because of its appearance. OK, fine, so it *does* kinda look like mud at first sight. And sure, I couldn't exactly expect people to just take my word for it that it doesn't taste a thing like that!

Still, it took me *three* years of constant refinement to make it look so close to chocolate! I had to get ingredients from the Mythical continent, work on shortening the time required to make it with alchemy, and go through loads of trial and error before I could make it like the chocolate I knew from my past life.

It got to the point where Nakona asked me, "Why do you go out of your way to eat this stuff?" When I had her try some, she just said, "It's tasty, but...it's a little too sweet. Plus, it just looks..."

In the end, the only ones who'd actually eat my chocolate were me and Renge! *Fine...* I thought to myself. *I just have to come up with chocolate that's a little less sweet.*

If looks were the problem, I could try making matcha chocolate, strawberry chocolate, or white chocolate. I'm always the type to keep trying if something doesn't turn out perfect.

Yeah, it just means there's room for improvement!

This chocolate pudding I was about to serve Dad, Air, and Renge was the product of my attempts to make chocolate that looked more appealing and was only moderately sweet. I'd decided to put some whipped cream and nuts on top.

"Looks nice, doesn't it?" I beamed.

"Ummmm..." Dad hummed in displeasure.

"Aww, what?!" My face fell. "Doesn't it look good?!"

"I-It's not that!" Dad protested, waving his hands. "I'm just thinking...are you *really* going to feed *this* to Air?"

"It's basically a sweet, tasty fondant chocolate cake you can eat even served cold! I *know* it tastes good! Come on, Dad...!"

"No, I...I-look, I mean, I'll eat anything you make, Tina. Even if Air doesn't want to eat it, I'll eat it for you!" he vowed like he was taking one for the team.

"Grrrrrrrrrrr!" I growled as I checked on the steak again.

He's acting sweet, but he's just assuming Air won't eat it! What's his problem?! Is brownish-black food that unusual here?! Maybe I should just make more!

Maybe squid ink pasta? No... Deshmel's so far inland that it'll be difficult to get. Maybe black sesame? I could make some sesame dumplings? Coming up with desserts is hard... Maybe I should get started with working on chocolate sauce?

As I thought all this over, I instructed Dad to deliver the pudding while I cooked the steak. If Air was related to Renge, something sweet would surely

please him.

Renge once told me that all Cerberi had sweet teeth, regardless of whether they were Mythical Beasts, demon hounds, or divine beasts. This was apparently a racial trait of theirs and their one weakness.

As I resumed frying the Hamburg steak, I glanced back at the tables, where I saw Renge looking back with shining, expectant eyes. *He probably smells the pudding*, I thought, smiling.

Air's attention turned back to him and the plate being carried to the table, which made him finally stop intimidating the believers. But while the smell drew his attention, his expression was a bit dour.

Oh no, the way it looks is the problem...! Maybe I should've put whipped cream and berries on top...

I flipped the Hamburg steak and was taking my time frying the other side when I heard shouting from the other room. As they were finally freed from Air's intimidation, the De Marl believers raised their voices in fright.

"W-We won't give up!" one said. "We'll even make *you* admit the Gods of De Marl are real, O Creator Deity Air!"

"Th-That's right!" said another. "We'll gather more followers! We'll make the entire *human continent* believe in our gods! Then even *you'll* have to acknowledge them!"

"Let's go!" cried the third. "We must resume our missionary work!"

"Huh?! Hey, weren't you idiots listening?! You'll just make everything wo—" Dad tried to stop them. But they didn't listen and hurried out of the dining hall.

I was stunned. We'd repeatedly tried to tell them as kindly as possible that worshipping anyone but Air and the Holy Woman created Kathra. They'd now literally just *met* Air, feeling the might of a true god on their own flesh.

So how in the world did they conclude that they need more believers? It makes no sense! What are they thinking?!

"Oh!" I smelled something delicious. "It's almost ready."

I put the prepared Hamburg steak on a plate and added some sauce. I

checked the oven and saw the bread was ready too. I took it out and put it in its basket and then brought everything to the table.

“O-Oh, you brought us more,” said Renge. “Thank you.”

“No, thank *you* for waiting! I recommend dipping the bread in sauce... By the way, how was the chocolate pudding?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh, uh...”

Renge presented me his empty plate and said it was sweet and delicious. I smiled then looked at Air and his plate. The pudding was still untouched.

Urghhhh...

“He said it looked like a mud pie and he couldn’t bring himself to eat it...” Renge shifted his eyes away from me. “Sorry.”

“But—but it’s really sweet and tasty!” I protested, looking straight at Air, who didn’t say a word.

Him just turning my pudding down and talking about it like that is so frustrating! I made it as perfect and as tasty as I could with this world’s ingredients!!!

“That *aside*,” Dad said pointedly, “how can we get those De Marl believers to understand? They even said those things *right* to Air’s face... And just when we found a possible solution with the mascots, too.”

Dad sank back into his chair, looking truly disappointed. Even as an ex-worshipper of the Gods of De Marl, he’d been unable to get through to these believers.

“That’s what all faith is,” Renge said dispassionately. “Those gods were made by humans to make others’ lives easier, so they’ll naturally gravitate toward whatever does. Everything bad that happens to them is either the ‘inexplicable will of the gods’ or the fault of nonbelievers. They believe what suits them and discard everything else.”

“That’s awful...” I said.

“Humans are fundamentally weak,” said Air with an air of finality, “which is why they cling to faith and need to worship something. Sometimes it *does*

enrich their hearts. But I've *forbidden* it in my world. Faith in anyone but me and the Holy Woman is evil. Such are the rules as I set them."

In other words, I reflected, faith in and of itself is a necessary part of human existence and, on its own, doesn't produce Kathra. But people are divinely limited in who they're allowed to worship.

"By the way, Air," Renge asked his divine uncle scathingly as he put aside his finished dessert and started eating his extra bread and Hamburg steak, "aren't you going to eat your pudding? Tina made it especially for you."

"Erghhh..." Air groaned, finally whispering—though I could still hear him—that it smelled nice and sweet, but the way it looked was a little much for him.

Does it really look that unappetizing?! I thought, crestfallen.

"If you don't want it, I'll eat it," Renge said dryly.

"I-I never said I *don't* want it. I just can't work up the courage to eat it..." Air said, sounding a bit irate.

"Here, Renge, if you want more, you can have mine..." Dad offered, pushing his plate toward him.

"Daaaad?!" I exclaimed, betrayed.

I guess I really have to work on making the pudding look more appetizing...



THE next day, Air said he needed to "borrow Renge" and the two of them disappeared somewhere. He said they'd be training. But I had to wonder if Renge really *needed* to. *He's already so strong!!!*

Renge himself had argued the same thing, claiming that "There's no *point* to me becoming any stronger." But Air wouldn't change his mind, so Renge was forced to follow him. You couldn't refuse the actual god who made the world.

I felt a bit lonely without Renge around. But I decided to focus on setting up the new commercial block after I talked with Dad about it. We had breakfast together, left cleaning the dishes to Mirage, and got to talking at our table in the dining hall.

“So...I didn’t have the chance to get into it yesterday, but I wanted to ask you something,” Dad began.

“Yes?”

“Well...there’s way less monsters around now,” he went on. “And there’s been talk going around lately about developing the wider area around Fort Deshmel.”

“Developing the region? What does that mean?” I looked at him, puzzled.

Dad took out a map, almost as if he’d prepared for me to ask. “You mentioned converting the fort’s storehouse area into a commercial block, right? So I thought we could do something like that. But on a larger scale.”

“Like building a shipping district?” I asked.

“No, even bigger than that! It’d be like how De Marl is laid out. Remember what it was like during our last visit? There are three walls, with houses and fields inside them. So we could do something like that. Expand the fort’s walls and build houses and small fields inside each one. It’ll make this place a distribution point that’ll be like a small, independent country. We’d need other countries to acknowledge us, of course. And establishing laws and nobility will be real difficult. So it won’t be easy.”

“Y-Yeah...”

I was taken aback by how big the scope of this idea was. Essentially, what Dad was saying was that, since Fort Deshmel was already at the world’s navel, we could develop it into a larger, safer center for trade and commerce. And it wasn’t just his idea, he explained. Others in De Marl, Fei Lu, and the other continents had similar ideas and had reached out to him about setting something like this up.

“To sum up the proposals others have sent us,” he went on, “we could build new walls and set up diplomatic residences for different countries around the fort. On the outer side, we’d set up homes for the diplomats’ knights and workers...in other words, residential districts. And on the outskirts of *that* region, merchants could set up stores. It’d basically form a noble town. Then we’d build a wall outside of that town, outside of which we’d build the

merchants' homes. And on the outskirts of *that*, we'd set up a town for the commoners where we could also plant fields for them to work. Of course, we'd build walls around that town too, to keep monsters away."

"Th-That really *does* sound like an entire country... But we can't *possibly* have the budget for that, right?" I asked, doubtful.

"The other countries said they'll help fund it," Dad continued. "Those nations that sent all those young knights, hoping they could seduce you to their side, are finally starting to make business contacts with us. All the other countries went along with it, refusing to let any one country get a bigger slice."

Come to think of it, I thought, *diplomatically speaking*, *there really isn't a place like this anywhere else in the world*. When there were talks to be had with the demi-human or Mythical continents, they had to set a host country where the talks would be held. But up until now, nobody had ever thought of a place where diplomats from other countries could live permanently.

But now they all had a reason to do so—*me*.

From the demi-humans' perspective, they'd worshipped the Holy Woman for centuries. Despite my refusing to leave the human continent, they still wanted to see me more easily. Moreover, humans kept making absurd demands that I acknowledge their faiths despite the Kathra it'd produce. And the demi-humans felt driven to protect me from that!

Well...that was the reasoning the demi-humans had given me anyway.

This is all such a burden...!

"And this has a lot of benefits for you, Tina," Dad said, smiling. "You'll be able to get rare ingredients more easily."

"That *does* sound appealing..." I nodded.

"And if we build up and maintain the roads, people will need an inn to stay in..."

"An inn..."

"Yeah. What do you say?"

"Ahh...!!!"

Deshmel was only going to keep growing. And if it did, it could become a revolutionary spot for trade and distribution. But I'd always wanted to go back to Rofola one day; that thought was what had kept me going so far.

"We could make a branch of the Rofola Lodge here...a Deshmel Lodge, if you like," he suggested. "And you could run it *and* set up an apothecary for your alchemical medicine here. So, what do you think?"

Dad knows I want to go back home, so he's trying to prepare a place I can call home here, too...

"A Deshmel Lodge...with *me* running it...!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. The Rofola Lodge's getting plenty of traffic from the demi-humans because it's your old home. And with you sending us potions, we're making a decent profit there."

So that's why he's considering branching out... I've always loved Rofola's clear air and water and its mountains. But thinking in business terms, filling a hole in the market in a place that needs an inn is an opportunity we can't pass up. But given the environment here's different from back home, we'll have to go about it differently.

"You still want to go back to Rofola, hmm?" Dad asked me.

"Ah! Well, yes. I love living in nature there... But setting up a new inn here *does* sound very appealing," I admitted.

"Yeah? Well, if that's how you feel..." Dad trailed off and crossed his arms like he had a hard time coming up with the right words to finish his sentence.

I waited and, eventually, he spoke up.

"See...during the war, I was dispatched to the demi-human continent. The demi-humans there had a bad opinion of humans. But when I talked to them, I could see it was mostly due to Edesa Kura. Once that misunderstanding was resolved, they acted friendlier."

"Yeah, they did..." I nodded.

Shida and Ledo were a good example, as they didn't hate humans on principle. *Though I'm not so sure about Cielo...*

“So I got to thinking that, once the war had ended, we could keep showing them humans weren’t dangerous. I thought I’d travel back to the demi-human continent and keep changing their misconceptions. But...well, you already know how I ended up getting discharged, right?”

Dad reflexively rubbed his right arm. It was intact now, but he’d lost it in the war. For many years, he’d had to use a prosthetic arm: a stiff wooden one, not a flexible one of plastic or metal like those people had used in my past life.

So him losing his arm, the situation with Grandpa, Grandma, and the inn and adopting me meant he’d had to give up on his dream... I never knew...

“And I ended up giving up on Lico before I knew it, too,” Dad went on ruefully. “I kept making excuses. ‘We’re already married to other people!’ ‘She’s a noblewoman!’ I was so *dense*, I couldn’t even acknowledge my own feelings.”

I couldn’t deny that last part. And yes, Lico being a noblewoman was true, too. I still didn’t really know much about De Marl society, but apparently, class differences were a big deal there.

“I just kept...giving up on things without even realizing I was doing it. But then you became the Holy Woman, Tina! And not only did you heal my arm, but you gave me another chance to travel the demi-human continent. And your healing the scars on Lico’s face made me remember how I really felt about her... That made me see just how many things I’d given up on way too easily.”

“Dad...” I felt like I was going to cry.

He spoke with a self-derisive smile. But I had to wonder if that’s what he was really thinking; the older people become, the more they give up on things. Dad was a knight who’d climbed the ranks to command and had become quite celebrated in De Marl. But even *he* couldn’t do everything he’d wanted to. But hearing I’d given him a chance to regain what he’d given up on made me both happy and proud of myself.

“So...” Dad concluded, “I don’t want you to give up on your dreams, Tina. I want to repay you for everything you’ve given me.”

“N-No, I didn’t do any of it because I wanted you to repay me...” I said, choking up.

“You said your dream was to become a world-renowned alchemical apothecary, right?”

“Huh...?”

My dream... That's right...

My dream was to become a famous alchemical apothecary known the world over, like Grandma. I wanted people to know me not as the Holy Woman. But as an apothecary. And I wanted to see the Rofola Lodge flourish. Because it was my home, passed down from my grandparents to my dad.

“Won't setting up a store here in Deshmel help you make that dream come true?” Dad asked. “You can run an inn here. And, if we develop Deshmel, we can have all kinds of merchants set up stores here. And René could find work here when he's ready!”

“Ah...”

René was, last I'd heard, set to leave for the dwarven kingdom of Segyadis to pursue his dream of becoming a jewel craftsman, with Ledo arranging for him to find a place to train and apprentice at. But Dad was already thinking about after that was complete and he needed employment. If René found work here or set up his own shop in Deshmel's new noble town, he'd deal with important people from all over the world.

A jewel craftsman wouldn't find much work operating out of the Rofola Lodge. But if this place at the heart of the world could develop into a country, he'd be able to take orders both locally and from far-off places.

“That sounds like a lovely idea,” I said finally.

“Right? But René not having anyone close to him around would make his life harder. Having you nearby would really put him at ease,” Dad told me.

“Yeah...you're right.”

Thinking about René's future motivated me. Even though I had to admit his chosen profession had little to do with either my apothecary work or running the inn, I had to be there for him. *I'm his big sister!*

“I also wanted to ask you about your coming-of-age ceremony,” Dad said.

“What dress do you want for the ceremony? We should be putting in an order...”

“My...coming of age...”

That’s right. In Wisty Air, people come of age at eighteen. My coming-of-age ceremony was coming up next year. And in Dad’s native country of De Marl, as well as Rofola’s closest neighbor, Fei Lu, it’s tradition for one’s family to give their children a ceremonial outfit for their coming-of-age ceremony. A dress for a girl. A tuxedo for a boy. Once one comes of age, they can also get married, and tradition dictates those outfits are what the couple wears.

Normally, these dresses or tuxedos were handed down in families, with some adjustments to fit one’s size, and weren’t subject to changes in fashion. Nakona had her mother in De Marl, but I’d found out (since the wedding had happened while I’d been held hostage in Edesa Kura) that she’d refused to accept her dress, meaning Dad had had to buy her a new one for her to marry Shida in.

In my case, I’d only ever had Dad, who was supposed to provide my dress to begin with.

“I... I forgot all about it!” I cried.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought...” Dad grinned. “How about we head back home and celebrate your coming of age there? And do it while I’m still around, will ya? And remember, we need to pick the dress out from the catalog first.”

“A-All right...”

Nobles and other wealthy people usually had their dresses tailor-made. But since we were commoners, I needed to pick from a catalog. Once it was delivered, we’d adjust the dress to fit my size. Dad had given me the catalog a while back, but I’d been too busy saving the world to look.

If the women in the fort find out about this, they’ll trip over themselves to say something like “Let me design your dress, Holy Woman!” and everyone will want to get in on the act and it’ll be the first fashion show all over again... I shuddered thinking about the chaos that would bring.

“It’ll take a while to make the dress, so please decide soon, will ya?” Dad pressed.

“Yes, I know! Because we need to get fabric.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Because of the increase in monsters and lack of sunlight, there are fewer mooas.”

“Right...”

The Sugula had a lot of unforeseen consequences, one of which was that the lack of sunlight affected creatures like this world’s version of sheep, mooas. My herb garden had been impacted by it, too. While I’d kept some seeds stored, I’d only recently been able to plant and raise them again.

“That makes new fabrics expensive,” Dad emphasized. “The prices should go back to normal once the mooas’ population springs back. But for now, there’s no avoiding inflated prices. So for more reasons than one, hurry up and make your choice, please.”

“U-Understood! I’ll pick right now!”

I ran up to my room, found the catalog, went back down to our table in the empty dining hall and flipped through it, looking for a design I liked. Given my personal image, and since this would also be my wedding dress, I felt white was probably the right direction. Except that in Wisty Air, white was a color people wore to *funerals*.

The catalog had some pure white dresses, with some of them even having gorgeous patterns and furs. But it all felt a bit...much.

“Yeah, I hope you can make up your mind quick,” said Dad as he watched me flip through the catalog. “But think it over *carefully*. This dress should last you a lifetime. If you end up having a daughter someday, you can pass it down to her.”

“R-Right...” I swallowed. “My own...”

Daughter... That word made my heart fill up with warmth as Renge’s face came to mind.

Dad pinched the bridge of his nose and whispered, “I guess I can’t *complain* if it’s Renge...”

Wh-What does that mean?!

“Well, anyway,” he went on to change the topic, “you wanted to know about Deshmel’s development.”

“R-Right...” I said.

“Renovating the storerooms and setting up a commercial area there is a good idea. But, well...considering we’ll have important people coming in from other countries, we might want to get you several dresses, given you’ll be presenting yourself as the Holy Woman.”

“But...but we can’t *afford* that many dresses, can we?”

“Well, between the dishes you created and Moné selling her medicine and yours, the Rofola Lodge is actually very well off,” Dad said. “I’ve got money put aside for René and Moné too, so we don’t need to worry about money. Besides, figuring out how to get your daughter a dress is a parent’s test.”

“A parent’s test...”

Someday, when I have kids of my own, this’ll be something I’ll have to do for my children, too. I guess starting to think about things like this is part of growing up.

When you think about it...I made it to twenty in my past life. But maybe I was still mentally a child back then... Wait! No, no, no! It’s way too soon to think about children right now!!!

“Then how about...” I said, “a shoulder-length bertha, an A-line skirt, a hip-length veil, and a casket bouquet. We’ll use Almeria for the color and make the fabric chiffon. I can do without a pattern on it. But embroidery, ruffles, or lace could work...”

“I-Isn’t that a bit too revealing?!” Dad stammered, visibly blushing.

“Y-You think...?”

The bertha would be thin, making my skin color visible through the fabric. But that’s just for my collar! It won’t actually show any skin. And if that’s revealing, what the heck do you call Nakona’s usual outfit?!

“I mean, it— It’s *your* dress, so you can decide what it looks like...” Dad relented.

“Can we...go with this, then...?”

Now I feel down, for some reason...

After that, it was getting late, so Dad retired to his room. But instead of going to sleep myself, I flipped through the catalog a little longer. I wasn't terribly invested in this whole “presenting myself as the Holy Woman” idea, but I decided to come up with an appropriate dress to wear when doing so. I had to keep in mind that things might get a lot more complicated from here on out.

I have to pull myself together... I thought as I thumbed through the pages.



THE sound of knocking on the door jolted me awake.

“Holy Woman! Holy Woman! My apologies for approaching you so early! And...good morning!”

“Wha...?” I groggily responded.

The lady knocking on my door was Muje—she was in charge of cleaning the third floor. She had an interest in medicinal herbs and helped me with tending to my garden. She was especially passionate about cooking herbs and occasionally tried to make variations of my recipes.

What's got her so worked up? I don't think I overslept that much. If I did, Jiril and Mirage would have woken me up...

“I'll be right out!” I called. “Did something happen?”

“Well, you see...! The worshippers from De Marl are here and they're now forcefully trying to convert us to their faith... Some people have already been hurt!”

“Seriously?!”

How did that happen?!

I hurriedly changed out of my sleeping gown and did my hair. Once I confirmed my long ears were hidden, I opened the door, where I found Muje standing there with a pale expression.

“Oh, Holy Woman! The knights are trying to fight back, but it's awful!” she

cried.

“I can’t sort that out by myself!” I responded. “Let’s stop by the dining hall and have Jiril and Mirage come with us!”

“Understood!”

We found Mirage and Jiril having leisurely morning tea and had them follow us. It was all happening in the plaza in front of the gate. The same believers that’d argued with Air the other day were back and grappling with the De Marl knights.

Wait... Why are De Marl believers fighting knights from their own country? I was confused.

Knights from other countries were trying to tear the believers off the De Marl knights. But these grown men were thrashing around like outraged children, their faces even contorted in tears and snot.

Just looking at them is painful!

“For now, let’s separate them, yeeees?” Mirage suggested.

“Yes! Please!” I nodded.

Jiril and Mirage moved in to help the knights. When Mirage restrained them and asked why they were doing this, they shouted that it was to make the creator deity Air acknowledge the Gods of De Marl.

“But Air wouldn’t acknowledge them even if you do thissssss,” Mirage said. “All other gods but him aren’t real anywayyyy.”

“Shut up! The Gods of De Marl are real, and we can prove it! We’ll have the creator deity acknowledge them! And even if they *aren’t* real, our faith in them will *make* them real!”

You’re talking crazy!

I looked up to the sky in exasperation. *What if Air heard them?*

“See, it’s just like I said.” I suddenly heard Air’s voice in my head.

“Ah?!”

To be precise, I didn’t hear it coming from my head. But rather from the

Spherit Stone in my forehead, which contained the Stella.

“Faith is a troublesome thing,” Air continued. *“Once humans drown in it, they become willing to cast their lives away for it. At that point, you can’t even call them human anymore.”*

“Air, what are you say—”

Air was clearly displeased. But there was a hint of amusement in his voice, too. Then I started getting a bad feeling and I saw the believers start to turn black and not just their skin. Their blood vessels stuck out with a black sheen, and it looked like they were turning to rubber.

This is the moment...when people turn into monsters!

“Let go of theeeem!” Mirage cried. “They’re turning into monsteeeeeers!”

“Eeek!” a knight cried.

“But why?!” shouted another. “The Holy Woman is right there!”

The Stella and I were right next to them, but they weren’t being purified. They were turning into monsters. *How can that be?!*

The black matter that was growing over their skin in bumps was Camilla. Their faith had made the Kathra within them evolve into Camilla, turning them into monsters.

I realized then what had happened. The creator deity, Air, had set a new rule. He’d designated the Gods of De Marl as evil. I understood why he did that. But even so, the thought of people right in front of me becoming monsters was something I couldn’t accept! I didn’t know if Air was going to forgive these people, but I wasn’t going to stand by and let them turn into monsters.

“A-Air, the one, true creator of this world! Show your mercy upon these lives!”

I brought my hands together in prayer. Since I’d met Air in the flesh the other day, I had a clear image of who I was praying to. And maybe *that* made all the difference, because the light that now shone from inside me was stronger than usual.

“Ah, uuugh, aaghhh...Ghaaaaa!” The half-transformed humans screamed as

their transformations began to reverse.

“W-Wow...they’re healing...”

“Oooh! The Holy Woman saved them!”

They returned to human form, gasping for breath. I suddenly realized what Air’s true intentions were. He’d done this to clearly show his rejection of the Gods of De Marl, making those men feel his will on their very flesh. He’d also done this *knowing* that I would save them and that they—and all others assembled—would turn their faith towards...*me*.

