



Author: yoneori Illustrator: LINO

MEALS made to ORDER:

HOW TO DOMESTICATE YOUR
DRAGON
WITH DELICACIES!



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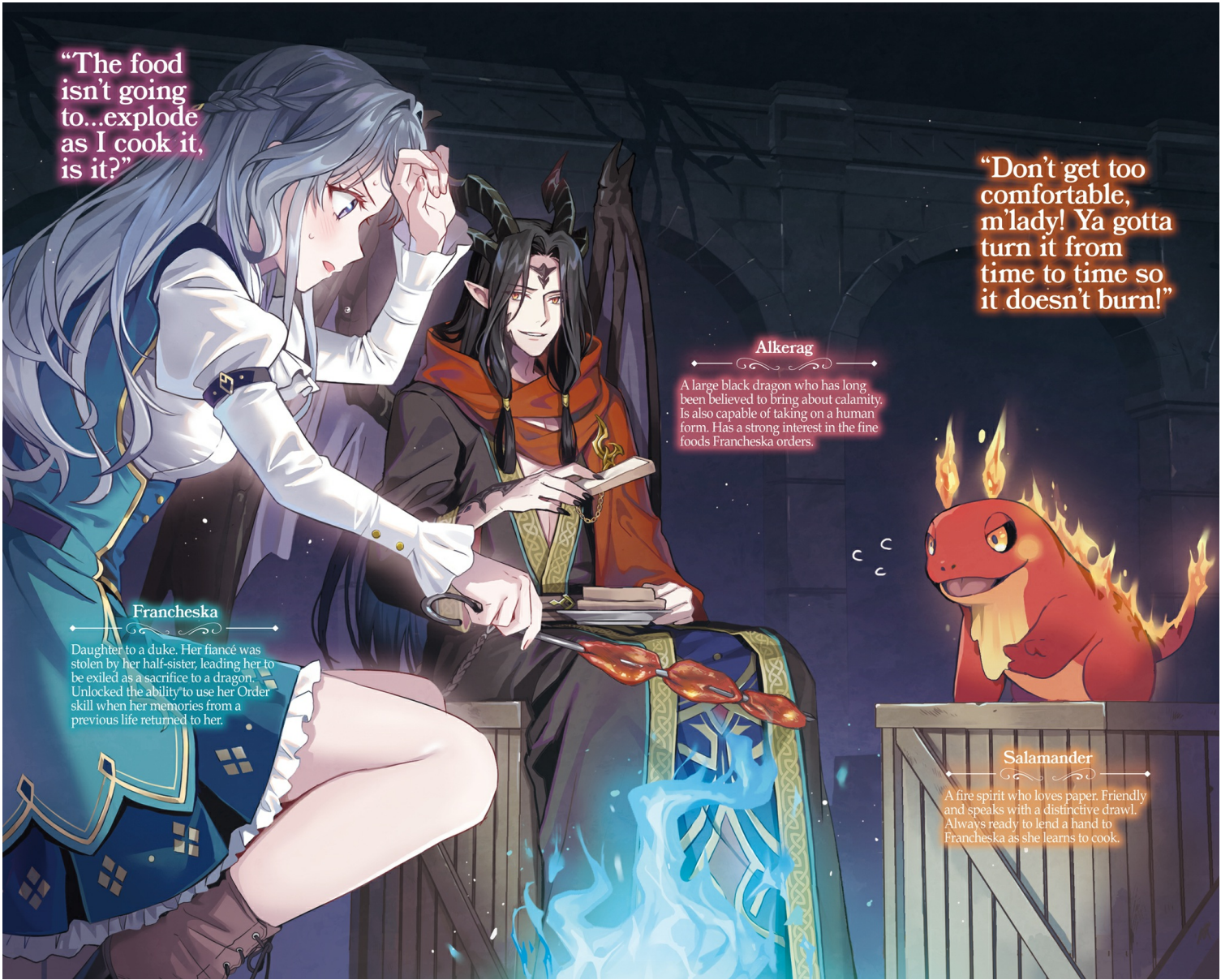


It opened its scarlet jaws to reveal rows of sharp fangs just before its voice rumbled out from the depths of its belly and reverberated over my head. A powerful magic emanated from its body, pushing pinpricks into my skin.

“Are you the one who disturbed my slumber, child?”



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“The food isn’t going to...explode as I cook it, is it?”

“Don’t get too comfortable, m’lady! Ya gotta turn it from time to time so it doesn’t burn!”

Alkerag

A large black dragon who has long been believed to bring about calamity. Is also capable of taking on a human form. Has a strong interest in the fine foods Francheska orders.

Francheska

Daughter to a duke. Her fiancé was stolen by her half-sister, leading her to be exiled as a sacrifice to a dragon. Unlocked the ability to use her Order skill when her memories from a previous life returned to her.