Was I still uncomfortable with being worshipped? Absolutely! But I reckoned it was better than people worshipping nonexistent gods and turning into monsters as a result.

“W-We were...about to become...*monsters*...?” one of the men asked, gasping. “But why?!”

“The great Air passed down his verdict and deemed your faith in the Gods of De Marl blasphemy, mmm,” Jiril said.

“You must understaaaaand nowwww. There are no gods but Air himselffffff,” Mirage hissed.

“Ngh, th-that’s not... It *can’t* be— Gha?!” the man stammered, trying to cling to his faith despite everything, only for his skin to suddenly start turning black again.

“No! Stop!” I shouted.

I brought my hands together and prayed to Air again. Bright light issued from me, purifying the believer. But then something strange happened. Normally, the light only came from the Spherit stone on my forehead. But this time, the believer himself started...*glowing*.

What’s going on? This has never happened before!

“Ugh, aah... Huh? Aaah... I... I’m... Aaah!! Aaaaaaah?!” the man started screaming.

“What’s wrong?!” another man asked him, alarmed.

“Holy Woman, what’s happening to him?!” Jiril asked.

“I don’t know!” I said.

The believer shined like he’d just been directly hit with the Stella and fell to the ground, cradling his head. His skin changed back to its regular color. *He looks like he’s back to normal...so why is he acting like this?*

Two figures suddenly came towards us—Renge and Lord Revireus.

“Good morning, Tina. What’s with all the ruckus?” Renge asked.

“Hey! I sensed some monsters. Did something happen?” Revireus looked around suspiciously.

“Renge! Lord Revireus! Good timing!” I called out.

Honestly, I wish you’d gotten here sooner!

I quickly explained the situation to Renge, who looked both perplexed and annoyed.

“Air must’ve done this...” he realized. “He has a shorter temper than you’d think.”

“Yes...but something’s weird with my Stella... What are we going to do? Is this man acting like this because of me?”

“Well...” Renge said simply, “the Stella isn’t something people are meant to be exposed to in such rapid succession. Tina, you have to remember it was a power that Air gave Akari because he found her worthy. But normally, its purifying powers are too great for *any* human or demi-human psyche. The only reason *you* can contain and use its power is due to the Spherit stone in your forehead serving as its vessel.”

“O-Oh...” I responded lamely.

Yes, I remember that now...

“So if you keep showering a human with the Stella’s power, of *course*, it’ll affect their defenseless psyche. Why did you use it on him so much?”

“Well... They all started turning into monsters right in front of me and I...I panicked...” I said weakly, clenching my trembling fists.

“This is *their* fault. We told them over and over again that worshipping false gods can lead to them becoming monsters,” Renge said.

“Their faith was *still* strong enough to indirectly repel the Stella’s influence. I can see *why* the great Air was mad at them...” Revireus said pensively.

Both of them agreed I wasn’t responsible. Yet I still felt guilty for forgetting the Stella’s inherent danger and using it so recklessly. I never realized this could happen. The believer crouching in agony couldn’t even remember his own *name* now.

“Tina, don’t let it bother you.” Renge comforted me. “If you *hadn’t* used the Stella, they’d have become monsters and harmed people.”

“B-But...”

“Maybe...” he said soothingly, “it would’ve been better to *let* them become monsters and let the Stella purify them gradually? Try that next time, then. I’m sure you’ll meet others refusing to discard their faith...even if it means becoming a monster.”

Saying this, Renge looked at the other two believers, holding the one believer who was still squatting in agony. The two of them gulped audibly, then prostrated themselves before me, tears running down their cheeks.

“W-We’re s-sorry! We were so stubborn, we...”

“We-we apologize for ignoring your suggestion about the mascot characters, Holy Woman. Please let our Gods of De Marl persist in the world as mascots!”

“I don’t mind, of course,” I said with some relief. “You’re free to do that if you wish. If anything, *I’m* sorry for overusing the Stella’s power.”

“N-No, you don’t have to... What I’m trying to say is...please forgive us!”

The two men were now bowing so low, their foreheads were touching the ground.

Why are they doing this? Do they think I’m going to do something to them? You’ve all got the wrong idea!

“Your piety isn’t a bad thing in and of itself. But surely, you see now that the gods you’re worshipping aren’t worth angering Air over,” Renge said, kneeling

in front of the distraught men. “If you must worship someone, let it be Air. He can be...relatively forgiving to those who worship him.”



'Relatively,' huh...? Air really does hate humans.

The men nodded and said they'd return home to De Marl. *Probably for the best!*

I looked down at my hands. I wasn't as aware of the full extent of the Stella's power as I thought I was. I felt I should learn more. *But this is a power only I can wield. Who can possibly teach me about it?*

"Ummm...Renge?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you a bit more about the Stella? If it's used too often, can it...*hurt* people?" I couldn't keep the fear out of my voice.

"Oh, this... Well, if it's just this much, he'll recover given time."

He *said* that. But the man squatting in pain looked positively stricken. He kept repeating "Who am I? What am I doing here?" *That doesn't seem right!!!*

"How long will it take him to go back to normal?" I asked.

"Likely a week. If someone's exposed to the Stella more than three times, it'll probably leave long-lasting effects. It's a truly powerful purification, and there shouldn't be a situation where one needs cleansing multiple times. The power just isn't made for that."

"Aaah..."

I saw what he meant.

"It makes no *sense* that they'd turn into monsters right in front of you to begin with," Renge said, his expression bothered. "Their faith probably went haywire, turning into Kathra inside them all at once. It must've been painful."

"Oh yes! It was terrible!" one of the men interjected.

"Then *learn* your lesson, foolish mortal," Renge glowered at him, clearly mad. "We've told you countless times already. The *only* god you can worship is Air. Next time this happens, you could end up dying."

At that, the men looked deflated and scared. I didn't know what turning into a monster felt like. But given the three men looked frightened to tears, it must've

been painful!

“Your foolishness must’ve inspired Air to add a new rule to the world,” Renge went on coldly. “Unless you worship *anyone* but the creator deity or the Holy Woman, that faith will turn to Kathra. And if that Kathra grows to a certain amount, the speed with which the Kathra will turn to Camilla will increase. It seems you’ve *crossed* that line.”

“What will happen if we worship our gods still?” one of the men asked.

“You just *saw*! You’ll become monsters. And if that happens, we’ll drive you outside the walls, where you will spend a few days being purified back into your human forms with the Stella’s aid. After all, directly exposing you to the Stella again could end up destroying your minds.”

“No...” the man shuddered.

I realized what Renge was trying to say. Directly using the power of the Stella on someone in quick succession could end up harming them. It was too powerful and could damage their psyches. The purification would be so strong it would literally bleach their minds clean.

I never knew it was such a fierce power! And the fact that I didn’t know that is dangerous!

“Is there anything else I should know about the Stella, Renge?” I asked.

“No...? Just keep doing what you’ve been doing,” he said brightly. “Stay inside the monster-attracting barrier to purify the monsters.”

“Well, I will. But...”

“Don’t let it weigh on you, Tina,” he said softly. “This was an isolated incident. If it bothers you *that* much, we can make it so no one but worshippers of Air and the Holy Woman are allowed in Deshmel.”

“I... I don’t think that’s...”

“You’re a little *too* kind, if you ask me,” Renge said, his tone a little different from before.

“R-Renge...?”

He was looking down at me with an anxious expression.

Whoa...

I can only see half his face because of his fluffy scarf. But...he really is handsome!

“Do you want us to drive them out, Holy Woman?” Lord Revireus asked, pointing at the believers.

“At least let them prepare for their trip back home!” I said, aghast by his shocking statement.

“I can just teleport them back,” he said indifferently, instantly snapping them back to De Marl with his magic.

Talk about forced deportation!

“H-Hey! Isn’t that taking things a bit far?” I asked.

“What’s wrong? I sent them back home safely,” he said flatly.

“Huh, I guess that works too?” I said, unsure.



THAT incident resolved (as much as it could be anyway), I turned my attention to my rumbling stomach and moved to the second-floor dining hall. Jiril and Mirage followed me. They were livid, insisting I was too soft on those men and that they should be barred for life. I told *them* I felt like they were too harsh on humans who didn’t worship Air.

“Hello there, little Holy Woman,” a voice greeted me as I entered the dining hall.

“What the?! A-Air?!” I exclaimed.

“Air?!” Mirage and Jiril echoed me, reflexively bowing.

Sitting there was Air, sipping water. *He’s here again?!*

“H-H-Huh? C-Can I help you?” I stuttered.

“Now that’s a curious reaction. I just wanted to drop by and tell you I added another warning about the Stella.”

“Wait...*you* did do something to the Stella?!”

So I wasn't just hearing things when I heard his voice earlier! What did he do?!

“I don't appreciate that implication...” Air sniffed. “The Stella simply adapted to your body and grew stronger. I *originally* made that purifying power for Akari. But since you're such a *hard* worker... Plus, your bread and steak were so *tasty*... Ah! I mean, I did it because you're my...*dear* nephew's lover.”

“...Would you like me to make you some omelet rice?” I asked, reading between the lines.

“Is that another tasty dish from your world? I'd love some!”

He's just a bit too easy to please... It feels like I'm taming him with food. But I guess I'm just working hard to satisfy a divine guest, right?

More than anything, I was happy he praised my food. Plus, being called Renge's lover made me so happy! (Not that we *did* much on that front...) So making him an omelet with some stir-fried chicken rice felt like the least I could do.

“So...” I said as I headed to the kitchen, Air following me, “you said the Stella's power...*evolved* within me.”

“Yes, it took a shape more suited to your body. And it's only in its first stage.”

“You're saying it'll get even stronger?!” I exclaimed.

“When Akari possessed it, its powers of blessing and purification only extended a few dozen feet when she actively focused on it,” Air explained. “It could even extend a few hundred feet when she *really* wanted to. In fact, if she *really* focused on giving a blessing, it could envelope a whole continent. One prayer a day and she could have blessed the entire planet in less than a week.”

“The entire *planet*?!”

Lady Akari was much more powerful than I thought. I can even see why people worshipped her. She was a bigger deal than I realized. *And Air's saying I could use a power equal, if not greater than hers?*

“If she really *tried*, she could even resurrect someone. Not if someone's soul had already been broken down by the Spherits, of course. But, under certain

conditions, she could manage it handily.”

“You... You mean she could raise the dead...?” I asked.

“Yes. Albeit not without certain conditions. But this power I’ve given you is *that* special and more. It’s *far* too great for humans to possess. But since *you’re* the child my nephew chose, I thought I’d spoil you. I tend to be generous to my relatives, after all.”

“Relatives...”

As I stood in the kitchen, I felt my face redden at that phrase. *He considers me family...! And more than that...as Renge’s lover! That makes me so happy!*

“So...what’s this omelet rice thing, then?” Air asked.

Boy, he’s awfully curious for a god.

“I found some wild rice on the Mythical continent,” I explained, prepping and cooking as I did so. “So now I can cook rice! I mix it with some fried finely chopped onions, kyraots, and pieces of chicken meat. You can add mushrooms to suit your tastes if you’d like, but I kept it simple this time.”

A lot of people dislike mushrooms. But I love them!

“You crush timatos,” I went on, “and mix them with chopped onions, salt, herbs, and vinegar and let it sit to make ketchup to put on the omelet rice! With this, the chicken rice stir-fry is ready. Then you fry a beaten egg in another frypan!”

Making omelet rice is very difficult. I couldn’t make it very well in my past life. Only now had I figured out how to make it right. *Running the inn’s kitchen for so long paid off!*

“Ha!” I cried in triumph as I finished and plated it. “And *that’s* how you make a nice and fluffy omelet rice! After that, you put on as much ketchup as you like for flavor.”

Air picked it up and dove in with a spoon. “Oh, that’s impressive! So that’s what omelet rice is like.”

“Since you use ketchup on the rice, you don’t need to put a whole lot of it on the omelet.”

“All right...!”

Air looked kind of cute...like an excited little kid. *You almost wouldn't think he's a god. Ahhh! But I shouldn't be thinking he's cute right now!*

“Air...” I asked, worried as he scarfed the omelet rice down. “What should I do now...?”

“Hmmm?” he asked through a spoonful. “Just...keep doing what you've been doing. You could try purifying the world. It should clean up all the monsters in one go.”

“Purifying the world? I can just...purify all the monsters at once?!”

“You certainly can. That's what the Stella *does*. But monsters,” Air went on as he kept eating, “will keep appearing so long as there's life. Humans in particular produce Camilla very easily.”

Oh, so that's how it works... But if I purify all the monsters presently in the world, I can go back home, right?

“Can...can I do this world purification thing as I am right now?” I asked, hopeful.

“Easily. You have plenty of mana to do it,” Air said as he put his now-empty plate down. “Oh, and the omelet rice was delicious.”

“Thank you!”

“Now, what's for lunch?”

“Lunch?” I repeated dumbly.

He wants more? The omelet rice wasn't enough?

“W-Well...since I have rice now, I figured maybe I could work on some rice recipes,” I said. Who was I to turn down a food order from God? “If you don't mind helping me out, I was thinking of making chicken and egg on rice?”

“Chicken and egg on rice? *That's* new... Let's try it. I did like this omelet rice thing.”

So he's letting me practice my cooking on him... He's really a kind god after all.

“Air! Why are *you* back here?!” Renge cried as he came into the dining hall,

Lord Revireus in tow.

“Oh, Renge, what kept you?” Air responded nonchalantly. “I’ve already eaten and now Tinaris is making me more delicious things to try...”

Clearly confused, Lord Revireus asked if this was really Air, the creator deity.

Hard to believe, I know...

The whole time, Jiril and Mirage were both kneeling with their heads bowed. I got the impression the Mythicals were more terrified of Air than I was...well, all except Renge, who seemed to be taking Air’s reappearance in stride.

“*Don’t* make unreasonable demands of Tina,” he chided. “Besides, I thought you *hated* being on the surface. What are you doing here again?”

“Oh, not much. I just thought I’d meet your industrious fiancée again. And pressure you to resume your training while I’m at it.”

“Now’s *not* the time for that,” Renge refused. “Besides, I can’t get much stronger than I am n—”

“What *are* you saying?” Air interrupted him. “The easiest way for a Mythical Beast to get stronger is through deification. With your half-human blood, you’d be better off putting in more effort. You *have* the talent! So hurry up and become a half-god, half-Mythical.”

“But I’m not *interested* in going through deification!” Renge argued, getting more emotional than usual. “I don’t *want* to become a god.”

“And I’m telling you you’re going to *have* to if you want to keep living in this world. If you *won’t*, then leave! You’ve never trained in another world before. So it’d be a good chance for you to try.”

“Grrr...”

Ummm...just what’re they talking about? Renge...becoming a god?! What are they getting at here?

“If you absolutely *don’t* want to be my successor,” Air went on, “find someone *else* to train and deify in your place. I’m still very much on active duty. But someday I’ll pass on as part of this planet’s natural lifespan. I’d really like to know I have a successor in place.”

“You make it sound easy...” Renge hesitated.

“That dragon child over there could do it, too,” Air said, pointing at Lord Revireus. “Red dragons mature into sovereign dragons quite easily. This age’s dragon sovereign is already quite far along in her lifespan, no? It *would* be a waste to lose her. If the white dragon sovereign passes on, maybe I’ll grant *her* some of my divinity to deify her...except *that* would shorten my lifespan. I really *would* like a new god to take over for me...”

I had no idea what Air was talking about. But apparently, he’d manifested physically in this world to find a successor, with Renge being his first choice. Lord Revireus and the Great Curalius were other options—at least, I think Curalius was who Air was talking about. *The Great Curalius is quite elderly, after all...*

“That elf friend of yours was a good option too, Renge,” Air continued. “He had the makings of it. But with the Sugula being born during his lifetime, he had the odds stacked against him. That reduced the human population a great deal, too, of course. But humans tend to breed very fast, like rabbits... I’d rather *not* deify a human, though. Both because it’s hard and I don’t like the idea of it.”

“It all sounds...quite difficult,” I remarked.

“It is!” Air slammed his hand down on the table, his spoon still in hand. “Do you understand my plight, Holy Woman?”

“Ah, erm, y-yes!” I said, alarmed.

Wow, it sounds like he really is troubled by this.

“See, normally, you have multiple gods born! *Multiple*! It’s not like I got in the way of other gods coming into being! Each world’s living beings are meant to put in effort and overcome the boundaries of their species to become gods! That’s why it’s necessary to make your world harsh to some extent! And since my world hasn’t produced any other gods, I suppose that must mean I’ve just been taking it easy!” he ranted.

“Erm, yes, I suppose it does...?” I faltered.

I wasn’t sure I understood what he was saying, and actually got the feeling I shouldn’t be agreeing with him at all! But if he asked if this world wasn’t harsh,

I'd disagree. Just from my own personal experience, strolling outside could get one attacked by bandits or monsters or zombies!

I remembered how, when I was just born, my parents sent me down a river and I was picked up by bandits who wanted to sell me into slavery. Saying this world was set to hard mode would be an understatement.

"Besides, even if I end up deciding to deify, that doesn't mean I'll take your place as creator deity!" Renge said aggressively.

"It doesn't?" I asked.

"No, it doesn't. The highest level of deifying is to become a creator deity... In other words, a planet's god. It mostly involves creating the concepts that give people in your world energy, as well as that world's rules. In other words, it's like being a system administrator, so you have to be smart to do it."

"I see..."

That sounded hard.

"Well, I want to have a replacement god set aside in case something happens," Air said. "And despite all my efforts, look at the state of this world's lifeforms! No one even has a speck of intention to deify! That makes no sense! What would be the right answer here? Forget about what gods other people will worship, you should work to become gods yourselves!" Air was getting progressively angrier. "And humans, in particular! For how much they want to become gods, all they do is assume the name but never put in the work to become one! They're all talk and no action, tricking those around them to get an easy life! Sometimes even the humans who seriously think they're gods are better than that. This is why I can't stand humans!"

"A-Air, please calm down first," I said.

He looked like he was at his wit's end.

"So you're saying this is your greatest concern?" I asked.

"Yes. Why won't any of the living beings on Wisty Air try to become a god? You keep making up gods, so why won't anyone try to *become* a god themselves? What other point was there in prohibiting belief in everything

except for me and the Holy Woman? I thought it would motivate the creatures living in my world to reach that level themselves if they saw the example I set as the strongest and allowed a mortal such as the Holy Woman to show the path they could follow to reach my level! But noooo.”

So Air actually had a reason to prohibit other religions. He thought it would motivate the people of his world to attain godhood. What an alien thought process.

“I think it’s because no one knows they can become a god,” I pointed out.

“They don’t?” Air looked surprised.

“Is it well known in the Mythical continent?” I asked.

“Hm, I’m not sure. I only know about it because Air told me...” Renge said.

“Today’s the first I’ve heard of it,” Lord Revireus added.

“Meeeeeeeeee too...” Mirage said.

“Me as well, hmm,” Jiril chimed in.

“Are you all serious?!” Air looked bombastically surprised at the Mythicals’ ignorance.

Apparently no one knew about this possibility, which went a long way to explaining why no one tried to become a god.

“Besides, deification isn’t easy, is it?” Renge said. “I’m not interested in it, and I don’t think I could do it even with training.”

“Of course not. Becoming a god doesn’t come easy,” Air said.

“I think only someone who’s really backed against the wall or very peculiar would voluntarily go through something that arduous,” Renge said.

“Hmm... So you’re saying the world isn’t demanding enough to drive people into that corner?” Air pondered.

“Renge, Renge!” I said in alarm.

“Lord Rengeeee, you gave him a bad ideeeeee!”

“Wait, Air, I didn’t mean it like that!” Renge rushed to correct his error.

At this rate, Air will make another dangerous law for this world! It's already dangerous enough as it is! Believe me, I haven't been alive for that long, and I already had too many scrapes with death!

"There's just no precedent!" Renge reasoned. "Yes, no one ever did it before, so no one knows humans, demi-humans, or Mythicals can deify! And I don't think they feel the need to do so..."

"No precedent, no need..." Air said pensively. "Should I summon a demon lord then?"

"Wait, wait, wait! Why aren't you listening to me?" Renge panicked. "How did you come to that conclusion?!"

"Wait, he can summon a demon lord? Really?!" I cried.

How does he say crazy things like that with a poker face?

"Demon lords from the sixth rank or over have deified in the past, so I could ask one of them to cull the humans' numbers. That should make for a good motivator, right? I could disseminate weaker versions of the Stella to create a hero or two that would exceed the limitations of their species. It's brilliant," Air said with a satisfied smile.

"Just dealing with the monsters is hard enough!" Renge insisted. "When you kill monsters, they scatter Camilla, which makes more monsters! Tina's Stella is our only hope. And now you're thinking of adding demon lords and their minions from another world to all that?!"

"He's right. Just the monsters make life hard enough here, Air!" I chimed in.

"But then I'm not pressing the people hard enough, right?" he asked, his head tilted cutely like he wasn't considering making the world suffer to further his goals. "I think I shouldn't overcomplicate things and use the old, established methods to up the mettle of lifeforms in my world."

"No, no, no! That's not true. We just told you that monsters make things hard enough. If you add a demon lord to it, all you'd achieve is to make Wisty Air infested with monsters! And you don't want that, do you?" Renge pressed.

"Well, no, but if this world falls prey to monsters that easily, doesn't that just

prove its weakness? That there's a clear lack of resolve?" Air countered.

Oh, no this is bad. If we don't change Air's mind here, we'll have a demon lord on our hands, too!

But I did have to appreciate the way he respected our opinions. He didn't make the decision on his own, and he was acting out of an intention to see us grow.

"There's nothing good to be gained from you being weak, is there? Wisty Air isn't invaded by other worlds because it's run by me, a Cerberus, a combative species. But creator deities invade other worlds all the time," Air said, dropping a scary tidbit there.

"Really...?" I didn't know what else to say.

"See, this is why I hate humans," he responded.

So the gods who invade other worlds were originally human... Good to know, I guess?

"There are more races of Mythical Beasts here, but not many of them are proficient at combat. There are some combative demi-human races, but their governments are strong, and they're unified under worship of the Holy Woman. That's both good and bad. In 500 years, I'll enter the part of my life cycle where I'm weakened every 5,000 years. So I need another warrior god class deity on my side to fill in for me," Air said.

"...You actually had a good reason for all of this then," Renge said, sounding a bit impressed.

"What do you take me for?" Air looked hurt.

Renge has a way of being casually rude to Air...

"Excuse me, but what do you mean, you get weak every 5,000 years?" I asked.

"I guess you could say creator deities go into a period of hibernation. Living things need to eat and rest to recover, right? Well, creator gods—or planetary gods as we're called—are the soul of a planet. Since we're the planet, we're alive and have a metabolic cycle. I happen to be a creator god with shorter

periods of weakness that come at longer intervals, but that just makes me weaker than most when the time does come. And since two Sugulas were formed during this period, I think my hibernation will be longer than usual. It doesn't influence lives on the surface, so you probably wouldn't know, but at times like these, the world is vulnerable to invasions from belligerent creator deities like dark lords and humans from other worlds. My world is a closed one, which makes it hard for invaders from other worlds to find their way here, but it's easier for them to get past that when I'm at my weakest."

"What? That's awful!" I exclaimed.

"See the issue? That's why you need another god to take my place when I'm weak and defenseless," he finished.

That's actually a really serious and convincing reason! But becoming a god, huh... I can't imagine what that's like.

"And you're saying you have no intention to deify, Renge." Air shot him a look.

"W-Well, I mean..." Renge stuttered.

"Air, mighty creator deity! Train me instead!" Lord Revireus burst into our exchange.

We looked at him in shock. He was very destructive and had a lot of power at his disposal. Air hummed, contemplating the idea.

"By asking me for training, I assume you're interested in deifying?"

"After hearing your explanation now, yes, I am more than interested!" Lord Revireus declared. "I wish to become a man capable of defending my mother. I need to become stronger than her to become the ruler of the Mythical continent she's protected all these years. I believe that I'm not strong enough to do that now! I wish to become as strong as Renge...no, for how presumptuous it might be, I wish to become even stronger than him!"

That was quite the statement. Lord Revireus really loved and respected Renge, so to state he wanted to grow even stronger than him was saying a lot. But I could understand that kind of admiration. It drove me to improve too, to create medicine that would help people, like my grandmother and Lico did.

Doing that would protect my family, too.

“Stronger than Renge, you say?” Air responded. “That’s quite the tall order. But yes, a dragon like you should have plenty of potential. And a red dragon, at that. Yes, very well. There was one strange fool who tried to raise a dragon among my younger siblings, but yes, dragons should be strong.”

“Y-You’ll make me into your student...?” Lord Revireus asked, nervous.

“Of course. I’d say you show more promise than Renge, with his lack of motivation. Oh, yes, why don’t you come with us too, Holy Woman?” Air turned to me.

“Huh?” I squeaked. “M-Me? Come with you where?”

“Air!” Renge looked at him angrily.

I never expected him to call for me to join their training. I had no idea why he’d ask me, because there was no way I could become a god!

“The divine realm, at the planet’s core,” Air said. “I’ll teach you how to use your power. Renge never taught you, did he?”

“Ngh! I...!” Renge groaned.

“If you increase the Stella’s purification by a stage, you’d become much stronger. And if you learn how to control it, you’ll be able to handle it even if you increase its stages. If you keep using it when you’re not used to it, it won’t be long before your purification becomes too strong and ends up bleaching out the people you’re trying to save,” Air explained.

“B-Bleach them out... Wh-What do you mean?” I asked.

Just the description made it sound ominous. This must have been what instinctively scared me so much.

“You’ll purify the desires living things need to live, too. From their sex drives and appetites to the desire to produce excrement or sleep. Even their thirst for knowledge. Without those desires, they will become catatonic and inactive and waste away. When desire is too strong it can become harmful, but there’s no life without it either. To begin with, the Stella was created from the concept of adjusting the desires of living things. It’s just like the Camilla, but its power

moves in a different vector. So if the Stella becomes too strong, it can change the way a living being acts and looks. Just like how the Camilla evolves into Kathra and morphs people into monsters,” he said.

“Are you saying the Stella can turn people into monsters...?” I asked, my mouth drying out at the thought.

“Yes.”

That revelation made everything go dark. I wobbled where I stood, and Renge had to catch me.

I can't believe it... The Stella can turn people into monsters...

“But they won't turn into the same kind of monsters living things turn into from Kathra,” Air explained. “Unlike Kathra, that scatters desire, they'll become white monsters that sap desire from other living things, sucking it from them to multiply. And to defeat them, you'll need Kathra monsters nearby. But if they get too large, they'll suck up all the desire from a Kathra monster, too.”

I was aghast. That would probably become a “white monster” that would be as large as a Sugula. It wouldn't grow and expand in space but eat away at the surface of Wisty Air.

A bleached and bleaching monster that eats away at all desire. And I could end up creating it by misusing the Stella. The De Marl worshipper from earlier came to mind. *He was only minorly affected, but if my power gets any stronger, I could end up—* “Please teach me how to use my power!” I said, eager not to become a monster-making machine myself.

“That's fine by me. We'll have to spend some time at the core to train,” Air nodded.

“Thank you!” I bowed.

“Tina...!” Renge looked at me, alarmed. “What about... Right, your herb garden and working on medicine? Weren't you going to bring people from all over the world to develop Deshmel?”

“Ah, yeah. Dad did bring that up,” I responded. “But if there's going to be so many people here, that's all the more reason for me to learn to control my

power, isn't it? What if I accidentally turn people into monsters? I have to do something!"

If my power became stronger, I could end up hurting those around me, and I didn't want that. After all, the Stella was always emanating out of me over a large area. And while it was good for purifying the monsters right now, if it grew any stronger, it could start causing harm.

"I'll go explain things to Dad!" I said. "And I'll have Muje look after the garden for me. Jiril, Mirage, could you handle things in the dining hall?"

"Mmm, we don't mind, but..."

"What about the commercial areaaaaaa? Should we cleaaaaan the storerooms? And should we refuuuuuse requests for potions while you're away?"

Aaah...I didn't think being away from here would be so nerve-wracking.

"And if you're going away for a while, you'll need a change of clothes and cosmetics, mm? This might be Air, but you'll still be a young lady spending time with an adult man, mm. And having Lord Revireus with you is concerning, too..."

"That's true, despite his behavioooooor Lord Revireus is still a maaaaan."

"What are you two worried about exactly?" Lord Revireus asked gruffly.

"I won't lay a hand on my grandnephew's lover," Air demurred. "We're not even the same race. You're getting carried away with your daydreaming..."

They're right; why would those two worry about that? But that said, I will need clothes and daily necessities...

"To begin with, who said you have to move to train? You can just come and go from here. See?" Air said and threw some blue, gelatinous slime on the floor.

"Whoa! What's that?!" I exclaimed.

It looked like a piece of slime, but it had eyes, so it must have been alive somehow.

Eew, what is this?!

"If you tear it apart, it splits into two," Air explained.

"Tear it apart?!"

What does that mean?

I tried to do as he said. But...

Ugh, it feels so slimy!



“You leave one here, and extend the other one like a string,” Air went on.

“U-Ugh...like this?”

“Make it thinner and longer!”

What am I making right now?! Is this one of those things that I shouldn't think about too much? Fine, I'll just empty my thoughts and do it.

I tore the slime in half and stretched it.

“Stretch it longer.”

“Even longer?!”

Could you at least tell me how long it has to be?

I kept pulling and stretching it until eventually, when it was six feet long, Air said it was enough. After that he told me to draw an empty circle on the floor with it.

What now?

“Now tear the other slime in half too.”

“Again?!”

Do you have some kind of grudge against slimes, Air?!

I tore the divided slime in half again, while its beady black eye looked up at me like it was pleading with me to stop.

This thing really is alive! Now I feel bad for it!

“S-Sorry...” I whispered.

Eew, the eye got cut in two...

“There, we're ready now,” Air declared. “This teleportation slime will be used to transport the Holy Woman. Revireus, was it? I'll teach you the spell to teleport directly there.”

“Yes, please,” Lord Revireus said.

“Uh, is this slime special somehow?” I asked.

“Yes, this is a divine slime that's only found in the divine realm,” Air explained.

“I could teach you teleportation magic, but you lack offensive spells, so I thought the slime might double as a bodyguard. If you teach the slime to take this shape, it’ll be able to change to it on command. Leave one in your room, or in the hands of someone trustworthy. If you bring the second half to the circle you made, it’ll allow you to jump into the divine realm. When you go back, you leave a half there to mark the point you’ll be returning from.”

“Ew... So this one’s always gonna have to be split into four?” I felt bad for it.

“You just have to keep half with you, the part that forms the circle. That’ll mark the point of return.”

Huuuh?! The poor thing!

“Don’t worry, divine slimes are strong creatures,” Air said nonchalantly. “They’re a divine beast that doesn’t exist in this world—it’s my personal minion.”

“That’s a god’s minion?!” Lord Revireus asked, shocked.

I can understand why you feel that way...

“You’ll protect Tina...?” Renge asked.

“That’s right. You can’t always stay by her side, right?”

“Well, yes, but... No, it’s fine. Tina having more guards is a good thing. Besides, my fur is fluffier!”

Renge? Why are you competing over? I mean, yeah, you’re an animal-type Mythical Beast, so you have great fur...

“Hey! My fur is peak fluff! I’m a god, you know!” Air countered in a huff.

And why are you acting competitive back, Air?! Wait, you can get fluffy, too? I guess if you’re the uncle of Renge’s father, you’d be from the same race...

“Well, you’re in for some disappointment, Uncle. I’ve been using Tina’s shampoo to wash my fur, so mine is much softer, sleeker, and fluffier! It’s definitely better than yours.”

You’re still fighting over this?! And why are you dragging me into it?!

“Well put, then... Let’s have everyone here decide who has the finest fur!” Air

declared.

“Fine by me! But to keep it fair, we can’t let people who know our identity decide. We’ll let outsider humans decide,” Renge proposed.

“Oh, an interesting concept. Very well!” Air accepted.

“Huh? Wait, what?” I blinked, confused by how this argument was spiraling into unexpected territory.

I turned to look at Jiril and Mirage, who looked more confused than I’d ever seen them before. Lord Revireus had the gobsmailed expression of a stunned cat, too.

Air and Renge were enveloped in black smoke and took on the forms of large hounds. True to his word, Air was a black Cerberus like Renge. Both glared at each other for a moment and then briskly walked toward the gate.

Do I stop them? Can I even stop them? This is the strongest man in the Mythical continent going up against the god who made this world.

“Aren’t you going to stop them, Holy Woman, mm?”

“Just let them have their way until they’re satisfied...” I muttered, resigned.

I’m not entirely uninterested in their fur... But that said, what do I do about the slime? I looked down at the slime sitting in my palm, and it swerved its one beady eye up to meet my gaze. *...Is this what they mean by the abyss staring back at you?*

“Whoa!”

The slime began to reassemble its divided body with a squelching sound and returned to its original form. It then jiggled and looked back at me again.

Wait, is it just me, or is it kind of...cute?

“Maybe I should give it a name?” I pondered aloud.

“You’re actually going to keep this sliiiiime? Slimes can be pretty usefuuuul. They clean up sewage and eat traaaash.”

“Oh, right. Slimes do that...”

The Mythical beast slimes brought over from the Mythical continent typically

handle things like that. They're not found on other continents, but in Deshmel, we used them for waste disposal. And since feeding them made them multiply, we've been selling them for cheap to merchants.

Incidentally, slimes don't die from lack of feeding. They can subsist on only water, but if they lack that, they can shrink until they melt away and die. That felt like a sad way to go.

For how useful they were, slimes were weak, sluggish lifeforms. It's been roughly three years since merchants in the human and demi-human continents started selling them, and I could see them becoming indispensable to people's lives in the coming years. They were, without a doubt, one benefit we got from dealing with the Mythical continent.

That said, I'd never heard of anyone giving their slime a name, which made me think it might not be a good idea.

"Hmm, but it's going to help guard me..." I muttered.

"Mm, yes, that's true. It's also a god's minion, so lumping it in with the other slimes feels wrong, mm."

"It's hard to believe a sliiiiime would be a god's minioooooon..."

I agreed with them. With Air having the same Cerberus beast form as Renge, it seemed funny that his familiars would be slimes and not something fluffy, fuzzy, or animal-like.

"Hey, are you sure you don't want to see Renge and Air's fluffiness contest?" Lord Revireus asked.

"Do you want to go see it?" I asked, a bit surprised.

"I mean, when it's those two? I'm worried the humans might do something reckless around them," he replied.

"They'll be fine...probably."

The people in Deshmel knew about Renge's beast form, so if they saw another one, they'd just assume they're related. No one here would do anything foolish to a Mythical Beast, and Air really was his relative, so surely they'd know their place.

“But the fluffiness contest does sound tempting...” I mused.

“Mm, it is!”

“If we’re lucky they’ll let us paaaaat them.”

“Right! It’s not every day you get a chance to touch Renge’s fur!” Lord Revireus nodded excitedly.

Everyone was letting their ulterior motives show...not that I was any better!



AND so our legs carried us to the plaza in front of the main gate. Three merchant caravans were entering the fort, and their passengers formed a crowd with Deshmel’s residents. That made it easy to spot the two black beasts.

“I’ve never seen caravans with that mark,” I said, noticing an unfamiliar carriage.

“True, mm. That’s a new one.”

Deshmel was the world’s navel—its center. With the decline in monsters, merchants who had to suspend their trade due to the cataclysm were beginning to travel again. With Deshmel being a safe zone, what was once a military fort now served as an inn and restocking point, bringing many merchants to our door.

I was glad to have more clients, of course, and the people living in Deshmel were glad to have access to unusual goods. However, those goods were only available when merchants were around. This stressed the need for a dedicated commercial area in which they could set up shop. We needed to get on servicing and building the commercial block soon.

“It’s only a matter of time before we get adventurers and traveleeeers.”

“But I’d be sad to see Fort Deshmel so full of people, mm. It’d be hard to relax with all these strangers around, mm.”

“Yes... That’s true,” I agreed with Mirage and Jiril.

We had lots of employees who were former slaves of Edesa Kura and were uncomfortable around men. I hadn’t thought too deeply about developing

Deshmel until I spoke with Dad, but maybe we should hurry. More goods meant there would be more traffic, which meant building the inn had to be a priority.

“Wait, should I start thinking about developing the town here, too...?” I pondered.

“Goodness, Holy Woman, you only realize that noooooooooow?”

“Of course you should, hm. It’s going to be *your* town.”

“My town?!”

“And it might develop into a country, too!” Lord Revireus added. “You should become a good leader, worthy of being Renge’s bride!”

“Ack...!”

So from the Mythicals’ perspective, I should be a leader worthy of the Great Curalius’ successor! Just being called the Holy Woman isn’t enough. I need to display actual leadership skills...

I never considered that.

But if I’m going to be...worthy of Renge... Yes, that makes sense. I should try to live up to their expectations. I want to go back to Rofola someday, but thinking about it more, that’s not enough if I want to live at Renge’s side for the rest of my life. I can’t believe it took me this long to realize that...!

“Oh, what should I do?” I fretted. “I want to learn to control the Stella, but... now I need to consider developing the town, too.”

“Well, mm. How about you let your father take over for that part of the work, mm?”

“Have Dad do it?” I’d feel bad placing any more responsibility on Dad.

“Oh, that sounds like a good ideaaaaa. He was the second in command of the De Marl’s kniiiiights, wasn’t he? The top knights in such countries were involved in politiiiiics, so he’d be more familiar with it than yooooooooou are.”

“True...”

“And he was the one who went around the world to spread awareness about the Sugula, mm. Other countries trust him, and even if people there start

objecting, he could silence them, mm. You should let people from large cities handle urban planning, mm.”

“You have a point...”

De Marl was one of the largest countries on the human continent, and we even based the idea of the three-layered wall system on them. The two Mythicals had a point—I was essentially a country bumpkin who grew up in the sticks, while Dad lived in a big city for a good chunk of his life.

“But I feel bad just dumping that problem on him...” I fussed.

“You’re diligent to a fault, as always,” a voice cut me off.

“No, it’s just... Wait, that voice—”

“It’s been a while, Tina. Have you been well?”

“Lico!” I turned around to find Lico standing there, dressed in a casual suit.

Whoa! I haven’t seen you in forever! I thought. *Still refusing to wear a skirt, huh? That’s Lico for you.*

“I’m good! Have you been doing well?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’ve been so busy setting up my successor that this past year’s been pretty much a blur, but otherwise, fine,” she said casually.

“O-Oh...”

I didn’t know she’d been that busy. Apparently, she was swamped with the formalities of relinquishing her noble status, and her father insisted that if she was not getting married, she should stay home and do alchemical research. “Why are you trying to leave the country?! Stay home with your mom and dad and focus on your research! Your poor father wants to see you greet him when he comes home from work again!” her father had insisted, only for her mother to slap him.

That’s a pretty extreme family spat... Should I be privy to this? I thought after she had filled me in on the whole story.

“Your father really loves you, doesn’t he?” I said.

“I wish he would consider my age,” Lico sighed. “It gave me a headache that

he'd even say that to his thirty-something-year-old divorced daughter."

"Y-Yes, I can see what you mean..." I agreed. It didn't sound pleasant to me either.

"My older brothers also keep insisting I stay at our family home," Lico continued. "My mother is basically the only one who's on my side. It's been hell. I had to wait six months for all the paperwork to go through, and I haven't heard a thing from Marcus..."

"Dad hasn't been staying in touch with you?!" I gasped.

"No. Well, I can't blame him, with how he's been traveling all over... He always hated doing paperwork and checking in with people when we were in the knights together, so I wasn't expecting much. I assumed he probably wasn't dead since he's traveling with the Mythicals," Lico said dryly.

"I-I'm SO sorry...!"

Daaaad! At least write her a letter! You can't leave her out to dry after proposing to her! You're making Lico worry! You doofus!

"You should tell him off about that later, mm," Mirage said.

"You're right, I should. And I'll tell Nakona about it, too," I responded.

"I think he's still asleep in his roooooom," Jiril said. "Licorice, would you come with us to the second floooooor dining hall?"

"Do you mind showing me the way, Jiril?" Lico asked.

"I don't miiiind, though I would have liked to indulge in Lord Renge's fuuuur," Jiril replied.

"I'm absolutely going to pat him, mm!" Mirage insisted.

"Yes, yes, go and let him give you a toooooouch," Jiril permitted, leaving to show Lico to Dad.

I promised to talk to Lico later and headed over to the fluffiness contest. There were a lot of women there, squealing about how cute the two fluffy beasts were and petting them. Both Air and Renge looked very smug and proud of themselves, even in canine form.

“This doggy is so fluffy and soft! It smells nice too, like it’s rinsing its fur with shampoo.”

“Yeah, it smells great. It smells like the shampoo the Holy Woman makes. Does she make shampoo for dogs, too?”

This was a dubious compliment, since I didn’t make pet shampoo. Renge bathed in human form using human shampoo.

I’ve never made pet shampoo! But maybe I should try making it.

“And this doggie has such pretty fur, too. So soft... And it has this wild animalistic musk!”

“Yeah, this smell is just right... This animal stench. That’s what a large dog’s fur should smell like.”

“Yeah... It’s different from the smell of shampoo. It doesn’t have the same kind of human...ego, but just that primal smell of nature you can only find in the wilderness. Nothing like it.”

The women who liked Air’s musk seemed to be bona fide dog lovers. Or maybe wolf lovers? I guess his animalistic musk overpowers the senses.

“Let’s try petting them, too!” Lord Revireus enthusiastically strode forward and I followed close behind.

“Ah, Lord Revireus, Holy Woman!” the women exclaimed in surprise.

“Please do join us in petting them!” one woman invited, moving aside to give us space.

“By the way, do you know where these doggies came from? They just showed up and let us fawn over them...” another woman said.

I’m surprised you just started petting them, then. You’re braver than I give you credit for... Oh, the merchants are in on it, too.

“I think they’re having a fluffiness contest,” I explained. “Could you speak up and say whose fur you like better?”

“Wait, really? That’s adorable!”

Both Renge and Air looked very proud, but everyone just went “Large doggies

are so cute!” and seemed to care about that more than they did for their fur. But I had a feeling Renge would get mad at Lord Reverius later for glomping him and burying his face in his fur to take big whiffs of his scent...

“Would you like to pet them too, Holy Woman?” one of the women asked me.

“Of course,” I said instantly.

Would it be fair if I didn’t get to indulge in their fluff? But Mirage and Lord Revireus had Renge caught in their bear hugs—he looked a bit bothered, actually—so I decided to pet Air’s fluffy fur instead.

“Wow, it really is soft... S-So soft...and fluffy...fluffy, wuffy...”

“Holy Woman, your vocabulary is plummeting into the nonsensical.”

Air’s fur felt very different from Renge’s. He had very little fur that was rough on the surface, the hairs being thin and tender. And then there was the smell—the animalistic stench. It was certainly intense. Renge had a bit of the same smell when he took beast form, but this smell was basically the product of pheromones. When humans or demi-humans got used to this smell, it gave a sense of euphoria.

And then there was the smooth texture on his jaw. It was like I could keep rubbing my cheek against it forever...

“So good...”

“Hrmph!” Air snorted proudly.

But then I heard a whimper behind me.

“Ah! Ren— I mean, I’m going to pat this doggie, too!” I declared. Renge wasn’t happy with me picking Air first.

Favoritism isn’t very nice. And I should let Lord Revireus and Mirage pet Air, too.

“I’ll pet you now,” I said and started stroking Renge’s fur.

Aah, it’s Renge’s fur. Its topcoat is rough as always, but it’s overall soft...

His hair was always soft in human form, but his fur was different when he was

in beast form. I traced my hand over his spine, which was hard to the touch, and then sank my fingers into the depression in his neck, scratching it. The base of his legs was covered in fluffy fur, which meant that I could relish both softness and smoothness by patting both his head and flank at the same time.

M-My vocabulary...i-it's dying! How is he so fluffy-wuffy?!

I got the urge to hug him. I buried my face in his neck and took a long sniff. I could smell the thick fragrance of shampoo and, deep within that, the clear musk of an animal.

That's the good stuff... Actually, no, that's not quite it.

Renge's warmth, the smell of his hair. I couldn't snuggle up to him like this when he was in human form. We were still too awkward for it. But this...this was soothing.

"Which do you prefer, Holy Woman?" one of the onlooking women asked me.

"Oh, erm! I, uh, yes... I think I prefer Renge's. It's more familiar," I said, still indulging in it.

"Renge's?!" all the women cried out.

"Huh? Uh-oh!"

The people here might have realized that the dog here was Renge, but with another dog the same size as him, it was hard to tell which it was.

"Is that actually Renge?!" one of the women asked.

"Pardon my faux pas!" I squeaked.

"Then who's this...?" They turned to look at Air.

Everyone started to realize what it meant to have another big black dog sitting next to Renge. This implied neither were dogs and that the second one must have been someone like Renge.

As everyone stared at him, the second beast chuckled as a black mist enveloped him. Seeing this, Renge took on human form, too.

"Who are you?!" everyone asked.

Most of them had never seen Air before.

“This is Renge’s great uncle, Air,” I introduced him.

“Hmm, it seems people can’t make up their mind, even though my fur is definitely better,” Air mused.

“I told you, the shampoo Tina made makes my hard fur soft, fluffy, and fragrant,” Renge insisted.

“Isn’t it disgusting for a beast to smell of flowers?” Air huffed. “It’s much more beastly to smell like the wild.”

“I thought we were competing over fur, not smell,” Renge pointed out.

“You’re the one who brought up smell to begin with,” Air countered.

In the end, fur is what matters to them, I guess. It’s a source of pride for them both.

“Wow... So this is a Mythical Beast...” one of the onlookers said in amazement.

“I can’t believe it. Those big dogs took on human form...”

“Well, either way,” Air ignored them and carried on. “I was able to prove just how wonderful my fur is.”

I guess he’s pleased. That’s good... Maybe I should have Ledo make me a brush for their fur.

“Well, now that we’ve had our fun, it’s about time I took Revireus and the Holy Woman to the divine realm,” Air said, recalling his task now that the contest was over.

“Oh, you’re taking us along?!” Lord Revireus asked excitedly.

“Are you ready, Holy Woman?” Air asked me.

“E-Erm, yes!” I nodded.

“Are you really going?” Renge asked me, concerned.

“Y-Yeah. If I don’t do something, the Stella could become dangerous, and Lady Akari wouldn’t want to see that happen, would she? I’ll go learn how to control it so that doesn’t happen.”

“I...see,” was all he had to say.

I had to wonder why Renge wouldn't come along, but apparently, he wasn't willing to do so, and it wasn't my place to insist and force his hand.

But then, a loud rumbling came from my stomach.

Silence hung in the air.

“Did you forget to eat your breakfast, Holy Woman? You cooked for Air, hmm... Maybe you should go after eating?” Mirage suggested.

“C-Can it wait until after breakfast?” I asked Air.

“Go right ahead.”

Time for breakfast, I suppose...



AFTER I sat down for breakfast, I explained the situation to Dad, who was awake and joining me at the table in the dining hall. He was pretty flustered. *Of course he'd be flustered, what with Lico sitting next to me.* Despite me only being awake for two hours longer than him, there was already a lot to fill him in on.

“I mean, after everything you said, I can see why you'd want to go study how to control the Stella,” he said. “But will you be coming back from the, uh...divine realm, was it?”

“Well, yes, that's what the teleportation slime is for.” I pointed at the navy-blue-colored slime, which was jiggling on the table. Its beady eyes reminded me I had torn it in half just a while ago. “Air taught me how to use it, though I haven't tried it yet. By the way,” I changed the topic, “how are things going between you two?”

“Huh?!” Lico and Dad both tensed up.

As his daughter, I thought now would be a good time to ask. Lico was giving up her noble status, meaning she was free to marry! And if they were going to get married, they could hold the ceremony in Deshmel's dance hall. Everyone would work hard to prepare meals and presents, and Nakona and I had to work on Dad's groom outfit. Things were going to get busy!

“W-Well, hm, once L-Lico’s affairs are in order, I thought, well...” Dad mumbled and trailed off.