Salamander

A fire spirit who loves paper. Friendly and speaks with a distinctive drawl. Always ready to lend a hand to Francheska as she learns to cook.

C o n t e n t s



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Prologue

In the darkest, gloomiest depths of a cave stood an ancient shrine, surely soon to be forgotten. On its altar sat a man clad in black clothing, and on his lap sat a girl. They seemed to be enormously comfortable in one another's presence, and they were studying what appeared to be a thin board that floated in the air. The girl, Francheska, was murmuring to herself; caught between the man's sturdy chest and long arms, she compared herself to the treasure at the center of a coiled dragon's watchful form.

The blue flames of the torches set on the temple walls spread cyan light throughout the cave. This glow highlighted the mystical gradient of Francheska's hair—the strands were black at their roots and became silver at the end.

Without caring for the hair's owner, the man twisted his long fingers into it and tugged.

A cry fell from her lips. "For goodness' sake! I understand that you find this tedious, but could you *please* keep your fingers out of my hair?!"

The man huffed. "There would be nothing to find 'tedious' if you acted with a little more haste."

Frustrated at herself for letting his sudden mischievous touch catch her off guard, Francheska turned to him and tightened her coral lips into a pout. However, even when she glared at the man whose arms still surrounded her, he responded with complete indifference. In fact, it seemed he had only let go of her hair to reach for the board before them—the skill tablet.

He tapped on it with a commanding finger. "I shall have this one, Fran. The one I sampled before, though a different flavor, was simply delectable!"

"I had always thought that dragons ate little but meat. I never realized they possessed such a sweet tooth," she said.



The man was pointing at a picture of a dessert dotted with colorful fruits accompanied by a description in a mysterious language. The image was so vibrant and detailed that it almost looked like one could reach out and grab it. While his gaze usually exuded arrogance, right now, the man's eyes sparkled with anticipation. Francheska felt a smile rise to her lips. There was a flame alight within the golden depths of his eyes, and it was such an endearing sight that she had to bring a curled hand to her mouth to hide her smile as she giggled. Ignoring the way he pouted in response to that, she brought a long, pale finger to the center of the tablet and pressed the square button displayed there.

The very next moment, a sizable paper carton appeared in her hands, seemingly out of thin air. Francheska placed the weighty box on the altar and opened the lid. The air was filled with the refreshing smell of tart fruit and the rich, sweet scent of sugary butter. The man's finely sculpted nose twitched, and Francheska's smile widened as she noticed the fire in his eyes intensifying. Nothing made her happier than knowing that her skill was at the root of such excitement.

"Here you are, Alk," she said. "One custard tart with seasonal fruit."

"I am much obliged."

Inside the box sat a perfectly identical version of the tart that had been displayed on the tablet. It was cut into six slices. The glossy apricot glaze was like the cherry on top of an already gorgeous dessert. Francheska's violet eyes softened as she offered a piece of the treasure to Alkerag. He gave her a cool nod before taking the slice in his large hand. He immediately bit into it, and the rainbow of fruit vanished behind a row of pearly fangs in mere seconds.

Francheska let out a relieved sigh—judging from the way he had eaten it, Alkerag had enjoyed this offering just as much as the others.

In reality, the man who was holding her on his lap and gazing intently at the floating tablet was not a human at all. Known as Alkerag, he was a giant black dragon said to be an ancient lord of calamity. Francheska had been thrown into this cave as his sacrifice but had managed to win him over with her skill. If she hadn't, she would be long since dead. While she was, in theory, walking on

eggshells—offending the arrogant, almighty dragon could well mean her days were over—she was fairly confident that he held some affection toward her. After all, he allowed her to call him by a nickname and to use her skill while perched upon his lap.

He must be awfully fond of my skill...

Being reminded of her current predicament, Francheska sighed before reaching out for the remains of the tart. The idea of testing out the fruits of her skill seemed far more appealing to her right now than ruminating over difficult matters. She could do that later. Ever since she had mastered her skill, she had become aware of how much less restrictive she had become when it came to her own appetite. Throwing manners to the wind, she sank her teeth into the very end of the triangle-shaped slice.

“Mmm! Is there anything as wonderful as the crunch of freshly baked shortcrust pastry?”

Though the tart wasn’t hot, it couldn’t have been baked very long ago. There was a generous layer of cream that had yet to leech into the pastry’s crust. That left it crunchy, crisp, and firm, and the crust of the *pâte sablée* pastry exploded in her mouth with each bite. Behind it all was a subtly sweet almond fragrance. The next thing of note was the thick custard that had been woven with vanilla. Together with the refreshing fruit flavors, it brought a rush of new life to Francheska’s taste buds. As that rich custard made of eggs and milk melted on her tongue, it mixed with the slightly sour fruit juice and added the perfect touch of acidity to an ingredient that would otherwise dominate with its sweetness. Satisfied, she swallowed it all down.