“Speaking of, Marcus, where are you living right now?” Lico asked. “I’ve heard you’re going between Rofola and Deshmel.”

“Y-Yeah, I’m assuming I’ll spend more time in Deshmel going forward, what with the development project to set up a large town here...”

“Really? Is there a proposal for it already?” Lico asked.

“I’ll let you see it when we’re done talking. It’ll probably take years to make it happen, and we’ll need to gather settlers,” Dad explained.

“Interesting.” Lico nodded.

Huh, I thought the atmosphere was right a second ago, but now it’s all gone.

They discussed the plan, talking about hiring accountants, getting nobles to pay money in exchange for rights in the new town, and hiring scribes to get in touch with high nobles from other countries. Lico was giving Dad advice from a noble’s perspective.

That’s a world I’m not familiar with at all...

“So, it’s not like we can just build all those facilities and get them to start working...” Dad pondered.

“If you’re going to set up a buffer zone in the middle of the continent like this, every country in the human continent will have to get involved. We’ll have to send letters to the demi-human continent and other wealthy individuals to ensure they don’t complain about being left out. We should also demand equal amounts of materials, personnel, and money from each to develop their zones. Will the Mythical continent get involved with this too?” Lico asked.

“Yeah, I’ve been in talks with Renge about it,” Dad said.

Oh, right... Renge is the Great Curalius’ representative. I was hoping he’d come with me to the divine realm, but...I guess he’s got his hands full here...

“Oh, so that means you and Lico will both be staying at Deshmel together for a while,” I pointed out.

Both of them stiffened and looked away from each other bashfully.

...Dorks.

"I...I suppose," Dad mumbled.

"Yes, I suppose I'll be imposing on you for a while. Tinaris, could you arrange a room for me?" Lico asked.

My eyes widened. She was actually going to stay in Deshmel! A former state alchemist from a large country like De Marl would be living in the same place as me! Under the same roof as me!

So that means...!

"Let's renovate!" I exclaimed.

"But why?" Dad and Lico asked as one.

"I want to make an alchemy laboratory for Lico and me!" I said enthusiastically.

Lico got to her feet, her chair screeching against the floor. Dad, Jiril, and Mirage all looked at her, baffled.

"Let's do it!" Lico cheered.

"Hey, Lico—" Dad tried to protest.

"Yeah, let's do it!" I nodded, jumping to join her. "We can make the walls thick to withstand any explosions, set up large cauldrons and a garden for harvesting alchemical reagents at any time..."

"Yes, thick walls are a good idea!" Lico agreed wholeheartedly. "That way we won't have to worry about explosions. If I can work with you by my side, even if I blow things up, you'll always be there to heal me. It's perfect! Mm, if that's the case, I'd like an underground laboratory. It'd be perfect if it's as large as this dining hall."

"What's perfect about that?! Cut that out, Lico! What are you even going to work on in that lab? Don't do anything dangerous!" Dad tried to stop our glee from spiraling out of control.

"That sounds wonderful!" I kept going, ignoring him. "Having a medicine

cabinet and drying room next door would be useful. Ah, and we can set up a reference room! With bookshelves from wall to wall, full of alchemy books from all over the world...”

“Yes...! That sounds perfectly ideal!”

“A drying room for drying herbs, and a fermentation room for fermenting them. And a vast underground cellar for storing chemicals, and another room for prepared medicine. And a vault for ingredients would be nice, too...” I said, listing the ideas off one after the other.

Lico’s research would allow me to access all sorts of ingredients I’d never run into myself. The type of alchemy she deals with is different from what an apothecary like me deals with, so I could gain a lot of new and different alchemical knowledge!

“Let’s incorporate all that into the blueprints,” Lico said.

“Hey,” Dad tried to butt in.

“Yes! Please!” I nodded enthusiastically.

“Hey!” Dad raised his voice in frustration, still completely ignored by the women in his life.

Lico and I sharing an alchemy lab together... I can’t wait for the day that happens!



WITH a full stomach, I made my way to the third-floor lounge, where Air and Lord Revireus were waiting for me. Dad did end up giving me his blessing to go.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting! I’m ready to go,” I said.

“Let’s get going, then,” Air smiled. “Throw the teleportation slime on the floor.”

“...Wh-Why do we have to be so mean to it?!”

“That’s how you’re supposed to use it. Don’t worry, just try it.”

“I feel bad about it though...”

I was taken aback by Air’s cruel instructions. The poor slime sitting on my

shoulder trembled fearfully. Even if that was how it was meant to be used, it still weighed on my conscience. I picked the slime up from my shoulder and placed it on my palm. It looked up at me with those beady eyes—and then plummeted from my hand.

“Whoa!”

It fell to the floor and split into three, one of them forming a ring. The other two remained in their broken form.

It memorized what we did last time? Wow!

“Leave one of the coordinate parts hidden here in this room,” Air instructed.

“Hide it...?”

“Like this.” Air picked up one of the remaining two and threw it at the ceiling.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed.

Rough! Why do you have to be so rough with it? That’s violent! The poor thing!

But the slime he threw disappeared into the ceiling and became invisible.

It can do that? The slime continued to amaze me.

“It only makes sense to hide the coordinate slimes. If someone takes away the coordinate you leave on this side, you’ll end up being teleported to wherever it’s taken instead,” Air warned.

“That sounds bad...”

“Just leave it with Renge,” Air said. “Yes, you should do that next time. He went off somewhere, saying he was called to the Mythical continent, but if it’s to protect you, I’m sure he’d accept.”

“Renge got called back to the mythical continent?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, Mother called him over, saying the Colossals formed a faction and are moving in,” Lord Revireus explained.

“Colossals?”

I’d never heard of a race like that before. I would have assumed they were

demi-humans, but apparently they were categorized as Mythicals. According to Lord Revireus, they were among the least intelligent Mythical races, acting more on instinct than anything else. They had a culture of pillaging and raiding, and believed the strong should rule their continent. And since the Great Curalius was approaching the end of her life and weakening, they were displeased with the idea of her leading them.

“They’re dumb and think anyone can be leader so long as they’re strong,” Lord Revireus said. “But you know that’s not true, right?”

“Absolutely,” I nodded.

The Great Curalius was a very wise and capable leader. She served as a mediator between the leaders of the human continent and the demi-human continent as well. Strength wasn’t everything.

“I wanted to be more like Mother and conduct myself more calmly...” Lord Revireus sighed. “But remaining composed just isn’t in my nature.”

“How so...?” I asked.

“He means his red dragon nature,” Air chuckled.

Is aggression like a physical inclination of some kind...?

“But I don’t think a prince has to rule the same as his predecessor,” Air said. “A red dragon like you will do just fine bringing people together and dragging them to where they need to be. Just do what comes naturally and be the kind of king you’re meant to be.”

“M-Me, a king...?” Lord Revireus repeated, surprised.

“Yes. Renge is strong, certainly, but he doesn’t have the qualities of a king,” Air stated. “He’s more suited to deifying and becoming a guardian to the world over becoming a king when he’s not suited to it.”

Ah...

I knew Renge had no interest in becoming the Mythical continent’s leader. Air was telling him to deify based on his personality, but Renge wasn’t up to it. I could understand Air being frustrated with him. He only suggested it because he thought it was best for Renge, but he was turned down instead.

What do you want to do, Renge? What do you want to become? I mean, you can be anything. What do you want to be? Look like? To do? I never really asked him about that before, either. Would he tell me if I asked?

“Ah, Almighty Air, is it possible for me to serve as both the leader of the Mythical continent and protector of this world?!” Lord Revireus asked.

“That’s a little greedy, but I don’t particularly mind,” Air responded with a ghost of a smile. “Of course you can, but you’d need to undergo rigorous training to do that.”

“I’ll do it!”

“Good, I like that youthful indiscretion! Very admirable. I like this stupid recklessness red dragons like you have.” Air looked satisfied.

Was that a compliment...?

“You have the other coordinate slime stored away safely?” Air asked me.

“Yes.”

“Then this time, I’ll set our coordinates in the divine realm. When we get there, throw this slime into the forest. That should set your coordinates.”

There’s a forest there? What kind of place is the divine realm? I wondered.

“Now, jump into the circle, both of you,” Air ordered us.

“Now?” Lord Revireus and I were both baffled.

“I set the coordinates, so you can pass through it now.”

We stared in silence at the circle drawn by the slime.

Did he just tell us to jump in there?

“You look like you might fall through, Holy Woman, but don’t worry, you won’t get hurt,” Air said. “I’ll go on ahead, then.”

“Ah, wait...!” I said. He was moving things along too fast!

Air hopped into the circle and vanished.

No way, for real?!

“Wait here. I’ll go in first and check if it’s safe,” Lord Revireus said.

“Thank you, Lord Revireus!”

He acted pretty rough around the edges most of the time, but he proved himself reliable every now and then. He stepped into the circle, but the moment his leg moved inside it, the floor under him vanished to reveal what looked like outer space.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed.

With one leg submerged in the space, he tumbled and hit the side of his face against the floor.

“Lord Revireus, are you all right?!”

With one of his legs sinking into the hole, it was only natural he’d fall over like this.

Where is his other leg now?!

“Ow...!” Lord Revireus complained. “This is weird, it’s like my leg isn’t touching anything!”

“That sounds scary!”

“I guess I may as well put in my other leg... Let’s go!”

“Be careful!”

It’s not that we didn’t believe in Air, but we were confused because this exceeded our imagination. Being a Mythical, Lord Revireus was used to teleporting across long distances, but he never experienced anything like this. As I looked on in concern, he suddenly stuck his head out of the circle.

“It’s safe. This thing is amazing!” he exclaimed.

“Erm, yes, amazing...is how I’d put it...”

“Hurry up!” he said with a smile and retreated back into the circle.

“Really?”

I’d never seen him look this excited before, which only made it more intimidating. But I already decided I’d go!

“Let’s do this!” I pepped myself up.

I stepped into the slime circle and dived into the hole it created. A sense of weightlessness overtook me for a second, and then I impacted what felt like the ground.

“Owie!”

“Hey, why are you lying curled up in a ball? It’s dangerous,” I heard Lord Revireus say.

“I-It hurts, though... What else was I supposed to—”

Me falling implied there was gravity and land I could hit. The slime was at my feet, still twisted into a ring-like string.

“This is the divine realm?” I looked around.

The sky above us looked like outer space, but there was ground under us. All around us was a field of flowers, full of the three major flowers—Duana, Lilith, and Solan. A soft wind blew, scattering flower petals into the space... And there was also what looked like a grave.

“Welcome to the core of Wisty Air,” Air said with a smile, standing beside the grave. “To the divine realm.”

Directly above the grave spanned an azure sky. Clouds sailed lazily in the sky as bright sunlight shined down upon the grave. It was a strange place and an unbelievable sight. It was like night and day, like heaven and earth all existed simultaneously here.



“Spherits...” I uttered in realization.

“Correct. It’s only natural a Spherit Folk would be able to tell,” Air said.

The countless dots sparkling like stars in what looked like outer space were in fact Spherits, going back and forth between the core and the world’s surface. They broke down the souls of the dead and brought them here, where they were further broken down into Air that fed back into the world.

This was the natural law of this world, and this place was what enabled this function. It was a truly strange place, where everything started and ended.

“Let’s get started, then,” Air said, announcing the training was about to begin.

“Okay!” I said.

“Oh, I’m getting excited! Train me however you will!” Lord Revireus looked absolutely pumped up.

“Good.” Air nodded, pleased with our willingness. “I’ll give each of you a task. I’ll come check on you when it becomes evening on the surface, so work on it until then. Holy Woman, you first.”

“All right!”

I can’t just sit still while I’m here!

I placed the slime on my shoulder and approached Air.

“Your control of your power is based on how well you can recognize the Stella’s power inside you,” he explained. “At the moment, you have no grasp of how powerful or large the Stella is.”

“Erm... Grasp it... Okay. But how can I...?” I asked.

“Place your hand over the stone on your forehead, where the Stella is contained, and try to sense it. A human or demi-human wouldn’t be capable of it, but Spherit Folk can wield the Spherits’ power. With this, you’ll learn how to control the Stella in the process of manipulating the Spherits. If you learn how to control the Spherits here in the divine realm, you’ll be able to use the Spherits’ powers to effectively disperse the Stella, blocking its effects on the minds of others. The Stella and the Spherits are all a part of me, and the Spherit

Folk are a race with the inborn capacity to slightly control the Stella, which was born from me. This is why when your Spherit Stones evolve, they become Stones of Daybreak that can grant any wish.”

“So that’s why...”

A species with the power to manipulate god’s power... I guess I was born into an absurdly powerful race. That’s now extinct...

“Wield the power of the Spherits as if it was your own. The Spherit Folk have that authority. But of course, if you aspire for more than that, you’ll have to accept appropriate responsibilities,” he informed me.

“What do you mean, wish for more than that?” I asked.

“I mean considering deification. If you deify through using my power, you’ll become my minion. You wouldn’t have the same freedom those who deify on their own enjoy. You’d be forced to obey me without question.”

“What?! Ew!”

So this means that if I deify, I’ll definitely become Air’s minion! Not that I want to become a god...

“Revireus, you come with me,” Air said, turning to him and ignoring the shocking truth he left with me. “I’ll need to test your current strength for now.”

“You got it!”

“Holy Woman, you practice sensing your power here,” Air said to me. “It’s not an easy task.”

“All right!”

I would be training in my own way, while Lord Revireus would be undertaking martial training under Air. The slime was sitting on my shoulder, and for some reason, other slimes inhabiting the divine realm started gathering around me.

Whoa, there are so many slimes like this one here. But they’re all smaller than the one Air brought me... Maybe my slime is considered big among its fellow slimes?

But then I realized I was being distracted by the slimes and forgot why I came.

I needed to train and learn how to control the Stella!

Air said I should learn how to sense the Stella within me, right? And to do that, I need to learn how to sense and use the power of the Spherits first.

Sensing the Spherits wasn't at all difficult for me, though. I was used to taking in Air from the atmosphere to replenish my mana, and that enabled me to sense the elements of the Air that were similar to me. It's said that Spherit Folk incorporated the Spherits into their bodies, so if I sensed something similar to me in the Air, it had to have been the Spherits.

"Whoa."

As I focused, I could see tiny, thread-like red lights all around me. Those were Spherits.

"Wow..."

The space-like night sky that spanned above me undulated with red and white lights. Was it reacting to my mana?

"Spherits, please lend me your power." I brought my hands together in prayer. "I wish to sense the Stella residing in my Spherit Stone. Please, give me your aid."

The red lights started coiling around me. It didn't feel unpleasant, but rather like the red, faint lights were moving to protect me. It felt warm and encouraging.

As that happened, I was able to grasp a stronger image of the Stella residing in the stone in my forehead.

It's so...big. Or rather, intense. It's nothing like what I imagined.

It was truly a powerful force, much too dangerous for mere humans to wield. But it was fine-tuned to be used by one person, a woman.

A power for Lady Akari's use alone.

And since I'd accepted it, it was beginning to change its nature to take the form of a power suited for me.

So that's why it's getting stronger. This power was originally meant for Akari,

but it's adapting itself so I can better tap into it. That's why I can use more advanced levels of it. It's developing for me, even now!

I groaned. I could understand this much, but I still wasn't able to grasp its full image. I could tell it was a great, powerful white force, but that was all. It was as complex as a maze, too inescapable and difficult for the mortal mind to grasp. It was nothing like ordinary Air—

It's probably divine power.

I learned to sense its presence, but its sheer size and span left me lost and confused.

This is definitely going to take a while...

As I continued trying to focus, without much success, Air showed up and told me, much to my surprise, that it was evening time. Time really did go by before I knew it...



“HOW did things go with Lord Revireus?” I asked.

“Well, since unlike you, he doesn't have any real jobs to speak of, I told him to stay in the divine realm for now and focus on training,” Air said. “He's not even close to Renge's power, which is honestly disappointing, but I know he'll grow. Dragons mature quickly.”

“Interesting...”

I was worried about Lord Revireus. Renge told me that Air's training hinges on being life-threatening. And he said that with a very traumatized look in his eyes.

“From here on out, I want you to come here whenever you have the time to train,” Air said. “The sooner you learn to control it, the easier it'll be for you. And honestly, I'm surprised you've progressed so much and learned how to sense the Spherits on your first day. I wasn't expecting much out of you, given half of your blood is *human*.”

He always said “human” like it was a dirty word.

“I was a bit surprised, too,” I said. “But since I learned the mana recovery technique, sensing the Spherits was easier than I expected.”

“Hmm. So your endeavors thus far have borne unexpected fruit, is what you’re saying.”

“Yes.”

When he put it like that, it made me feel a hint of pride. After all, my work as an alchemical apothecary was what gave me this edge.

“If you keep up this fast pace, you might learn to control the Stella sooner than I expected... Hmm. Holy Woman Tinaris, do you have any interest in deifica —”

“None whatsoever,” I flat-out declined.

“Drat,” Air said, looking very much stumped.

“Oh, would you like to have dinner?” I asked, trying to cheer him up.

“What are you thinking of making?”

“Hmm. That’s a good question.”

I’d been making a lot of rice-based meals recently, so I felt like I should diversify for dinner.

Hmm, but I could make curry... Maybe curry rice would do? I have some curry powder left over, so maybe we should go with that. But then again, I haven’t perfected the flavor yet, and I wouldn’t want to serve it to Air when I’m not confident I did it well yet...

“Right! Let’s go with a mouth-watering chicken!” I said.

“Mouth-watering chicken? What’s that?” Air looked suspicious. “Is it a dish? That doesn’t sound very appetizing.”

“Yes! It’s called that because remembering it makes your mouth water. It’s good with rice, I have the ingredients for it, and I’ve been meaning to try it!”

“So you’re experimenting on me.”

“Pretty much! I remember all the steps, so it’ll be my test dish.”

“A test dish, eh?”

Unlike curry powder, I made this dish once in my past life. I never made it in

this world, but I had everything needed for it, and I'd been dying to try it.

As I walked up from the parlor to the second-floor dining hall after teleporting back to the fort, I ran into Jiril and Mirage, who were relieved to see me back.

"Oh, good, you're back, Holy Woman! Mm!"

"What a relieeeef! Do something about thaaaat!"

"What?" I asked.

Apparently they weren't relieved that I was safe, but because they were waiting for me to return and resolve some kind of problem. They pointed at Dad and Lico, who were grabbing each other angrily by the collar.

Wait, weren't things just hunky-dory between them before I left?

"What happened?" I asked.

I was fairly confident it wasn't anything too major, but since Jiril and Mirage wanted me to handle it, it must have been something personal.

"Well, you see, mm, they're arguing over how to educate Moné."

"Oooh. Yes, I see." I nodded.

That pretty much answered my question. Since we sent René abroad to study, Dad likely wanted Moné to study to become an alchemical apothecary, too. Moné, however, sent a letter asking to stay at the Rofola Lodge to fill in for my share of the work. This was something Dad could resolve by just talking it over with Moné, but when he consulted Lico for help, they started arguing.

After all, Lico was a researcher at heart when it came to alchemy. She would likely prefer for Moné to attend an alchemy school in De Marl. That led to further disagreements, leading to how they were arguing now. Mirage and Jiril's story added up in my mind.

"Dad, Lico!" I stepped in. "If you're going to argue, do it in private!"

"Tina?! You're back!" Dad exclaimed.

"What was the divine realm like?" Lico asked me, instantly changing the topic. Typical.

"It was an amazing place. But forget that, were you two arguing over Moné?"

I asked.

“W-Well, yeah.” Dad looked a bit sheepish. “Lico said that Moné is a talented alchemical apothecary, but she doesn’t hold a candle to you.”

“That goes without saying.” Lico was insistent. “Maybe you can tell both of them have talent, but Tinaris is an exceptional alchemist. There’s no comparing Moné to her!”

Huh? Compared to me...? I wasn’t expecting to be a part of the argument.

“Dad, Lico’s right this time!” I scolded him.



“Huh? But she can make medium-grade tonics now. Isn’t that impressive?” he pressed back.

“It is, but not when compared to me! I’m a Spherit Folk, and that lets me easily produce potions humans can’t ever hope to make!”

That was one thing that made the fact Moné was inspired by me a bit regrettable. For example, the mana restorative. I could make it easily because I used the same abilities Spherit Folk used when imbuing stones with Spherits to create Spherit Stones. My race meant I could create all sorts of potions and medicines humans simply couldn’t create. Expecting Moné to be on the same level as me would just be placing unreasonable expectations on her!

“Moné is a normal human, like you, Dad...” I said. “And the fact she can make medium-grade tonics at such a young age is just a testament to the effort she put in. You can’t compare her with me. I—”

There’s no other Spherit Folk but me in this world. I’m not like Dad or Moné, I’m not human...

“Don’t compare her with me,” I said, a little sad. “Moné’s her own person. You should talk to her directly and listen to what she wants to do. It’s her life to live, you know?”

“...You’re right. Yes... I’m sorry, Tina,” Dad said, hanging his head.

“See? I was right!” Lico said victoriously, pulling on Dad’s ear.

“F-Fine, fine, I was wrong, you were right! Just let go!” He conceded defeat.

Dad was able to admit when he was wrong. I was always so impressed by that trait of his.

“I’ll talk to Moné and ask her what she wants to do,” he decided.

“You do that.” I nodded.

“Personally, I’d like for her to experiment with other types of alchemy,” Lico added.

“But the alchemy you work on is for combat, right? Moné became an alchemist because she admired Tina’s path as an apothecary,” Dad argued. “I’m

not sure she's interested in your kind of violent alchemy."

"You don't know that. Alchemy isn't just about making medicine. If she tries other kinds of alchemy, it'll help her expand her horizons," Lico said.

"You just want to prop up a worthy successor." Dad shrugged. "Not that I'm sure why, you already have Lys."

"He's too occupied with his research to help out with mine," Lico pouted.

Oh, no, they're flaring up again. Why are these two always like this...?

"I'll go make dinner!" I declared loudly to break up their rising tension.

"Ooh, dinner...?" they both said, clearly interested.

Good, that got them to pipe down.

I walked into the kitchen and put on my apron. Mouth-watering chicken. In this world, chickens were called Ukoks, which meant it would technically be called mouth-watering Ukok. I started by steaming some Ukok breast. Once it was properly steamed, I put on some preprepared sauce and garnished it with fine-cut onions.

The sauce was made of a soy sauce base, with ground ginger, carrot, honey, vinegar, olives and some ground red peppers to substitute for chili oil.

...How will I go about making chili oil? I'd love to have some for Chinese cooking. And if I get some white rice, I could make pilaf and fried rice. And doria, and kung pao rice, and paella...! Rice is such a versatile food! But wait, just making the mouth-watering Ukok isn't enough. I shouldn't put it off and make some fried rice!

Some people didn't like fried rice, but in my past life, we'd cook it with leftovers, and it was pretty much the dish of the year. We'd cut up any leftover meat or veggies from last night's dinner and throw them in the pan with some rice, mix in a beaten egg, and add condiments for flavor. I know some people aren't into it, but this was my personal preference.

"Just remembering it is making my mouth water... So, mouth-watering Ukok and leftover fried rice it is!" I declared.

"Oooh!" everyone around me exclaimed, impressed.

“Shouldn’t you cook some fresh rice instead?” Mirage asked.

“Sorry, I don’t have time to prepare it...”

Jiril and Mirage helped me cook, but they couldn’t handle all the cooking entirely on their own. Given I’d be away more often now, I started considering introducing more people who could cook to the second-floor dining hall.

This dining hall was the closest to my room, and all the people I know have been eating here for as long as I was here. Dad’s been too busy, so having him in the kitchen for once was encouraging, though.

“And who is this...Mythical man?” Lico asked, looking at Air.

“Oh, yeah, this is your first time meeting him, isn’t it?” Dad said. “Well, you might not believe it, but this is the creator deity, Air...supposedly.”

“Come again?” Lico asked.

“That’s right,” Air said with a thin smile. “I’m the one and only god of this world. A pleasure to meet you, mate of the Holy Woman’s father.”

“Huh?!”

Right, this is Lico’s first time meeting Air. Everyone’s taught about this world’s one and only creator deity when they’re little. It only makes sense she’d be confused to see him right in front of her.

“What’s going on here, Marcus?” Lico turned to Dad. “This can’t really be Air.”

“It really is him, the one and only,” Dad said, shrugging.

“I found the part about Tinaris training in the divine realm hard to believe as it is, but now an actual god showed up here...? This is absurd.” Lico shook her head.

“I get how you feel... I have a hard time believing it too,” Dad sighed.

“I can hear everything you say, you know?” Air said sarcastically. “I think that’s enough skepticism, let’s eat before the food the Holy Woman made goes cold. Your cooking is very novel and fascinating. I’m really glad I summoned you here.”

It seemed Air was solely focused on dinner. The mouth-watering Ukok was

one thing, but I didn't think fried rice was the kind of food worthy of serving to a god. Still, this was what I made, so it was too late to regret it now.

I brought a few distilled drinks from the shelf and offered him some alcohol, hoping it might improve his mood. But instead of Air, Dad and Lico seemed more interested in the ale.

I always warn them they drink too much. I should warn them not to get plastered in front of Air.

"Hmm, this is delicious," Air said as he tasted the meal. "This bird goes quite well with the alcohol."

"It does?!" Dad and Lico perked up in perfect unison.

"It's satisfying to chew on and makes for a good snack to drink with. That said, my body breaks down toxins in seconds as it is, so it's hard for me to get drunk," Air sighed.

"Oh, you can't get drunk? Now that's a pity," Lico remarked.

"That's just how my body works. Not much I can do about this," Air answered, taking a sip nonetheless.

Dad and Lico filled their glasses with alcohol and started drinking alongside Air. But they weren't the only drinkers here, it seemed.

"Maybe we should participate too, mm?" Mirage said, picking up a glass.

Dad and Lico invited her over, glad to have someone else to party with. Jiril joined in, too, bringing in a barrel of ale while saying it couldn't possibly be enough.

Oh, boy...

"Do you make alcohol, Holy Woman?" Air asked me.

"I haven't come of age yet, so I can't drink," I said.

"Of age...?" Air parroted me, looking baffled.

"Hmm, I mean the age where I'm legally considered an adult. In the human continent, you're only considered an adult who can drink and get married when you turn eighteen."

“Oh, humans do have this tendency to want to distinguish children from adults,” Air remarked.

That’s a pretty big generalization...

“But I’ll admit setting a clear point where one leaves the protection of their parents and becomes independent is a good thing,” Air said. “For my race, it’s conditional. It happens when one’s third eye opens, armored fur starts growing, and we become capable of fully taking on a human appearance.”

“Huh...”

“That’s how Cerberi handle this matter of adulthood. Renge clears all those conditions, but half of his blood is human, and he’s never left this world. Many of my nephews hate humans, and none of them have come to see him or acknowledge him as part of our clan.”

“...They don’t?”

Renge’s an adult, but he’s not acknowledged as part of his own race?

“I acknowledge him, though, so it’s fine,” Air shrugged and sipped on his drink. “And I acknowledge you becoming his mate, Holy Woman. Albeit, I’m not sure if a Spherit Folk like you will be able to have children with him.”

“W-We haven’t even started thinking about having children!” I said, going red in the face.

“Even if you can have children, they’d probably count as a new race of demi-human,” Air carried on, undisturbed. “Since they’ll draw on Renge’s blood, they’ll probably be categorized as beast-type, and if they are able to wield the black flame, it’d make it tricky to raise them on the human continent.”

“Erm...!”

Isn’t this going too fast? I’d like to have kids with Renge someday, yes, but we’re not even married yet...and I do want to do that properly!

“Oh, yes, Holy Woman, how have things been going between you two, mm?” Mirage joined in.

“What?!” My voice cracked.

“Your father and stepmother are heeeere, so why don’t you tell uuuuus?” Jiril asked. “You’re turning eighteen next year, which means you’ll be of aaaaage. You’ll be alloooowed to marry, and you want to have children someday, yees? And even if there’s a while before that haaaaappens, like Air saaaays, your children will be a new species. We don’t know what they’ll be liiiiike, and maybe you won’t be able to raaaaaaise them on the human continent. Will you move to one of the other continents theeen?”

“M-Move?”

Jiril barraged me with questions, all of which were things I hadn’t considered. Children with Renge, the difference in the continents, what will happen when we get married.

“I, em, uh...” I stuttered, lost for answers.

“You never considered any of that, have yooooou?” Jiril grinned.

I groaned. My excuse was that it always felt like a long way off, but she was right, I would be of age next year, which meant marriage was on the table. Not that I had to marry as soon as I came of age, of course, and both Renge and I were long-lived species.

“Won’t letting the right time slip by make you keep putting it off?” Mirage asked.

That is...a very convincing argument.

“Maybe I should warn Renge about putting it off,” Dad said.

“That’s right, we can’t let Tinaris get married late. Let me tell you, getting married when you’re old is shameful,” Lico said sagely.

I squeaked. It was convincing, coming from her...

“But don’t you think Renge gets a say in this, too?” I asked awkwardly.

“We can call him over and ask. You there, dryad lady, go get Renge,” Air ordered.

“Understooooood!”

“What?!?”

They're actually calling him over?!?

Jiril teleported away with a pop, and then appeared in front of us again with Renge a few seconds later.

"Y-You came that fast?! Renge, what about the Great Curalius?!" I asked.

"She's fine. I'll be heading back when I'm done here, though. But I heard that Air's been making absurd demands of you. Are you all right?" He looked at me, worried.

I mean, that's not entirely wrong, but you could have worded it better, Jiril!

"I'm fine, i-it's just—" I stammered.

"Now then, Renge," Air cut me off. "The Holy Woman will be coming of age next year."

"Huh? She is?" Renge asked. "So that's happening next year, then. Time goes by fast."

"Ahahaha..." I laughed dryly.

Renge kind of sounded like Dad. But I did first meet him when I was a baby. My parents sent me adrift down the river to save me from the war consuming their country. I was picked up by bandits, and that's when Renge saved me. He knew me since I was a baby, so hearing I'm coming of age would elicit this response. It didn't change the fact it gave me all sorts of mixed feelings, though.

"Why are you acting like it has nothing to do with you?" Air pressed him. "Once she's of age, you two can marry. You two are mates and intend to become spouses someday, right? Then why don't you formalize your wedding once she comes of age?"

"Huh?!" Renge let out a strange yelp.

He hadn't considered a wedding at all!

"Unless... You aren't serious about her?" Air asked.

"That's not it! How could you say that?!" Renge shouted.

"Then you intend on marrying her?" Air pressed.

"I...I am, but—"

Renge trailed off into a long pause. The way Air was pressing him for details was definitely off. Dad and Lico, however, were silently sipping on their drinks and staring fixedly at Renge, demanding an answer.

All my guardians are pretty intimidating...

“I...I do intend to marry her sooner or later, but Tina and I haven’t really done much in the way of being in a relationship,” he said quietly. “I just...think we haven’t considered the prospect of marriage enough yet.”

That logic made sense. I loved Renge enough to think I was willing to marry him, but that didn’t mean I was going to hurry up and do it the moment I could.

“Then I’m allowed to make passes at the Holy Woman until then?” Air asked, a wicked grin turning up the corners of his lips.

Air?! What do you mean, ‘make passes’ at me?! I shot him a dirty look.

“What are you saying? You’ve never been interested in women to begin with,” Renge said.

Maybe he was trying to drum up jealousy in Renge? Because it didn’t feel convincing. I never got the impression Air was a man in the traditional sense, and if anything, he felt like he was on a higher plane of life compared to me. Renge was right—Air never felt like he was interested in women, or reproduction for that matter.

“Do you think I need to be interested in women to reproduce?” Air asked.

“Huh?!”

“It’s one quick way of making a half-deity,” Air said. “Half-deities already partially exceed the boundaries of simple life. That way I’ll be able to create a successor who can deify from scratch, as opposed to going to the trouble of training you. And if it were born from the Holy Woman, all races of the world would accept it.”

“Seriously, what are you saying?!” Renge shouted, looking more belligerent than he was a moment ago. He probably wasn’t taking him seriously, but he was glaring at him angrily just the same.

Is he actually jealous?

I always got the feeling that my attraction to Renge was one-sided, and he wasn't particularly drawn to me. But maybe this jealousy meant that he was, in fact, attracted to me.

"Stop trying to get Tina involved in your problems," Renge said. "Even if another world's god attacks, I'd fight them off."

"I'm sure you will, but I'd still like to have more defensive and offensive gods. Otherwise, I'd be anxious to leave this world unguarded while I hibernate."

Air's hibernation period could potentially be that dangerous, and Air was saying that even with Renge being so powerful, the enemies he could be facing would be too much even for him.

"But if you get married to the Holy Woman and produce offspring, I could train those children. A child that draws on the blood of the Spherit Folk and the Cerberi would have great potential."

"Air! This is why you're being so insistent on us getting married?! Do you plan on stealing away our children?!" Renge thundered.

"If that's what it takes, yes. It could be a child borne from me and the Holy Woman, too. In fact, it'd be faster that way."

"What?!" I recoiled.

This conversation is going off the rails! And Air's intentions here are going in unpleasant directions!

"May I ask a question, Air...?" Lico raised her hand.

"Yes?"

I couldn't tell what she had in mind, but apparently Dad told her about Air, and despite that, she had a question. Her alchemist's senses spurred her to resolve the problem.

"If you need more gods, why don't you manifest the Gods of De Marl? Surely you can use your power to manifest the gods of other countries, too."

"You're asking why I don't give form to the gods humans worship? That's not possible. If you give power to a god borne solely out of faith, it would reflect the desires of humans. They only create gods because it's a matter of convenience

for them, like how the god of Edesa Kura was used as an excuse to justify invasions. Even if humans don't do it in your era, they will eventually fall back to doing so again."

They'd simply interpret the gods in a way that suits their goals. People in my past life did that a lot, too. I remember hearing about that in history class. They interpreted religion in ways that justified invasions.

That was bound to happen again if Air were to manifest other gods. The human continent would be embroiled in religious wars.

"Then how about making a unified god?" Lico suggested.

"A unified god?"

"You'd unify the Gods of De Marl and the other gods worshipped on the human continent into one god and give them form. After all, humans aren't as intimately familiar with the legend of the creator deity. So, if the humans find out that all the gods they were taught to worship since infancy were unified by the creator deity Air, I think the people would be willing to worship it." Lico appended that creating the unified god would make people more aware of Air's power and majesty.

Whoa, that's a great idea, Lico! That's an alchemist's logic for you, once she knows she's dealing with new elements, she can piece them together into new options.

"Hm... And you think the different countries won't fight over different interpretations of the unified god? I doubt that," Air demurred. "Humans always find a way to expand interpretations in ways that suit them."

"But if it's a god that exists physically, they'll be able to shoot down any interpretations, just like you can," she countered.

"...True. But if that god lingers in one place, won't that country use that as a symbol of authority?" Air asked.

"Just make it so it doesn't reside in one place. Like...a bird, for instance. Or a speck of light. That way, even if you tried to keep it trapped somewhere, it could slip away as light and ride the wind elsewhere. It would appear wherever people are, assuage their concerns and would learn and mature alongside

mankind.”

“A god that learns and matures... Fascinating.”

Oh, looks like Air is all for it! You’re doing great, Lico! No one thought of this before!

“I’d like to pursue this further, but I’m not familiar with the gods of the human continent. Hm, remind me, what was your name again?” air asked.

“Licorice Avide... But, erm... It’ll be Licorice Ril, once my marriage is finalized.”

I could see Dad shudder from the impact of those words.

Heheh. Good going, Dad.

“The Holy Woman’s stepmother, then. Your father found himself a smart woman,” Air said to me.

“Didn’t he? She’s also my alchemist teacher!” I bragged.

“Mm-hm. Well, we can discuss the details of this later, but for the time being, I want to hear about your plans for the Holy Woman, Renge.” Air turned back to Renge.

Renge let out a small gasp.

How often do I get to hear Renge being this taken aback...?

“Are you going to marry her? When? Her birthday’s next year, so after that? Human weddings are a big social affair, if I recall. Have you planned that? And where will you live? How about children, how many are you going to have?” Air bombarded him with questions.

“I, erm, uh...”

Poor Renge! He’s getting hit with the same wave of questions I was!

“A-Air, we’ll decide that together later, so please, leave it be for today...!” I implored him.

“Then you two can figure that out together right here. You have your parents, as well as me, Renge’s teacher and blood relative. Your fates are important, both for your families and the world at large. It would be a good idea to discuss it in a wide forum. We’ve seen how wise your stepmother is.”

I could only let out a whimper. He was right, I couldn't deny that. I glanced at Renge, who looked defeated by the fact he couldn't argue against Air's reasoning.

Don't look at me like that, I can't help you here...

"We don't know how your children will turn out until they're born, and there's a possibility you won't be able to have any due to the difference in your races," Dad piped in. "But that doesn't mean you shouldn't set a date for your wedding and decide on your home."

Not you too, Dad...

He fixed his eyes on Renge, who made a croak reminiscent of a frog being squished.

"Well, Renge?" Air pressed him for an answer. "Your father never thought of the future when you were born, and left you in that house when Akari died. You were all alone until I came along. Do you intend to be the kind of irresponsible husband your father was? Of course, I don't know what your idea of a family is."

"That's not true!" Renge shouted. "I wasn't all alone...!"

"Oh, yes, Akari's younger brother was looking after you for a time, right?" Air said. "But a human's lifespan passes by quickly. You were alone after that. But this time..."

Renge's mother, Lady Akari. The previous Holy Woman and the first human acknowledged by Air. Illness claimed her life, but even after that, she lingered within the Stone of Daybreak she had left with the Great Curalius, and she was always worried for Renge.

Renge's father...a Cerberus from another world. He loved Lady Akari dearly, but never cared much for Renge. After Lady Akari died, he returned to his original world, leaving Renge all alone in this one...

That story was Renge's trauma. It was the weak point that made him most vulnerable.

"So, what are your thoughts, Renge?" Air asked him again. "Are you sure you want things to stay as they are? You want to keep stalling on making this

choice?”

“...No. Next year, when...Tina comes of age. We'll need some time to prepare, but...let's marry at the end of next year. What do you say, Tina...? Do you...really want to marry me?”

“Huh?”

Renge was fidgety and red in the cheeks.

Did he just...propose to me...?

“Ah...Yes. Of course I do...!” I squeaked out, taken aback by the intensity of what just happened.



Renge wants to marry me. Not just to be his significant other, but to really... marry me. I can't believe this. I'm so happy... Is this a dream? Is this real?

"And where do you intend to live?"

"Guh?!" Renge looked pressured by Air's question. "Well, we intend to develop Deshmel, so why don't we have a house here?"

"I don't mind," I smiled. "I'll be able to work here, after all."

That was a pretty good answer.

Making our new home in Deshmel felt right. Dad and Lico would probably have a home built in the noble area, so we could take advantage of that. But still, I wanted to go back to Rofola. But like Dad suggested, if we build a Rofola Lodge branch here in Deshmel, it might make me feel a bit more like home.

"Come to think of it, Marcus did mention he was going to live in the noble town here and set up a Rofola Lodge branch, too. Were you going to have Tina be the proprietress of that branch?" Renge asked.

"Huh...?"

"If so...I'll be willing to help. I've never had to serve customers before, so I'll need Tina to teach me how to do it," he continued.

"Ah..."

Building an inn here, and managing it with Renge? I've never even imagined that, but that...sounds perfect! I can cook, while Renge handles the customers at the counter and shows them to their rooms. We could hire people to do the cleaning and laundry, and I'd spend any free time working in Lico's lab.

It wouldn't be exactly like the Rofola Lodge, since we wouldn't be surrounded by nature, but eating meals with our guests, listening to their troubles, and offering them medicine to help their lives sounded amazing. And if we had kids, we could show them off to our guests...

René could work as a craftsman in the noble city and could come over for lunch sometimes. On days off, we could go back to Rofola and have a girls' night out with Nakona and Moné.

“I think...that’s a great idea!” I exclaimed.

“Then, erm...let’s go with that— Oh?” Renge smiled initially, but soon became expressionless. Based on his reaction, I could tell something happened.

“Did something happen to the Great Curalius?” I asked.

“The Colossals started their invasion,” he said. “We’ve got plenty of defenders, but Colossals are very durable, and it’ll be a hard battle. I’m sorry, but I have to head back. She recovered thanks to your medicine, but the Great Curalius is still quite old.”

“Why don’t you let Revireus intercept them?” Air proposed. “I could let him go if it’s for that reason.”

“I do think it’d be good to let them realize Revi is the next Mythical king, but if we let him handle it, he’ll burn the whole place down. I feel like it’d be better if I left him under your training until he learns to restrain his powers,” Renge said.

Oh, yes... Lord Revireus is pretty reckless.

Mirage and Jiril both nodded in agreement.

“Why didn’t you teach that young dragon better?” Air asked.

“I’m not good at teaching people how to fight,” Renge replied. “The Great Curalius and Eure said I’m too soft.”

“Oh, you do have a penchant for spoiling people.”

I can’t say I expected that would be why...but it does suit Renge to be too nice for that.

“I’m sorry you had to come when you’re so busy,” I said.

“No, I really wasn’t clear about things, and I’m glad we got to talk about our future. I just hope we can do everything according to schedule,” Renge said.

“That’s true.”

Just today was nerve-wracking enough. Would we really be able to get married by next year? I hung my head, but Dad walked up to me from behind and placed an encouraging hand on my shoulders.

“Don’t worry. We’ll help you prepare.”

“Yeah,” Lico said.

“That’s right, you’ve got us to help you, hm.”

“Yes! It’s your wedding with Lord Reeeenge, so we should make it a graaaand event that will go down in hiiiiistory!”

“No, we want an ordinary wedding!” Dad and I said as one.

Letting Jiril and Mirage handle it will absolutely complicate things!

Seeing all of us react this way made Renge laugh out loud.

“I’ll head back, then... I’m leaving, but Air, don’t force Tina into anything absurd,” Renge said strongly.

“I know. Goodness, it’s a shame Curalius won’t deify. She’s a dragon, after all...” Air whispered in complaint as Renge teleported away. Even as he complained, he was picking away at his mouth-watering Ukok.

I’m glad he likes it.

“She’s only weak now due to her old age, which speaks to her experience and wisdom,” he continued. “You’d think she’d be interested in deifying...”

“The Great Curalius was on the verge of reaching the end of her lifespan, so I really think you shouldn’t force any more work on her,” I said.

“Mm? Reaching the end of her lifespan? And she came back to life? How?”

“Um, well... You see...” I began to tell him what happened.

It was my...no, technically it was Lord Revireus’ fault. I accidentally made a very dangerous potion, which allowed her to cheat death. Back when I was abducted by Edesa Kura and taken captive by the Kaguya with a Will of its Own, Renge showed up to save me, and the Great Curalius helped out a lot, too.

Air listened to my story, and then fell silent.

“Hm, Air?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. In that case, I should go and get Renge to return.”

“Return? Why?”

“So I can make Curalius into a god. I’m not sure if she’ll be of much use, but

it's better than nothing."

"Where did that come from? The Colossals are attacking her right now! Why call him back?!"

Air, why do you have to do everything in the spur of the moment? What brought this on?

"Curalius probably became half-dragon half-deity," he said.

"How?"

"She was old and about to breathe her last, but your potion resuscitated her. That made her cross a certain threshold. If a dragon becomes aware that they're living a new life, they deify." Air spoke in a good mood and chewed on a chunk of Ukok before getting up. He looked ready to teleport, when suddenly, he paused. "Holy Woman, could you pack the rest of that meal for me?"

"I, erm, I could make it into a sandwich," I suggested.

"Sounds good."

I guess he really liked it.

I cut up some vegetables and cut some fresh bread in half to make a sandwich. Being a Japanese person in my past life, sandwiching any food in bread was second nature to me.

Air said he's fine with this, so it works! But since it's very oily, maybe I should wrap it in some leafy vegetables first. That should do the trick.

"Here you go," I said, handing the sandwich over.

"Thank you. I'll be off, then."

"I'll see you tomorrow, when you come to train me."

Air teleported away, the sandwich in hand.

Is the great Curalius really about to become a god? I just hope Renge doesn't end up fighting with Air again...

"At any rate, congratulatioooooons, Holy Woman!"

"Congratulations! Good for you, hm!"

“Huh?” I was taken aback as the Mythical ladies suddenly hugged me from both sides and started patting my head.

“Goodness, you haven’t realized, hm?”

Haven’t realized what? What are they celebrating?

“We’re talking about your engaaaaagement to Lord Renge!”

“He just publicly proposed to you, hm!”

“Ah...”

They’re right, Renge just...promised to marry me. Even though we haven’t done anything a couple does yet...and in front of Dad and Lico, at that!

“E-Erm, Dad?”

“Aye, I saw the whole thing. You’re getting married, aren’t you...?”

You don’t have to look so serious about it...

But that made the realization set in. I was getting married to Renge. We were going to set up a new inn here in Deshmel, which we’d manage together. It was a dream come true.

“I guess you should start planning your wedding, then,” Dad said.

“Right, what should we do about that? I’ve never been in a wedding before...” I said.

There were people who got married in Deshmel, but their idea of a wedding was to swear their eternal love in front of the Holy Woman...which was to say, me. I didn’t even remember what those impromptu weddings were like because I was really nervous at the time. I used to believe that lapses of memory that come from being nervous was some kind of joke, but then I experienced it myself. So while I was at weddings before, I didn’t actually remember any of them.

“Hm, that makes sense. People don’t really hold weddings in roadside inns,” Lico said.

“Nakona has this problem, too.... Shida’s body entered puberty now, but it’ll take him at least five more years for it to end,” Dad said.

“Yeah, well, if Nakona were to get married to Shida when he looks the way he does now...people would think she’s crazy. Or a criminal,” I said dryly.

The Elf of the Sun’s curse was lifted from Shida, but he still looked like an eight-year-old. With the curse lifted, he was beginning to age and mature, but it would take a few years before his outward appearance matched Nakona’s age. Nakona couldn’t marry someone who looked like he was half her age. It would make her look like some kind of criminal deviant.

“What about you and Lico, though?” I asked.

The two of them fell quiet.

Huh? No answer? They’re averting their gaze, too. They haven’t considered that, either?

“Ah, you see, the two of us...” Dad started.

“We figured we could just register as a married couple and be done with it,” Lico explained. “We’ve got work and research to take care of, and both of us were married before. We feel like this isn’t something we need to show off, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Dad agreed.

Jiril, Mirage, and I looked at them expressionlessly. What were they saying?

“Hm, this is a good chance, Holy Woman. They’ll give you a good impression of a wedding ceremony to work off of, hm.”

“Good ideaaaaaaa. Weddings on this continent differ by country. But here in Deshmel, the women wear dresses and the men wear tuxeeeeedos when they swear their love before you, Holy Womaaaaaaan. Let’s let them do iiiit.”

“Huh?!” Dad and Lico were both taken aback by Jiril and Mirage’s forceful suggestion.

“Jiril, arrange for teams to handle outfits and makeup,” I said. “I’ll draw up a guest list based on their acquaintances. Mirage, you gather up the cooks in Deshmel and have them cook the menu I’ll prepare.”

“T-Tina?!” Dad looked at me, shocked.

“Tinaris, wait!” Lico tried to stop me, too.

“No buts!” I chided them.

♣ Side Story: A Nobleman's Daughter

I, Licorice Avide, am the youngest daughter of House Avide. I have four older brothers and, being the only girl, I was consequently rather spoiled as a child. I developed my passion for alchemy when my third brother began attending alchemy school.

In nobility, any son after the second was obligated to leave the family upon his coming of age. At worst, if he couldn't find a fiancée, he'd have to discard his noble status. So, with his eyes fixed on his desired future, my third brother decided to take to the city and learn a vocation.

For a sheltered daughter like me, alchemy was a bolt from the blue. At a time when I was fussed over at every turn and my every need was tended to, an art where my actions led to instant, tangible results was an appealing prospect.

My first creation was just a simple salve. Then I experimented with harder creations, gradually shifting into complex recipes. All De Marl nobles were required to learn the technique of mana recovery; I proved to be quite adept at it.

Yet my parents still insisted a young lady like me should broaden her horizons and steered me away from the field of alchemy. It was truly, honestly, frustrating! Especially after having been pampered for so long.

When I entered the Lords and Ladies Academy, I became engaged to a knight who'd gained fame during the war with Edesa Kura. His name was Rondered Grephis. He was seen as an upstart commoner who climbed up from the gutters to obtain a noble title. But the reality was that he had bootstrapped his way up through sheer martial merit. And his first order of business as an up-and-coming noble was to marry his way into one of the old, legacy houses.

Hence, his marrying me. But I didn't mind. I was sure that, if my father put so much stock in him, Rondered would guarantee me a stable future. At the time, my father captained the Crimson Knights and he was receptive to having an up-and-coming knight marry into the family.

I honestly wasn't interested in marriage, but I remember being surprised by what a stunning man he was—well, it was mostly his face that was stunning me. My father was all about looks himself, so I have a feeling he was hopeful he could get cute grandkids out of marrying this handsome man to his pretty daughter.

Our engagement went off without a hitch, and we decided we'd marry soon after my graduation. Back then, I really *was* happy. The idea of a bright future with this successful, handsome man excited me.

While I was attending the Academy, Rondered had, upon my father's recommendation, become the Crimson Knights' vice-captain. My father then retired, handing his lieutenant his captain's seat, and set Rondered on the road to work in the general staff division. In other words: a promotion.

But more importantly, it made me discover knighthood.

It felt like a divine revelation. I knew my family was bound to oppose the idea, hence why I never consulted them. As soon as I graduated, I became a knight and joined the Ebony Knights, who fight using alchemy.

My parents and brothers all complained, shouted, and cried, trying to dissuade me from what they thought was a reckless decision. But I persisted for nearly a decade. They'd taken away alchemy, the thing I loved most. But that only made my admiration for it grow all the more.

When I entered the Ebony Knights, I cut my hair and immersed myself in alchemy research. I shunned sleep and neglected meals. I read every book on the basics and tried, failed, and retried every experiment possible until I was successful.

And I was having the time of my life...!

Since I'd married Rondered soon after graduating and then threw myself into my career as a knight, our relationship gradually grew...distant. He hadn't wanted a wife who'd fight side-by-side with him on the battlefield, but an obedient one who lovingly awaited her husband at home. Despite knowing this, I still submerged myself in alchemy research. Being denied alchemy for so long had made my relapse into it all the stronger.

But even so, the love I'd harbored for Rondered in my student days *did* grow stronger after our marriage. This, too, was likely the result of being denied my aspirations. My family loved and pampered me. But they'd tried to keep me away from my life's work and joining the Ebony Knights. That made me sad, and I turned to Rondered for approval.

But when it came time to go to the frontlines and test my research against the enemy, Rondered grew cold and distant. That made me even sadder, and I drowned my sorrows in alcohol. When Rondered wasn't kind to me, my colleagues were; I ended up turning to them for encouragement.

The friendliest of all were the Azure Knights' captain Dirbleu and his vice-captain, Marcus. Both were like Rondered: mere commoners who'd come to the big city and became knights. They'd both married civilian women; that is to say, they didn't marry for political reasons. They also never mocked me over my noble background. They just saw me as another knight, a colleague, and a comrade. It made me happy. It felt...*good*.

There was no underhanded fishing for my weaknesses, like with other nobles. They simply saw me for who I was. It made me feel at ease. Like I was home.

One day, while experimenting on a new weapon, an explosion burned half my face off. Dirbleu, Marcus, and the others either told me to wear a helmet and that I was lucky to still be alive, or they patted me sarcastically on the back and asked me what I was thinking, getting injured off of the battlefield.

My family said much the same. "You're lucky to be alive! No more crazy experiments. At least be *safe* when you work..." and on and on.

In a way, a noblewoman with a disfigured face was basically done for. Yet even so, my family, Dirbleu, Marcus, and my colleagues all still treated me like a person.

Maybe that was why I never really minded all the vicious gossip about my face. How I'd lost all value as a woman. And while I didn't care what everyone else thought, I was heartbroken when I learned Rondered was completely unattracted to me after the accident.

My own husband! Of *all* people!

It's not like my injury was anyone else's fault, least of all his. I got what I deserved. But still...

Having come back from fighting abroad, he'd never once visited my sickbed. My brothers told me that instead, Rondered partied constantly. This made all my brothers suspicious of him and they shared their apprehensions with our father.

Rondered had only married me for pedigree, of course. And by now, he had it. He'd solidified his position as vice-captain of the Crimson Knights. A position he'd earned through my father's help, in exchange for marrying me. He had his own estate, a presence in national politics, and a guaranteed spot as the Crimson Knights' next captain. Through sheer effort, he'd clawed his way up to success. If he had one failure in life, it was that *I* was his wife.

Thus, on the day I was discharged from the hospital, he divorced me.

"They say his next wife will be the current wife of the Azure Knights' vice-captain, Marcus. They'll probably divorce before long, too. You have *bad* luck with men..."

"Elysis..."

On that day, I was visited by Elysis, my alchemy teacher—at least, that's how *I* thought of her. But I don't know if she saw me as her apprentice. Like Rondered, she was a commoner who climbed up to her status as a state alchemist through merit. But her efforts were genuine.

Unlike him, she was a strange woman who refused the nation's offer to grant her a noble title. To her, titles meant nothing. All she needed was for De Marl to give her ingredients and a place to work. She didn't care for needless duties or attachments. The only thing on her mind was brewing potions.

She was a contrarian who always pushed people away with those kinds of statements. Yet, coming from her, it was convincing. She was a truly inspiring woman, never relying on titles or pedigree, living on nothing but her own merit.

So Rondered is marrying Marcus Ril's wife, hmm...? I didn't know his wife's name and had never met her. Apparently, she was a very pretty woman.

Marcus always did brag that his wife was too beautiful and graceful for him.

But wait...did she seduce Rondered away from me? Or was Rondered disloyal to both me and Marcus? I still love Rondered, but...stealing Marcus' wife... How can I ever look Marcus in the eye again? How can I ever apologize? I was more heartbroken for Marcus at that point.

"If you want to regain your life as a woman," Elysis said, "I can make a tonic to fix your face. Making the Supreme Tonic has always been my dream."

"No... I don't need it," I told her and meant it. "My face, it's my...punishment for being immature. This face suits me..."

"If you say so," she accepted my decision. "But if you change your mind, come to me at any time."

I hung my head. Elysis really was kind.

That was how I became the female alchemist knight with half her face burnt off. I sank deeper into my research, experimented on the battlefield, and killed enemies. Before I knew it, I became Captain of the Ebony Knights and started running into my father and brothers in the castle. Dirbleu went out of his way to keep me from running into Rondered. I was lucky to have such good friends.

Elysis was right. I'd no luck with men. Despite that, Rondered—my failed first love—still gripped my heart. With my face the way it was, I had no hope of finding new love. So I clung to the past, knowing all the while it did me no favors.

Before I knew it, the war had ended. Marcus lost his arm in combat and retired. I heard he went back to his family home: an inn in the middle of nature. That he'd divorced his wife after all, but was raising an orphaned baby he'd adopted. Dirbleu was worried about him. But apparently, Marcus was enjoying his new life.

He was managing a place called the Rofola Lodge. While I was investigating traces of monsters in the forest near it, a serpent monster took me by surprise and bit me. Its bite was venomous and made my body go numb.

I was in trouble. I tried moving out of the forest to where I could find people, then I found the monster attacking two young girls. I moved in to save them and saw one of them had familiar pink hair.

Where've I seen that hair before? I can't remember...

I was wondering why the serpent monster didn't finish me off. Then I saw why. It preferred to pursue the two girls over me. Monsters always moved in the direction where the most people were, so they could hurt as many as possible.

Injured as I was, I was still a knight. It was my duty to protect the powerless to my last breath. This was why I studied alchemy and became a knight and I'd be shaming myself by not doing that duty. *I took so many lives in the war. So dying to protect others will be the best way to end my life with pride.*

So I believed. Yet the pink-haired girl bravely kept the monster at bay to stall for time.

"I am Nakona Ril! My father is Marcus Ril, former vice-captain of De Marl's Azure Knights! I won't be careless! I'm not very experienced, so I think the most I can buy you is thirty seconds!" she cried.

"You're...Marcus' daughter?!"

I thought she looked familiar... So that's Marcus' daughter... She's as pretty as her mother. But her courage comes from her knightly blood—Marcus' blood...

The other girl, a petite blonde, gave me a supreme antidote and low-grade tonic that detoxed the poison and healed my wound. Thus I could fight, fulfill my duty, and defend these girls!

I couldn't defeat the monster in the end. But I *did* manage to drive it away. I never thought little girls would save my life.

And Marcus' younger daughter, Tinaris, was an alchemical genius. She came to me for advice and, through my feedback, grew as an alchemist at blistering speed. I thought her skill as an alchemical apothecary was already a match for Elysis...and possibly greater!

Since Marcus wasn't knowledgeable about alchemy, he had no clue what Tinaris was truly capable of. But it was plain to me that she could very well create the Supreme Tonic. If she came to De Marl and became Elysis' student, she most certainly *would*.

But I knew Tinaris was too kind and nowhere near stout-hearted enough to be able to shrug off the pressure the authorities would put on her. Alchemists, and especially alchemical apothecaries, had to both enmesh themselves into politics and fight over authority. Disease was a constant concern, more than monsters. That meant having control over apothecaries—the one source of medicine in the world—meant a powerful person could keep them within arm's reach for themselves and outside the reach of their political opponents.

Tinaris being so young and talented was a dangerous combination. She'd surely be abducted and held captive. Sadly, I could think of many noblemen who'd stoop to such stupidity if it suited their ends.

Once, Elysis herself had even been kidnapped and forced to make a poison that left no traces after killing its target. She gave one of her guards a poison in the form of a fruit and, when he'd passed out, had tortured him by turning his blood acidic, driving the man mad with pain, only to heal him with tonics and repeat the process. By doing so, she struck terror into her guards and her captors, allowing her to buy time until she was rescued.

Elysis never spoke of this story publicly; she wasn't proud of what she did. But her ordeal was just a testament to the many dangers alchemical apothecaries faced.

Marcus was no longer in the Azure Knights. So bringing Tinaris to De Marl unprotected would be dangerous. Even *if* I placed her under Elysis' care, she'd still be in danger if she hadn't the courage to escape peril on her own.

I'd once been abducted myself. Forced to make weapons, I'd escaped by making a bomb that blew the whole place sky-high, escaping the blast radius by taking cover underground.

All this was to say that large countries were by no means a safe place for alchemists. De Marl wasn't particularly guilty of this, and I'd heard that state alchemists from other countries were abducted once or twice because someone had wanted to extort them for their talents.

In the end, I believed young Tinaris was best left in Rofola to study alchemy in peace.

But then the monsters started growing in both numbers and size, which

required me to go out on patrols. Monsters were always a problem. Defeating them scattered Kathra that turned plants, animals, and people into more monsters. Thus, the only way to handle monsters was to drive them away.

But it was tricky: monsters were drawn to wherever the most people were. The only way to defend human settlements was to rout the beasts away. But there was a limited number of knights. To maintain trade routes, we had to be dispatched every few months to drive away monsters.

Thankfully, my alchemical weapons were quite adaptable, making me easy to dispatch to different battlefields. I ended up joining the patrols, despite being a captain, both because my father was still a politician and because Dirbleu had told me Rondered was living in the capital and came to the castle often. So, if I wanted to avoid seeing him during meetings—and I *did*—I had to go out on expeditions.

My father didn't want me running into Rondered either. So, in the end, he'd chosen me and handpicked troops from the other knight orders and sent us off.



IT had been four years since I ran into Marcus and his girls near their family inn.

It'd been a busy time with many expeditions. The number of monsters was on a stark upswing. For the first time, countries aside from De Marl were getting concerned.

It was around that time my cousin, Lysteinn, lost his father in the war and was adopted by my family. My aunt, who was in poor health, also passed away around that time.

Lysteinn was seventeen. In De Marl, children come of age at eighteen. Him still being a minor meant it was valid for us to adopt him. We were his last remaining relatives—his mother's bloodline having died out during the war.

Influenced by my third brother and I, Lysteinn became engrossed in alchemy. He was especially curious about my alchemical weapons and acted like he was my apprentice...which I didn't mind.

He later joined the Ebony Knights and tried to become independent...so I

began to wonder if he could succeed me as captain once I'd retired. Other members of the Ebony Knights were putting in a lot of effort and dedication, sure. But they lacked Lysteinn's tenacity.

In having Lysteinn act as my apprentice and assistant, I came to learn the importance of fostering the next generation.

It was during that time Lys, his colleagues, and two other dependable knights were sent on a mission to defeat a gigantic serpent monster that'd appeared on the highway. That monster, a venomous viper monster that made its territory in that area, was named Uroboros.

It was the same monster I'd faced when I met Tinaris. It'd grown so much in the years since that it'd been given a name. Since there was no way of defeating monsters, specimens that attacked multiple people became known and given names.

Thus, Lys and I lay in wait to capture Uroboros and bury it in the earth. It'd also serve as a research specimen for ways to defeat monsters. But, of course, such research would be incredibly dangerous. Just cutting a monster open would make Camilla overflow from the wound, turning everyone in the area into monsters. I still thought it could work—since slashing a monster didn't make any Camilla spill out—but everyone else was opposed.

It made sense, since the experiments weren't held in combat conditions. If done indoors, in a closed space, Camilla could spread out with no one noticing. Edesa Kura was researching monsters, after all.

For the time being, we were to use iron threads laced with mana that'd render the monster immobile, then stuff it into a pit, which would then be buried. Obviously, this didn't actually *fix* the problem. But it *did* buy us some time.

Along the way, we ran into an unusual party of demi-humans, whom we escorted to the Rofola Lodge. There, I found out that Tinaris had apparently created a Supreme Tonic. Marcus and I argued over how to use it, with him insisting I use it to restore my face.

I wasn't sure why he was so stubborn about this. What'd happened to my face was *my* fault. I'd given up on ever grasping a woman's happiness. I felt

restoring Marcus' lost arm was more important and useful than fixing my face. He had two daughters to hug with that arm, after all. Nakona had grown very strong, of course. But with the monsters now much stronger and larger, Marcus needed his arm back to fight, protect his girls, and secure his inn, where his guests could stay safe.

I went about the mission with such gloomy thoughts in mind. Then we saw giant centipedes and worms attack the Lodge. At first. We'd thought it was the Uroboros. But they were larger than the monsters we'd seen before, and we couldn't leave them unattended. Thankfully, Nakona and the demi-human party were able to handle the two monsters, with Marcus serving as a capable commander.

I thought we could beat the monsters this way and drive them away—and that's when it happened. I wasn't being careless—when I saw Tinaris being attacked, my body just moved. I was a knight, after all, and defending lives was my duty. I never thought my job was to *slay* people but rather to keep them safe.

Still, I'd never expected that centipede to spew out a glob of paralyzing toxin. Ten feet large, it knocked me down with its sheer mass, seeping into my body even through the armor.

The effect was instant. My entire body, my internal organs, even my *breathing*...it all went numb. I lost consciousness. Yet, for some reason, my hearing faintly lingered on...

Eventually, I realized I was being forced to drink something and I found the strength to swallow. The pain and numbness melted away. My bones, broken from the impact of the blow, were healed. So were all my old wounds. Even my ravaged face...it was all cured.

She used it... Tinaris actually used the Supreme Tonic... They beat the monster and she used it on me...

We headed back to the inn to discuss what to do next. Every time we passed by any kind of reflective surface, I glanced at it, confirming that yes, my face was fixed. Every scar was gone, and my skin was flawless. *So this is the power of the Supreme Tonic!*

I pursed my lips. It's not that I was unhappy. Yet, as an alchemist, this felt like a crushing defeat. I knew I couldn't hope to compete with an alchemical apothecary in her own field. And of course, I knew that even though I was a state alchemist, there were those all over the world better than me.

Why am I so shocked, then? Did I let my success go to my head...?

No... If that's the case, I just have to keep improving! Knowing there's always a higher summit you can aim for is part of what makes life worth living. For now, I should just be grateful for the Supreme Tonic and the girl who made it.

Tinaris Ril... You saved my life...



A few years later, the world crowned Tinaris Ril as its new Holy Woman.

The world's state was rapidly shifting. All the nations of the human continent formed an alliance to fight Edesa Kura. War was on the horizon once again.

The Mythicals, at first uninvolved, eventually joined our side—all for the Holy Woman's sake. Edesa Kura's stronghold in the world's navel, Fort Deshmel, was captured by our side.

There, we embarked on a dangerous plan. The Holy Woman made her residence there and a monster-attracting barrier was set up to draw in monsters from all over so she could purify them with her power.

The number of monsters was in clear decline. Yet, they were still growing in size. With fewer monsters appearing, the knights needed to be sent on fewer missions to repel them. But I got the feeling that despite that, the number of sighting reports we got rose sharply. It was strange, but maybe them becoming bigger made them easier to detect.

Eventually, the Mythicals gave us more bad news. The world was on the brink of ruin.

The Sugula—a monster that devours entire worlds.

At first it was a black dot in the sky. But gradually, it grew bigger and bigger. Within a few years, it had enveloped the entire sky in pitch black, causing the monsters' numbers to once again increase and the monsters themselves to

grow enormous.

At first, the Holy Woman's powers made a key difference. But before long, the monsters spawned faster than she was capable of purifying them. As monsters became rampant on the highways, the knight orders were bombarded with requests to take care of them. There were more of them than we could handle, and we ended up taking on escort missions instead.

The world being destroyed... I've never even considered that...

As we all looked up at the Sugula, growing bigger by the day, I and everyone else were overcome with anxiety.



“HAVE you considered getting married again, Licorice?”

“Huh?!”

When I returned home for the first time in a while, I found my father *and* brothers there. They wanted to talk as a family about how De Marl would handle Edesa Kura. This led to the question of our assets, what the family's future would be, and eventually leading to my father's question.

“Father! I'm in my mid-thirties and a divorcee! What nobleman would want me?” I asked.

“Why, the various priest families have approached us with offers of arranged marriage.”

“Wh-What...? That's crazy!”

“No, these talks have been going on since *before* your face was healed. I turned them all down because you were fresh off your divorce and said you still needed to let your wounds heal. Your face was never the problem! The issue was strictly with your heart.”

“Father...”

Father cared about me *that* much. While that made me happy, I had to shake my head. The right thing would be to accept an arranged marriage and repay my family's kindness and love. But in the end, I wanted to count on my family's considerate love for me.

“I’m not getting remarried!” I declared. “I’ll remain a single alchemist for the rest of my days.”

“I understand... Well, that’s *your* choice to make...and the kind of choice you’d make anyway,” he laughed.

My family had all been on my side from the start. Still, it felt like up until now, I’d been one-sidedly refusing their attempts to help. They’d only brought it up to check how I felt and let me know the option was still on the table.

My family *was* kind. They truly understood me. In nobility, daughters were mostly used for political marriages. Most nobles wouldn’t give their daughter the right to make these choices to begin with. My family rose to its status thanks to my father’s military accomplishments.

But there was no knowing what our future would hold. Once I passed the mantle of captain of the Ebony Knight to my vice-captain, what would happen to our status? My brother and father were both senate members so, as the conversation leading up to this told me, the family’s fortune wouldn’t evaporate any time soon.

“That reminds me, Licorice,” my third brother said suddenly, tipping his glass. “The Alchemy Academic Conference is coming up! Elysis said she wouldn’t go. But *you’ll* be attending this year, right? Did you ask for your leave yet?”

“Ahhh!”

I’d completely forgotten about that! Since it only happened once every four years, the conference was easy to forget about. But since Elysis refused to attend, purportedly due to her age, I was the only De Marl state alchemist left who *could* attend. My brother had become an alchemist first. Yet I’d surpassed him. *It must’ve made him feel like a failure. And yet he’s telling me this now...!*

“Hahaha,” he chortled. “You can be so forgetful sometimes, Licorice.”

I could only hang my head in shame. My family really *was* too kind to me. Why did they all look at me with proud smiles? Only Lysteinn, our adopted sibling, looked at the way my family smiled at me like there was something weird about that.

My family really is...

“Good grief! Dad! Mom! You three! I’m thirty-three years old! Treat me like an adult!” I complained.

“We *know* that!” protested my father. “We’re trying to treat you like an adult!”

“That’s right,” my mother chimed in. “We just think that for all that, you’re still our little girl.”

“Your forgetful streak *is* cute, Licorice,” said my third brother. “I’ll submit the leave request for you.”

“And we’ll arrange for your bodyguards, too,” said my second brother.

“Hearing you won’t get married put all your big brothers at ease!” said my eldest brother.

“Grr...!”

I’m thirty-three years old! Yet, they treat me like a child...

“...I heard Captain Rondered is politically isolated in the castle,” Lys said suddenly. “That’s what he gets for making enemies of House Avide.”

“Lysteinn!” my whole family chided him for mentioning that name.

I never heard what else he had to say. Everyone kept their mouths shut and a placating smile on their lips. They were probably planning to harass Rondered for the rest of his days as payback. *Not that I can do much to stop them...*



A few days later, the alchemy academic conference took place in Saikorea. Since Tinaris couldn’t leave Deshmel, I took her mana restorative recipe and announced it at the conference. But the only feedback I got was this: “*The developer of the recipe reports they were able to repeatedly produce this recipe. But since, despite multiple attempts, no one other than they have been able to replicate the results, we request the recipe be reexamined.*”

After the announcement, the question of who developed the recipe came up. To that I responded, “The creator of this recipe wishes to remain anonymous. Since no one *but* them can recreate it, I believe revealing their identity at this point would not be appropriate.”

Anyone who knew Tinaris created this recipe would be clamoring to meet her and I knew full well just how shaky the Holy Woman's position was, given the political climate. I had to keep any danger that might be directed at her to a minimum. However, due to that, there wasn't anything new or interesting to discover at the conference.

"Huh? Lico...is that you?"

"Marcus...? Fancy meeting you here..."

I had no idea *what* Marcus would be doing at a conference like this. Then I remembered he was currently traveling the human continent to spread the word about the Holy Woman: his own daughter. *That must've been what brought him to Saikorea!*

"Uhhh...what brings you here?" he stuttered.

"There's an alchemy academic conference going on. Once every four years, alchemists announce their findings..."

"Oh yeah, I heard about that. They announce anything interesting?" he asked.

"Not much. The research Tinaris asked me to have inspected didn't yield anything, either."

"Tina asked you to do that?"

A mana restorative could be a revolutionary discovery that'd turn the lives of all adventurers on their heads. Many people use techniques but aren't proficient with mana restoration. This would allow them to recover their mana easily. And this was doubly useful nowadays, with the Sugula impeding the effectiveness of mana restoration. That made magic difficult to use which, of course, impacted alchemy. So, if people other than Tinaris could make mana restoratives, it *could* resolve this problem.

And yet...a recipe as simple as adding mana to water is much too simple! My only conclusion is that there's something...special about Tinaris that allowed her to make it. Or maybe there's some other trick to it... Either way, there's something missing in this recipe.

"It's strange. Tinaris has been able to make it multiple times..." I mused.

“True... Well, she makes it with water we draw out from Mount Rofola’s underwater reservoir. Maybe it’s just the water quality,” Marcus supposed.

“The water, huh... I *did* hear Mount Rofola’s reservoir is linked with a leyline. So it must be charged with Air that reacted to Tinaris’ mana. We should investigate Rofola’s water, then. I guess we can have her try it with water from elsewhere next time...”

Would just changing the water work, though? I guess I’ll have to draw water from Rofola and see...

“If you want to go see Tina,” Marcus said brightly, “I’m on my way to Deshmel right now. Want to come with?”

“Oh! Perfect! Sure, I’ll come along.”

Since I had more questions to ask now, and since that meant taking a ride with a Mythical’s teleportation magic to instantaneously travel there, why not? Marcus asked the Mythical he was traveling with, Shinsen, if I could come along.

Shinsen didn’t mind. He was currently in human form, and it was so convincing I couldn’t imagine what his beast form was.

“I’ll be teleporting us over,” Shinsen said abruptly, “so please hold hands.”

“H-Hold h-hands?!” Marcus recoiled.

“Huh?! D-D-Do we have to?!” I asked, taken aback.

“Humans fundamentally don’t have enough mana,” Shinsen replied simply. “I have to keep the spell under control if I’m going to take you there safely.”

We both fidgeted uncomfortably. Holding hands at *our* age? It felt embarrassing. Even if it *was* just Marcus, we were still man and woman. Surprisingly, Marcus looked just as embarrassed as I was.

“Well, if we have to... Here,” I said, extending a hand.

“Ah... S-Sure!”

Marcus was flustered by me reaching out my hand. *Why’s he so embarrassed over me?* I had no idea what his deal was as he, Shinsen, and I held hands. It must’ve made for an odd picture.

This is weird...!

“Th-Thank you...” I murmured.

“Yeah... *Aaahhhh!*” Before Marcus could finish that sentence, the scenery changed around us. A moment later, we found ourselves in Deshmel.

Mythicals really have amazing magic...

Wearily, Marcus thanked Shinsen. We’d appeared in front of Deshmel’s front gates just as a carriage was rolling out. Shinsen entered the fortress to report to Renge, yet a few moments later, I saw Renge walk out along with a carriage.

Oh, he just missed him...

And as it turned out, that carriage was being guarded by Lysteinn.

“Oh, It’s Lico! Weren’t you in Saikorea for the conference?” he asked me.

“I ran into Marcus, who brought me here. There wasn’t anything worth mentioning at the conference, though.”

“Figures. It’s not the kind of alchemy we usually use, either.”

“True.”

“So, you’ll be spending the night here in Deshmel?” Lys asked me.

“Yes, that’s the plan. I need to tell Tinaris about the conference.”

At least that *was* the plan. But I ended up drinking into the night in the second-floor dining hall. At first, it’d been a normal dinner. But when the merchant Giyaga and his escorts—Lysteinn’s unit—joined in, we all ended up drinking together. They pestered me and Marcus for war stories and asked about my research.

“Phew...” I heard Marcus sigh at one point.

“What’s wrong, Marcus? Booze not giving you much of a buzz tonight?”

“If anything, it’s giving you too *much* buzz...” he grinned a little sadly.

To Marcus, the days he spent at war were days invested in the name of surviving. All his martial stories weren’t something to brag about but experiences he didn’t want to revisit. The Azure Demon Wolf of De Marl, who

rose to glory in conflict, ended up losing everything in the war.

When I told my war stories, he always made a point to say that no matter how much you try to embellish them, there is no glory in war. And I tended to agree. Comrades who ate and slept beside you could be gone without a trace the next day. That was the nature of war. One fought because that was the only way to protect what they held dear. That was why invaders were not to be forgiven.

Edesa Kura was always like that. It discriminated against humans and demi-humans to justify their faith. They claimed demi-humans should be subjugated and that everyone who believed in any gods but their god were infidels who deserved the worst punishment imaginable. It was hard to believe they were human like us.

“By the way...how old are you now?” Marcus abruptly asked.

“Why do you wanna know?” I shot back.

“I was just thinking...you don’t seem to age at all.”

He means my...looks? I didn’t know how to feel about that question. *But he’s drunk! He’s not that curious, surely...*

“Well, I’m thirty-three years old! You gotta problem with that, buddy?!”

“O-Oh...uh, n-no, never said anything’s wrong with that.”

Now I was starting to get angry. When you get to my age, everyone starts mentioning marriage. *Is Marcus going to do that, too?*

Why do women get pestered with that question all the time when men don’t? Is it because women can’t have children after a certain age? That must be it...

Can’t they make it so men get pregnant too? Doesn’t it make sense since that means more chances of childbirth? Why won’t evolution make it so?! Maybe I should have Tinaris make a potion that makes men get pregnant too? It’ll be more efficient all around!!!

“...What are you gonna do next?” Marcus asked. “Stay with the knights?”

“Hmmm... Well, lemme think... I *could* have Jiel replhace me as cap’n and go back to jhust being a...reshearcher...”

I was starting to slur my words. *Huh...didn't think I'd had that much to drink....*

So he's asking about work, not marriage. Huh... Well, I guess we're both at an age where that's important.

I felt like now was a good time to start over. Knights out on the frontlines needed to be at peak physical condition. In other words, in their twenties.

Old soldiers had no place there. An old soldier was lacking in stamina. Such unreliability impacted the survival rate of other soldiers. The only place they had on the frontlines was as the rear guard, where they'd throw away their lives to protect the rest of the unit in case something happened. In my case, I just wanted to retire and pass on my duties to someone else...

"Old Elysis is getting along in years, too..." I continued. "So, as a De Marl state alchemist, I think I should focus on my research. I'm *sho* busy, though! I've plenty of research to catch up on. But *firsht*, we need to *finishh* this war with Edesa Kura... I don't want to have to deal with them *jerksh* ever again..."

"Agreed."

How long must we fight this damned country?! I spent my entire twenties fighting them! I had to ask myself what would have happened with my life if that earlier war had never been triggered. Would I have stayed married to Rondered? But the more I thought about that, the more I realized he'd only ever married me to advance his career. If that war hadn't happened, he likely never would've even married me to begin with. And even if he had, he would have still cheated on me.

...And I wouldn't have met Marcus and Dirbleu, either.

I would have probably just married some noble's son and never become a knight... Well, I'd have probably still pursued alchemy.

"Mmm... What are *you* gonna do, though?" I asked Marcus.

"Hm?"

"Are you gonna keep talkin' to *politiciansh* the rest of your life? That shounds terrible, having to deal with them!" I cackled.

Despite being an unsociable oaf like me, Marcus was traveling all over the

world to spread the faith of the Holy Woman and inform the different countries about the Sugula in an attempt to minimize the Camilla's spread. I was surprised he could do it at all. This was the same man who climbed up to the position of vice-captain of De Marl's Azure Knights. While vice-captains had enough authority to get involved in De Marl's politics, Marcus had never been good at diplomacy.

One couldn't survive in the world of scheming and lies the nobles and politicians occupied unless they'd been educated in it since childhood. It was harrowing; one wrong move in politics was akin to throwing a lantern into a room full of oil.

"Yeah, that's right. So, if you're gonna quit the knights anyway... Lico, help me out," he said, looking straight at me. "S-Shtay by my side and shupport me for as long as I live."

"Huh?"

Whaaaat?

What did he just say?!

My hand went limp. The glass I was holding fell onto the table, where it shattered.

It sounded like he...

"Eh, ah, M-Marcus... What did you just...?"

"Ah... Er... No, I just..." he stammered.

My face went red as I became flustered.

Did...did he just propose to me?!

Everyone in the dining hall stared at us curiously.

Marcus suddenly scratched his head roughly, hopped to his feet, and exclaimed, "I-It means...*exactly* what it *sounds* like! You can give me your answer whenever, so just...just think about it, all right?! Good night!"

He left and I sat there, speechless.

Exactly what it sounds like... Does this mean...that Marcus...he...?

“Ah, I *knew* he was into you,” Lysteinn said, joining me at the table with another cup of ale.

“Y-You *what?!?*” I cried.

“You *really* didn’t notice, did you? Well, it *was* hard to tell, what with Marcus’ attitude.”

“Wait, since *when* did you know this?!”

“He’s been acting that way since I first met him,” Lysteinn said, scoffing at my naivete. “I think he’s had a thing for you ever since you were active knights.”

“He what?!”

That’s absurd! It can’t be! We were both married back then!!!

...But what if he felt this way long before that? Before we got married. After all, he became a knight before I graduated school. Then I got engaged to Rondered as soon as I graduated, and we married a year later...

What if Marcus has held this torch since back then... No! That’s not possible! It can’t be...

“Huh. I guess you *don’t* mind that kind of attention, Lico,” Lysteinn smirked.

“What?!”

“You’re red as a beet. So...you’ll accept? I think that’s a good idea. Marcus’ name is renowned among the knights even now. And I’m *sure* Uncle won’t object! After all, the alchemist that restored your face *is* his adopted daughter...”



“Ah, what... No, th-that’s... Wait, no! It has to be proper! Clear! I can’t know what he *really* means based on that comment!” I stammered.

“Hmmm...” Lysteininn pondered as he pursed his lips.

Yes, it needs to be proper... I’ll have to ask him when he’s sober. Maybe he just said it by mistake in a drunken stupor.

I sank into my chair and downed the new glass of booze Lysteininn had brought me; I couldn’t tell what it tasted like.

Why? I said I’d never remarry. But...maybe it’d be okay if it’s with Marcus. But I shouldn’t get my hopes up! If I end up disappointed by this, I’ll be back drowning myself in booze again. Besides, Marcus has two daughters and adopted twins. Is he expecting me to be their stepmother when I’ve never had children? Tinaris and Nakona grew up just fine without a mother! They have a great father! What would introducing me as their mother achieve at this point? Huh?!

Is it because those twins don’t have a mother...? But Marcus has already raised young kids up to adulthood. Why would he look for a stepmother now? I can’t imagine he’d want me for that...

“...You *really* need to talk to her about this properly, Marcus...” Lysteininn said into the ether, his expression blank.

Why...?



MUCH to my surprise, the proposal was serious. I talked to Marcus about it the next day and he said as much. I couldn’t imagine *why* he’d want a charmless woman approaching her late thirties. But my parents permitted the union with surprising ease, and my brothers all said they approved of Marcus.

Apparently, my fourth brother had told them when he visited the family. He’d also told us there were rumors that Rondered’s wife—Marcus’ ex—was flirting with other men at social events.

Of course, since she was a commoner, most nobles would only care enough for one-night flings. I figured she knew that perfectly well.

Yet, my fourth brother said she was looking for a third husband! She was going to dump Rondered after cheating on Marcus to marry him! And that's despite her having a child with Rondered already. My brother then revealed that she actually approached *him*, unaware that he was my older brother. It was almost impressive how brazen she was.

"Goes without saying," he went on, "but no noble House will want anything to do with a woman *that* age and with *that* kind of marriage history. If she's *really* going to break up with Rondered, her only options are to go to retired nobles who already gave up on the headships of their family and try to take away what assets they have. Is she *really* going to leave Rondered for that?"

"Does Rondered know about this...?" I asked.

"I *think* he does... He's basically holding on by a thread, too. He thought his political standing was firm enough after Father turned his back on him. But he was wrong. That's a common mistake upstart nobles make. It's clear he doesn't understand *why* Father arranged for him to marry you."

There was no point even thinking about it. But if Rondered and I had had even a single child, things would've been very different. De Marl was run by the nobility and they only came from a few different Houses. Only knight captains and vice-captains had social mobility, and their opinions were taken into consideration under the justification of them being fresh minds that brought on a new perspective.

The nobility were decided by family names and pedigree. If one wanted to enter that scene, joining those families through matrimony was the quickest way. My mother's family was one such noble house.

Rondered wished to become a noble, so he'd become captain of the Crimson Knights. But now, he hardly had any political voice, all because he'd divorced me and married a commoner woman instead. And another man's wife at that. A noble family's bloodline mattered more than noble status in this country. Without noble ties, Rondered was just an upstart commoner. And it was overlooking this reality that was Rondered's mistake.

His action marked him as a man who made light of bonds between different noble houses. His child with his current wife would end up going back to the

streets or become a servant to low-ranking nobles at best. There were schools for commoners too. But noble academies required invitations from one's grandparents. This was common knowledge in high society. But since he'd never had children with me, Rondered didn't know this.

While I'd been at war, he was brazen enough to try and enroll his child in the Lords and Ladies Academy and had been shameless enough to request an invitation from my father. This story made Rondered the laughingstock of social dinners for a while. And that led to his commoner second wife falling out of love with him and getting wrapped up in young noblemen's bedsheets before being promptly sent away the morning after.

High society loves scandals. While there was never any shortage of those, Rondered and his wife were a constant source of juicy gossip.

Since Rondered's child was innocent in all of this, I'd asked my grandfather to let them be enrolled upon his recommendation. This wasn't seen as a good idea, though.

"The child was only let into the academy on the mercy of a discarded ex-wife." "House Avide's stubborn oaf of a daughter still holds feelings for the husband that threw her away."

Such were the rumors whispered about me. But mostly the former, either because I was a state alchemist or because of House Avide's reputation. Or both. But I didn't care what people said—the child wasn't at fault. Their future was uncertain, so I wanted them to be given an education. Even if they weren't *mine*. Even if they *were* the spawn of the man who'd betrayed me...

Looking at Nakona and Tinaris had shown me how children can carve their own paths in life. I saw firsthand just how special those two were. "Special" was an understatement: one was now the Holy Woman and the other the chosen wife of the Elf of the Sun!

...If Marcus could raise those girls as a single dad...maybe he really will cherish me for the rest of my life.

"I think we can believe Marcus Ril wouldn't do anything like *that*," my brother said. "He's the kind of man who'd throw his future away to protect the Holy Woman. And I think he was interested in you since his days as a knight, even

with no obligations on your side.”

“Yes. Marcus, he...he never saw me as a noble,” I said.

“A man without ulterior motives. Well, I can’t say you marrying a commoner *isn’t* concerning...”

“That’s fine by me, but...if anything, I think *I’m* the problem here,” I reflected. “I lived my entire life as a noble and a knight, you know? So...I don’t know how to do things like cooking, or cleaning, or sewing... Things a wife is supposed to know...”

“You’re not wrong!” my brother grinned.

You don’t have to affirm my worries here, you know! It just makes me sad... especially because it’s true.

“But he said he wants you anyway, right?”

“Yes. He told me he can cook and clean for us. And his daughters can sew. He actually said he’d need new clothes, what with so many politicians coming to see his daughter, the Holy Woman. He said he was hoping our family could help.”

“Yes, I understand,” Father said. “But Lysteinn tells me he proposed to you in a moment of emotional, drunken outburst. Well...if that’s what happened, we’ll lend you all the help we can offer to support your wedding. After all, Rondered wanted to take advantage of our family the whole time.”

“Yes...”

Father had liked Rondered back then and had voluntarily set up our marriage. That said, I’d had feelings for Rondered too, so I’d gone along with it.

“Besides,” my dad chortled, “our family certainly *would* profit from having a relation to the Holy Woman. Marcus *has* been stubbornly refusing all the invitations from De Marl’s nobles, after all...”

“Father!”

“Dad!”

Ugh... Now might be a good time to leave and hurry back to Deshmel. Yes...go

home to Deshmel... Well, I mean I'm already home! I'm just leaving for Deshmel. Yet...it feels like I'll be going home...to Marcus. Do...do I really belong by his side? Ahhh!

"Thanks to you, our influence over the Senate will skyrocket." My father winked. "You caught yourself a *fine* man, Licorice."

"*That's* what you were thinking...?" I groaned.

"I know, I know... Neither of you considered that, did you? We haven't been able to adjust our schedules to all be here until now. But we should be able to find the time now. Make sure to bring him along next time you come home."

"I will..."

Marcus did mention he needs to drop by and meet my family. Though I feel bad about him having to contend with all my brothers at once...

"...We—" Dad began in a morose tone.

"Yes?"

"We put you through all that pain because I really...*trusted* Rondered. I'm so sorry you suffered because of us."

"That's not *your* fault, Father. When I burned my face," I touched my now healed cheek, "it was *really* just my inexperience and recklessness..."

Rondered really *had* had potential. Regardless of my father's backing, he rose to his captaincy on his own merit. He worked hard to get to where he was. I knew that. I didn't want anyone to deny that, even my father.

"The timing was just...off," I went on, shrugging. "For me. For Marcus. For Rondered. For Marcus' ex-wife. But that's not the case this time. You don't need to feel guilty over that."

"Timing, you say..."

"Yes."

"...Hmm."

I know I probably made you worry a great deal, Father. And now I'll do so all over again. But...I'm far happier than I used to be. And honestly...I'm starting to

believe Marcus and I can become the husband and wife I always dreamed of. Of course...with four stepkids, it won't exactly be what I imagined. But I already love those kids. So long as we keep holding onto each other, and he's always by my side, I'll be fine. Just like my parents were.

"I'll be back soon," I said as I left the estate later that day.

"Yes, we'll be waiting for you," my mother said.

"Keep your brothers up to date, too," my dad said.

"Hehe, I will..." I laughed as I turned away and left through the gates.

Come what may, I'll always have somewhere to go home to. So...I'll be fine.

♣ Me at Age Seventeen – Part 2

BEFORE I knew it, a week had gone by. My training with the Stella was going smoothly, and I became able to use it on a larger scale, but with a weaker intensity than before. Still, I was sure that if I kept working on it, I'd be able to use my powers in new ways. Lord Revireus was also advancing by leaps and bounds towards controlling his power properly, although Air complained that his mental discipline still needed work.

As for the storeroom in Fort Deshmel, that place had completely changed. The cleaning was going according to my instructions, and lumber was carried in to set up the framework of the new storefronts. We'd begun inviting people to set up shop there as well. We set one storefront aside for Mister Giyaga, one for a woman interested in selling sundries, one for another woman who wanted to sell cosmetics, and one for me.

In addition to those three and myself, we'd extended offers to the traveling merchants that dropped by Deshmel. My life in Rofola taught me just how vital peddlers were to the world writ large. We'd informed the peddlers that if they were interested in setting up a shop in Fort Deshmel, we would have space for them to rent. All we had to do now was be patient and wait.

We also brought in stones to set up a new layer of walls outside the fort's ramparts. Shida was due to come by any day now to help set up monster-repelling barriers.

Will Nakona be coming with him? I wondered. With his curse lifted, Shida should be maturing physically, so I'm looking forward to seeing him. What does he look like now? He should look around twelve years old, I'd think.

Hmmm... Now that I think about it, I haven't seen Renge all week... Is the war with the Colossals over yet...?

The hostilities with the Colossals in the Mythical continent were ongoing. Renge dropped by the fort every now and then, and he'd said the Colossals

were stupid, making it hard to negotiate with them.

From what he told me, a peaceful solution sounded hard to achieve. Shinsen was good at diplomacy. But their limited intelligence made it difficult for them to understand him. And they were also exceptionally stubborn, so the negotiations were dragging on.

It sounds really complicated... And Air's watching from the sidelines, hoping the Great Curalius will deify. And understandably, Renge doesn't like that...

"It looks like we're due for bad weather today, Holy Woman," said one of the workers as I was tending my garden. "You should probably go indoors."

I was gathering herbs as I looked up and noticed leaden clouds hanging overhead. "Yes, you're right..." It did look like it was about to rain. I quickly gathered all the herbs I needed and hurried into the fort.

"What will you be making today?" the worker asked, following me.

"I've been asked to make face lotion and body cream, since I've been making more sundries than actual medicine recently," I said. "I've been itching to do some real apothecary work."

"I see. The knights have been praising your heat rash medicine nonstop."

"It's been helping? That's good to hear. I'll have to make more heat rash medicine, then..."

Imagining how stuffy the knights' armor must be made me feel like I needed to improve the recipe somehow. *There must be some fundamental solution I'm missing...*

"Oh, Holy Woman, there you aaaaare! There's troooooouble!" Jiril approached me in a hurry, dragging her tail.

"What's wrong, Jiril?" I asked. She looked uncharacteristically alarmed. "Did something happen on the Mythical continent?"

"Yes, I believe soooo! There's mana overflowing there, changing the weeeeeather. I think Lord Renge used his black flaaaaames!"

"He did?!" I couldn't believe it.

Renge's black flames had special, destructive powers and he hated having to use them. He only did so when there was absolutely no other choice.

Is it his flames that made the weather change so drastically? I remember him saying that he hates to use them because it doesn't distinguish between friend and foe and scorches the earth.

"I'm worried, so I think I'll go baaaaack to the continent! Don't worry though, Holy Womaaaaaan! I'll leave Mirage here with you!" Jiril told me.

"Take me with you!" I demanded.

"I *thought* you'd say thaaaaaat! But you caaaaaan't. You can't use magic to defend yourself, can youuuuuuu?"

I clenched my fists. She was right, of course. I *could* use some spells, but I'd been so focused on controlling the Stella that I hadn't had the chance to practice them.

But if Renge's using his black flames, he must be really backed against the wall! I'm too worried to just stay here!

"No, Jiril, Renge and the Great Curalius mean too much to me. *Please!* I want to make sure they're safe!" I pleaded.

"Oh... It's hard to say no when you put it like thaaaaaat..." Jiril hesitated.

Okay, I just need to give it one more push...

"Jiril, *please!* I'll be too worried to do anything if you just leave me here. I haven't seen Renge all *week!* *Please...* I just want to see him...!"

That part was true. But I also knew using his black flames left Renge dispirited. He could specify *where* the disaster his flames unleashed would strike, but not what *form* it'd take. For that reason, Renge believed he was only good for destroying and nothing else. But I *knew* that wasn't true. *I can't leave him to stew in his negative feelings...!*

"Ohhh... Fiiiiine. But only for a little bit, understaaaaand? It could really be dangerooooooooous," she warned.

"Okay!"

Yay! I can go see Renge! And uh...check up on the Great Curalius too, of course... I'm worried about her too! Really!

Jiril held out her hand and I laid my hands over hers. In the blink of an eye, we teleported. When I opened my eyes, I found myself looking up at a leaden sky full of brewing clouds. Raging, mana-laden winds blew all around us. The black flames' power was always overwhelming to behold.

"Wait in the Great Curalius' spriiiiing, all right?" Jiril told me.

"All right..." I agreed.

She took me to the spring where the Great Curalius lived. I walked on the lotus flowers, approaching the big dragon who was lying curled up. *Oh no! Is she sick again...?*

"Greetings, O Great Curalius," I said, bowing.

"Oh...if it isn't Tinaris," the mighty dragon intoned with a surprisingly casual tone. "You came to visit again? Were you worried about me?"

"Yes..."

She sounds fine. That's a relief...

"You would have been better off not coming, though," she went on. "It's dangerous. Renge just used his black flames."

"He always gets depressed after using them, so that's why I'm here," I said.

"Oh my, yes... So you came here to comfort him?"

"Well, yes..."

I wasn't sure if my encouragement would *help*, really. But I loved Renge and was worried about him. The Great Curalius chuckled warmly at my fidgety, hesitant response.

"What happened," the dragon explained, "was that the Colossi got tired of waiting and marched their army against us. Renge took them head-on, single-handedly holding the line against them. We can't allow the Colossus leader, a very impatient figure, to rule over the continent. This fight was sadly inevitable..."

“That makes sense...” I said. “After all, you need to handle things accordingly.”

“Yes, of course. Everyone on this continent is like my child. And if they’re all going to live in peace, going to war is necessary at times, sad as it may be,” she said.

That’s a leader’s responsibility. It was a heavy burden, though. I thought leading the people of Deshmel was difficult. Yet, the Great Curalius single-handedly led a number of different races.

But with her as she is now...

“Great Curalius! It’s awful!” a half-man, half-horse Mythical shouted as he ran towards us.

“My child, what’s the matter?” she asked him. “Why are you so flustered?”

Whoa, a Centaurus! I’ve never seen one before.

“The Colossi’s leader resorted to desperate means and they’re now forcing their way in!”

“Oh, the poor fool...” The Great Curalius shook her big head.

“They forced their way in as a last-ditch method?” I asked, confused by this news.

“When Colossi are driven into a corner, they use their mass to charge and physically break through obstacles,” the Great Curalius said.

Huh...? They charge in? Like bulls? And they’re charging in now, here? No way...

“The Holy Woman is here. Let us reinforce the barrier,” the Great Curalius said.

“But Great Curalius, if you strain your body much longer...!” the Centaurus shouted.

“With Renge’s black flames being *this* intense, even the Colossi’s leader, as large as he is, won’t be able to move freely. The safest way for all is for me to reinforce my barrier.”

“But the strain it’ll place on your body! You won’t last!”

I looked up at the Great Curalius in alarm. But her eyes were fixed squarely on the Centaurus. She was going to sacrifice herself again to protect the continent's peace. I wanted to do something. To help somehow. I knew that if I did nothing, this kind dragon would once again act without regard for her life and safety.

No! I saved her life once...and Lord Revireus wanted her to live to the point of crying about it...!

"You can do it," I heard a voice whisper in my ear.

Suddenly, Curalius and the Centaurus both turned to look at me. I realized a bright light was emanating from inside me. And that voice—I didn't imagine it. It was a voice that I knew.

"Lady Akari..." I said in awe.

"Right now, Tinaris...you can do it! You can protect this place. Listen to the light overflowing from within you. It will protect everyone."

My eyes widened at the realization of what she was saying.

"The Stella will surely help you! The effort you put in will prevail. Believe in it!"

I listened to the light overflowing from within. Then, effortlessly, I spoke these words for the first time, as if I knew exactly what to say: "O, Stella—become a wall of light to protect all life!"



The light inside my body spread out like a thin, semicircular layer, reminiscent of a snow dome. It felt thin and slim, yet...firm. It was strange. I'd have expected it to feel more brittle. But the Stella's barrier proved stalwart. Maintaining it was difficult for me...but possible.

"Oh my! Look at that...!" the Centaurus exclaimed.

"Tinaris, you... This light...!" Curalius glowed and I understood. The Stella's blessing was bolstering her strength.

I didn't know exactly how it worked, but the Stella was a concentrated form of Air's divine power. Despite teetering on the edge of death just moments ago, the Stella was now making the Great Curalius evolve into a mighty half-dragon, half-god. I could feel as much.

"You did it faster than I imagined," I heard a familiar voice beside me.

"Air!" I cried.

The barrier was complete, so I believed we were safe.

"What's it like," Air asked Curalius, "becoming a dragon god? Doesn't feel much different, does it?"

"Yes..." the glowing dragon god mused. "But it's strange. Is this what it's like to be neither living nor dead?"

"Yes. If you'd like, I could invite you to the divine realm. What say you?" Air invited.

My actions had ended up evolving the Great Curalius into a dragon god. Her white scales shined and her golden eyes overflowed with life. She spread out her wings, now wider and brimming with vitality. She looked even better than she had after my potion had restored her health.

"I appreciate and am honored by your invitation, O mighty Air. But there's no need," Curalius said, shaking her head. "I've decided to remain the leader of this continent until a new one is in place. Please...give me time until I can elect my successor."

"I will wait," Air nodded. "I am training your son now. But I think it might take him 500 years before he can deify. Perhaps he should lead the Mythical

continent for a time and gain experience. That said... I was surprised to see Akari's thoughts still remain. Does she have any intention of becoming a god?"

"Huh?!" I froze up, realizing he was now talking to me. "I, uhh...I can't hear her anymore..."

But the mere fact that I *had* heard Lady Akari's voice earlier meant some of her must linger inside the Stella.

Lady Akari... You saved me again. Thank you.

"Well..." Air said, somewhat disappointed. "You need a *soul* to deify. So lingering thoughts aren't enough. 'Tis a pity. If there was so much as a piece of her soul left, I'd have been able to do something. I *did* acknowledge her prowess..."

"...Lady Akari chose to live and die as a human," I told him quietly.

Renge had told me as much. When Akari had first fallen ill, her brother Keria had made her a potion of immortality—an elixir of life that would've allowed her to live forever. But Akari had rejected it. She chose to live and die as a human to teach Renge the importance of transient life.

All life is bound to end. That is why we must protect and save others. And humans are especially weak, their lives ending more easily unless they're offered help.

That was Akari's choice as a mother. That was what had made Renge so kind. She'd taught him that the weakness and transience of life is part of what makes humans what they are. What makes them precious.

I was so impressed by her. I didn't think I could make the same decision.

"She was, indeed, special. I may hate humans, but Akari was always... different," Air said.

Even this misanthropic god acknowledges her uniqueness. Lady Akari was truly a one-of-a-kind Holy Woman, who'd rejected immortality and godhood in favor of remaining human and dying. And that inherent humanity was what had defined her way as a Holy Woman. And though I could only hope to measure up to her, her residual thoughts still guided me.

“You’ve...become a *god*, haven’t you, O Great Curalius?” the Centaurus asked the new dragon god in awe.

“Yes...” she mused. “But as I said, it does not feel like much has changed. Though I *do* feel young again.”

“Then you will keep guiding our continent?!” the Centaurus asked expectantly.

He’s likely very anxious without a clear leader to look to...

“Yes, I will. I shall continue ruling until Revireus grows older. For now, I’ll try to convince the Colossi to surrender. I’d left that task in Renge’s hands. But now, I think I’ll be able to convince them. That is...assuming you will allow it, O mighty Air?”

“Yes, I do,” Air said. “And you may guide the Mythical continent, too. But when I go into hibernation, I need you to protect Wisty Air from outside forces.”

“Of course. I will keep this world safe, even if it costs me my life.”

The Great Curalius stood there, mighty and lofty. I was truly transfixed by the visage of this proud, shining white dragon. *From now on, Air is no longer the one and only god in this world...*



“**THE** Colossals have retreated to their forest,” Renge told me as he came into my chambers at Deshmel, tiredly slumping onto the table as he sat down.

“They live in forests, huh...?” I mused as I brewed more of my heat rash potion.

For now, the threat to the Mythical continent was averted. Thus, we returned to Deshmel, and I went back to making potions. I had a list of things that needed to be made for sale in the commercial block, and I was beginning to start work on stocking my new store.

Tonics and salves were always in high demand, so I knew I’d need to keep a good stock of medium-grade tonics. I couldn’t man the store myself at all times, so I’d need to hire a clerk.

Thinking of all this, I wrote down everything I’d need for my new shop. Then I

looked down at Renge, resting on the table. He looked exhausted.

“Want some tea?” I offered.

“Only if *you* make it...” Renge mumbled.

“*Hehehe... Coming right up,*” I said, satisfied.

I threw some lumber into the stove and lit it up to boil some water. Then, as I looked for the tea leaves, I spotted some unfamiliar dried leaves.

What’s this...? Oh, right! I made some herb tea a while back!

There were lots of medicinal herbs here that didn’t exist in my old world, so the only utility herbal tea had here was to taste good. This meant I could use herbal tea to further popularize some of these herbs.

For now, I could turn Duana, Solan, and Blade leaves and Moon Rule and Lilith petals into tea. I took out some Duana leaves and used them to make tea for myself, while pouring Renge a cup of ordinary tea.

“Eew! What’s that smell?!” Renge bolted upright and exclaimed, repulsed.

“Does it smell *that* bad? I made myself tea from Duana leaves.”

“Huh...? You can make tea out of Duana leaves?!”

“Well, uh...I’m trying to see if it works...? I used Appraisal and it said it’s non-toxic. The question is just how it tastes...”

“Right...that’s the most important part.”

“I’ll be checking *that* now. And if it’s nasty, I’ll try to improve it so it’s tasty, healthy, *and* pretty!”

I took a sip to taste it. But— “*Urrrrrp!*” I screwed up my face in disgust.

“How is it?” Renge asked.

“Bitter! *Really* bitter. *Way* too bitter...” I said, coughing.

This is really bad! Tea’s supposed to be bitter. But this is too much. I’ll have to rethink how I make it to mask the bitterness...

“Are you all right?” Renge looked at me, concerned.

“Yeah... It’s bitter, but it should be good for the body.”

“I respect your desire to improve. But don’t go too far.”

“I’m not going too far! I just need to rethink how I process the leaves. Maybe I need to dilute them in water or boil them to get the bitterness out before I dry it. *Hmm...*boiling them might take out their nutrients. Maybe I should bake them...?”

“Whoa... Do you really have to go *that* far to make them less bitter? Is it worth it?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

“Let me try! I *want* to... I mean...everything’s finally back to normal.”

Every time I looked up at the sky and saw that it was blue again, I felt relieved. I’d spoken to Nakona about this, but it was still hard to believe how close we’d come to the end of the world during the Sugula crisis.

It just...didn’t feel real. We were so caught up in just getting through life that we’d thought the end of the world had nothing to do with us. But that wasn’t true. Our hearts just tried to look away from the reality before us.

That’s why I stopped planning what I’d make for dinner the next day and stopped researching medicine that humans could make, too. I’d thought it didn’t matter. But looking back on that now, it felt like I’d reached a dead end. I’d just...given up on making new things. It’d felt pointless since, even if I made something new, the world was doomed anyway. I’d already resigned myself to that fate without even realizing it...until Renge...

“With the Sugula gone,” I smiled, “we can think of tomorrow and the day after... Thinking about it like that...it makes me want to make new things. And it’s all thanks to *you*, Renge.”

“Huh...? No, I...ummm...” Renge stuttered, taken aback.

“I’m serious,” I beamed. “Making new things is a challenge I enjoy. And now Dad and Lico are getting married and Fort Deshmel’s about to become a proper town. Everyone’s doing new things. Now that the Sugula’s gone, they can all... think of the future.”

“The future...”

“Yeah...our future, too.” I whispered those words, to which Renge looked

surprised for a moment, but then smiled.

“Yes...you’re right.”

“Yeah. What are your plans for the future, Renge? Is there anything *you’ve* been meaning to do?”

“Well...I never considered that.”

“Figuring that out is your goal, then.”

“Yes, I suppose... The future, huh...? I really never considered it. The Kaguya with a Will of Its Own is now defeated and can never exist again... *Mmm...*”

I poured myself a new cup of regular tea and sat across from him. Watching Renge seriously contemplate the future made me happy.

Thinking of the future...our future...is true bliss.

♣ Side Story – Farewell (Renge POV)

IN my oldest memories, I remember the way my father had looked down on me after we buried my mother.

Expressionless. Emotionless.

I never got the impression he'd cared much for me to begin with. So, when my mother died, I got the distinct feeling he'd disappear and leave me behind. And sure enough, my father left Wisty Air without a word.

"Did Oborozuki leave and return to his world?"

My uncle on my mother's side, who took me in, eventually died too. A few years later, a man who looked very similar to my father appeared before me and asked me that question. He called himself Air. He was the creator of this world. Its god.

Oborozuki was my father's name. And Air was one of *his* father's—my grandfather's—brothers. I was shocked to learn that. I'd thought all my blood relatives were dead.

With me having no one else to turn to, Air had raised me in the divine realm. He taught me about this world, other worlds, about my father's family, and how to use my powers...all sorts of things. Those were truly fruitful, fulfilling days. Growing stronger was gratifying. Growing wiser was satisfying. Air was like both a father and an older brother to me.

If asked whether I liked or disliked him, I'd pick the former. I respected him. Apparently, Air didn't know my real father that well, either.

I learned that, when Cerberi mature, they cross into other worlds and linger there for a century to train. My father came here to Wisty Air for that reason. Then he met my mother and fell in love with her, and I was born.

But the century came to an end and my father left this world. Refusing to take me along, he discarded me. Air was baffled by his nephew's actions. But he

didn't pity me. Nor did he particularly criticize my father. He simply chose to focus on raising me as a pup related to his bloodline.

There were five aspects that determined whether a Cerberus was considered an adult. The first was growing one's armored hide, which nullified most physical and magic attacks. The second was one's third eye opening, which allowed access to the entire race's accumulated knowledge.

The third was learning to use one's third tail, which opened access to our detection abilities. This tail is what Cerberi use to cross to other worlds. The fourth was learning to use the black flames. And the fifth was to develop an ability equal in power to the black flames.

...There was also another condition: being able to assume human form, fight in it, and remaining in it for prolonged periods without one's ears and tails popping out. But since I'd spent my entire life in human form as it was, I actually had more trouble maintaining my beast form.

And yet, I was able to fulfill all those conditions and was considered an adult Cerberus. When Air finally acknowledged I'd matured, I returned to the surface. But the changes I found there shocked me.

First, I met the man who would become my lifelong friend—the high elf Leishi, who'd later go on to be known as the Elf of the Sun. Uncharacteristically for a high elf, he was a peculiar person: the kind to leap before he looks. He was gregarious and impulsive, never thinking things through. I'd get mad at him regularly. But if not for him, I'd have never come up with the way to destroy the Sugula or considered burning the falling Kaguya from the continent's edge.

But in the process, many lives were lost to the flame. Countless species driven to extinction.

Tina had mentioned to me that the Sugula truly being gone allowed her to think of the future and make new things. Her words honestly surprised me. I looked out the window in the hall.

Yes, indeed, it was a blue sky that hung over a world rife with greenery and a stirring ocean. Many races lived in this world—the same world Leishi and I had had to thoroughly raze two thousand years ago.

Things really are back to the way they were...

Of course, they weren't *quite* back to the way they were. But the world was revitalized, and new life had replaced that which was lost.

Such nice weather...

"What are your plans for the future, Renge? Is there anything you've been meaning to do?"

I couldn't answer Tina's question. I'd never considered the future...or perhaps, I'd been avoiding such thoughts. Leishi had once asked me the same thing; I'd never given him a clear answer. I never *had* to decide what I wanted to do or who I wanted to become. Nothing interested me and there wasn't anything I wanted to do.

All I cared about was protecting the world my mother and Leishi left behind.

Protecting the world...yeah, that's what I want to do.

But other than that—

"What else do I want to do?" I muttered.

I loved Tina, of course. I wanted to protect *her* as much as I wanted to protect this world. Though, in the end, I'd end up all alone again...

I fell silent, remembering my father. The memory of his leaving has shackled my heart for as long as I've lived. Just like Leishi, Tina would leave me behind someday too. And that thought made it difficult for me to open my heart.

I...I can't keep going like this...

I teleported down to the divine realm and found Air napping in front of the grave. When I'd lived in the divine realm, I'd heard this was where Air's older brother was buried, the original god who'd made this world, Wisty—who, as a Cerberus, had been called Futuba. I'd heard he'd actually been killed by their younger brother.

"Hmm? Do you need something?" Air asked me, his eyes still closed.

"Ah...!" I jolted.

If I love Tina and intend to marry her...I'll have to confront my father properly.

I swallowed, then said, “Air, I want to cross to another world and go to the village of the Cerberi. I want to see my father.”



“Hmmm? What brought *this* on? After you’ve spent so long running away from doing that?”

“I’ll be marrying Tina next year...and I feel like he should...know that...”

“Oh, I see... That *does* make sense. I doubt he’d care much, though.”

I’d imagined as much. My father had never really liked me, anyway. I doubt he remembered I existed at all.

“The Cerberi village,” Air recalled, “was in a world called Leen-El Dorado. I haven’t been there since I deified, so I don’t know what it’s like there now.”

“Leen-El Dorado... Thank you. I’ll go there.”

“You do that. I can’t come along, I’m afraid. Those who deified are forbidden from going back. I’m sure they’ll let you in, though.” Saying this, Air gave me a strand of his hair. I didn’t know what for, then the hair levitated in my palm, billowed out smoke, and suddenly turned into a small black wolf plush the size of my thumb.

“What is this...?” I asked.

“Think of it as a means of identification,” Air said. “During my time there, the Cerberi village was hostile to outsiders. But if you show them you’re my apprentice, they probably won’t kill you.”

“Kill me?!”

“This is all I can do to help you. It’d be easier if I could come along. But really, you’re an adult. You can take care of yourself. If they irritate you, just beat them up.”

I couldn’t find the right words. Air was my...teacher. And also, my brother and father. I could vividly feel that he was...worried about me.

“Thank you. I’ll be off then,” I told him.

“You do that...”

I enveloped myself in my black flames, closed my eyes, and opened my third eye to set the right coordinates. I peered into the endlessly expanding interstice between worlds, into the dimensional sea. Across space and galaxies. Between

the nether and beyond the multi-verse...

This is amazing...so this is what crossing into another world is like.

“Ah...!”

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a forest of giant trees, standing a hundred feet tall. The hair doll Air gave me floated up and began guiding me through the forest.

Did...did I really come to another world?

“Oh! Hello...I’ve never seen *you* here before,” a voice suddenly said.

I turned around and saw the source of the voice: a turtle-like dragon raised its head through the trees to peer at me. A dragon speaking was no surprise. But that’s not *why* I was startled.

It was because this dragon didn’t *know me*. I’d never seen this kind of dragon or even this kind of place in all my long life.

“I’m, uh...my name is Renge.”

“I am Riola, an earth dragon who lives here in the Dragon Forest.”

“Dragon Forest...”

The name was unfamiliar. I didn’t know of such a place in Wisty Air. *I really have traveled to another world...*

“I think I’d recognize a mature Cerberus like you...” Riola said. “Were you born in the village?”

“Well, no. I was born in another world... I came here to see my father. I will marry next year and, though he might not care much for me, I thought I could do him the courtesy of telling him.”

“True...”

“Is the Cerberus village nearby?”

“Yes. Would you like for me to take you there?”

“Huh? You’d do that?”

“Of course. I’m on a walk and it’s on my route.”

While I wasn't sure if I could trust this dragon, I still followed them. After five minutes of walking, Riola stopped in their tracks and looked somewhere. I looked in the same direction.

"K-Karin... Not often I see you out in the forest."

Riola's voice was stiff. Standing in front of us was a tall man with long hair that extended down to his feet. He was dressed in the same Cerberus native dress I wore when assuming human form. The robe-like dress had a unique pattern to it: black with a white outline, similar to armored fur.

But the atmosphere about him was unique. Like he wasn't a living being.

...A half-god, half-Mythical...

I could tell he was alive. But he didn't give off much of a presence.

"I am Karin," he said, looking at me. "I am chief of the Cerberus clan."

"I-I am called Renge," I said, unsure of how to approach him.

"Ahh, the half-human, half-Mythical Oborozuki left behind in Mitsuba's world..."

I gritted my teeth. *So...I really was abandoned... But I didn't expect the clan leader to appear here! Are we that close to the village? Or did he come here to bring me into the clan?*

"That's Mitsuba's denizen beast," he said, noticing the doll Air gave me. "I see you've reached adulthood."

"Yes."

"And you're here to report to Oborozuki that you intend to marry another world's Holy Woman, are you?"

"Y-Yes, but how do you—"

"*You're* the one who's sharing his third eye with me...though I see you're not accustomed to using it."

"Ah, yes...it's my first time..."

"Which is why I came here to meet you. Past here is the gatekeeper. They know *why* you're here. But they likely will not let you in."

They're not going to let me enter the village? I guess that makes sense, since I just showed up without letting them know... Is that why Chief Karin came out to greet me?

"He's here for *you*, Oboro. So *you* handle him," Chief Karin suddenly spoke to someone I couldn't see.

I looked up and saw someone on one of the large trees' branches. His features were very similar to Chief Karin's. He wore a robe with long sleeves and a long hem. His hair was longer than mine. His eyes opened sleepily.

I could barely remember his face and voice. That's how long it'd been since I'd last seen him. *But there's no doubt...*

"F-Father..." I said, my voice breaking.

Longing and inexplicable emotion brewed in me.

Why did you leave me behind? Why did you care so little about me? Why didn't you take me with you? Were you...waiting for me to come to you? I tried really hard until now. I— My mind was racing with thoughts and complaints. But I was an adult, not a child who'd lash out over a grudge. My father being absent and my becoming Air's apprentice made me stronger and gave me a place in the world. Many people in the Mythical continent relied on me. In both Leishi and Tinaris, I'd found precious people who meant the world to me.

My life is filled with regrets. But I never would've had all these dear encounters if you'd have taken me along. All my life thus far has been based on my choices. And I'll keep on choosing my future all on my own.

I...I...!

The tears overflowed. There was so much to say. But the words just wouldn't come out.

"I will be off then, young Cerberus," Riola said gently, seeing me tremble and shed tears. I could hear the Earth Dragon's retreating footsteps. But I was too choked up to be able to thank them properly.

Father and Chief Karin remained silent, waiting for me to calm down. But then I noticed my father dozing off again on his branch. *He...truly cares nothing for*

me...

Finally, hesitantly, I spoke. “I...I will be getting married next year. I met a woman who accepts me, and she’s the only one I’ll spend my life with going forward.”

I’d considered distancing myself from Tinaris. But seeing my father now made me overcome some line I’d drawn in the sand. I had finally come to terms with something I never realized was holding me down this hard.

“I shall live on in Wisty Air. So...farewell, Father.”

“I see...”

My father finally spoke, despite looking like he was sleeping. He said nothing else: just those two words.

“Did Mitsuba teach you the laws of the Cerberi?” Chief Karin asked upon confirming I’d calmed down.

Mitsuba was Air’s Cerberi name. Cerberi had the authority and power to kill gods, which required them to live bound by firm laws. Since I was half-Cerebri, of course, Air had taught me those laws.

I nodded. Chief Karin nodded back. “Good, then. Your children, too, will be born with the power of the Cerberi. You must teach them the responsibilities that come *with* that power. And if you cannot do it alone, bring them to the village. We will teach them what their place in the universe is.”

“Understood.”

Such was my responsibility for the blood flowing in my veins.

Of course, Air and the others *had* said they weren’t sure if Tina and I were capable of having children to begin with. *But...I can consider all that when—and if—we have children.* After all, *I’d* been born despite my mother and father being different races. It wasn’t impossible.

And if that happened, our children could also be burdened with my great power: the black flames, capable of killing gods and burning concepts when mastered. If our future children proved to have greater potential than I’d had, there was a chance training them would be more than even Air could handle. In

that case, I'd have to rely on the full-blooded Cerberi, as opposed to a god like Air or a mixed-blood like me.

"I'll be counting on you if that happens," I said finally.

"...Make sure to bring your family along next time. My younger brothers are kind to women and children," Chief Karin suddenly said.

"Huh?" I looked up at him.

But at that moment, Chief Karin teleported away. That just left me and my father, resting on the branch above me, and he probably wasn't interested in talking. He'd never talked to my mother endlessly, either. Still, it didn't feel right leaving without saying anything.

"Farewell, Father," I said softly.

I opened my third eye and set Wisty Air as my next destination. I used my tail to fix my position and enveloped myself in the black flames. My father said nothing, simply seeing me off with his now-open eyes.

I won't be a father like you. I'll become the kind of father I always wished I had. So farewell...in every way that matters.

I won't be left behind. I will...see Tina off when the time comes. I'll let her depart for her next life in peace, so I can meet her again when she reincarnates with my head held high. And we have centuries together before that.

Thinking about it like that, as my journey back to Wisty Air began, life didn't seem so bad anymore.

♣ Afterword

HELLO, this is Kiri Komori.

Thank you for picking up volume 6 of *Reincarnated as the Last of My Kind*.

I would like to take this chance to thank everyone who read and supported this series. To the editor who reached out to me. To Yamigo-sensei, for their wonderful illustrations. To Roman Lempert, who handled the translation. To everyone involved in the production of the English publication, And to the family who've always supported me. Thank you all so much.

The Age 17 arc is a newly written part of the story that was never posted for the web novel version. I'd considered writing it, but I decided against it, since it'd be too long. Yet, when the publisher told me I could write more arcs for the story, I went for it.

In Renge's side story, I featured his father and the Cerberus village. It took a lot of restraint not to feature his many different siblings. I believe that, in bidding farewell to his father, Renge is now ready to mature alongside Tinaris, bit by bit. If I get to write more of their story, I'd like to go into detail about Tina, Nakona, and Marcus's respective wedding ceremonies.

Now, I'm sure many of you were looking forward to this: the series is now sold in both hardback and paperback format! I actually just got my copies not too long ago. Having a physical book really does make all the difference. There's this sense of presence and weight you can't deny. I was really excited: *Whoa, it's a real paperback book!!!* I thought. Seeing the series go from digital-only to print was really exciting!

On an unrelated tangent, last year, my mother adopted two cats, expanding our family to one dog and two cats. One of the cats got sick, which had us worried for a while, but now they've recovered, weigh a respectable eleven pounds, and is very vocal in their meowing. I don't know who said cats like quiet, but they're wrong! This cat is louder than my dog and likes to dash madly

across the hall every night!

Still...I'm glad they're feeling better now!

Oh! Also, there are audiobooks for volumes 1-5 out now, narrated by Cassandra Morris and Graham Halstead. There are additional narrators covering different point of view chapters in each volume. Do check those out, too!

Again, thank you for picking up the sixth volume! Until next time!

-Kiri Komori



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