“The contrast between the crunchy pastry and the soft custard filling makes it taste all the better. I do so like fruit that isn’t overwhelmingly acidic.”

“You do seem to have an aversion to sour flavors, Alk,” Francheska said. She then watched as the dragon helped himself to another piece, this time eating only the fruit and custard from the top of the tart. She decided to try it for herself.

Crisp strawberries dripped with sweet juice, and orange slices burst delightfully between her teeth. The sweet peach compote was tender enough

for her tongue to squash it completely, and that only made the sugary acidity of the bursting blueberries that followed all the more prominent. The thick custard stepped in next, spreading over her tongue and gently soothing it where the sour flavors had battered it. The combination of custard and fruit was indeed delicious.

However, this was a tart. And, in Francheska's opinion, it *needed* the pastry's firm texture. As she enjoyed the leftover crisp base with just a thin layer of custard, an unconscious, silly smile rose to her face.

"The fruit *is* lovely with the custard," she began. "But I think I prefer the crust, especially where the bottom meets the side and the heat from the oven has given it a slight bitterness... Yes, a tough exterior is what I *really* like. Maybe with a bit of prickliness too..."

The dragon stared at her as she took her final bite, as though she had said something beyond his comprehension. "Are you perhaps...?" But then, he gave her a satisfied nod. "Never mind. I think I know what you mean."

There were now just two slices of the tart left in the box. Alkerag must have helped himself to another two while Francheska had been eating hers. As she was reaching out to distribute what remained, the dragon fumbled around in his robes before holding out his hand before her.

In his palm sat a dark blue gem the size of a chicken egg. "Is this adequate compensation?"

In order to use her skill, Francheska needed to spend "points." She could gain points by putting coins or gems into the skill tablet, which was why Alkerag would offer her those things as payment.

It seemed a little backward to her—she was using her skill to prolong her life, and yet the creature she was supposed to be appeasing was paying *her* to use it. Francheska tried to keep her face under control, determined not to let her complicated feelings on the matter show. It wasn't that she didn't lament her situation, but the bright side was that Alkerag's compensation granted her more opportunities to put her skill to use. She tried to take it as proof that he appreciated her ability.

"That is more than enough. I would accept something smaller if you have it."

“I am afraid to say that I do not. Not at hand, at least. If this is too much, you can keep it until you have need of it.”

Despite the gemstone’s size, Francheska was in no position to refuse it. The dragon wasn’t a flexible creature; once he said something, he never took it back. She accepted the weighty stone and made a show of looking at it dubiously, but Alkerag reacted with little more than a dismissive wave of his hand. Instead, he stuffed his cheeks with another slice of tart.

Knowing that any further argument was pointless, Francheska brought the stone close to the skill tablet. The moment it made contact with the screen, the gemstone was swallowed up with no resistance whatsoever. Bursting petals and confetti appeared on the display, along with a dynamic announcement written in another language.

“My skill is certainly useful.”

“Indeed. It has supplied me with all sorts of delicious delicacies. The ones who exiled you from your country do not know what they are missing.”

The words that had spilled from the dragon’s smiling lips sent strong ripples through Francheska’s heart. Purposely ignoring the way he was hungrily eyeing up the last piece of tart in her hand, she took a bite of it.

It didn’t matter that this was the umpteenth time she was tasting this tart. The combination of generous creamy custard and the avalanche of seasonal fruit would never stop being delicious. The silky custard was so indulgent, and then the tangy fruit joined in to sharpen her senses... Francheska feared that she could eat slice after slice if only she had them at hand.

She giggled. “I used to be regarded as someone without value. But now, I feel totally unburdened—I’m *grateful* to have been exiled.”

“Without value?” Alkerag paused. “I have never sampled delicacies such as these in all of my days. To deem you worthless when you are capable of producing such previously unknown wonders is unfathomable to me.”

Francheska had made that comment thoughtlessly as she munched on the tart, but the dragon behind her was wearing a genuinely baffled expression.

“I would exchange every treasure in my possession for these culinary delights

of yours,” Alkerag muttered, which at last elicited a quiet giggle from Francheska. He sounded half joyful and half bashful, with just a touch of arrogance to his tone.

“Thank you, Alk!” she managed through her laughter. “Knowing that you appreciate my skill makes me feel better about what it, and I, have been through.”

Whenever she ordered sweets, cakes, or anything delicious, it attracted a number of tiny, hungry spirits. Francheska had ordered some extra baked goods for them along with the tart. The spirits had come as expected, and she handed the extras out to them with a smile.

Just then, a pair of large arms reached out around her lithe body and pulled her in tightly from behind.

“You were an offering to me, a flower. I intend to have you devote yourself to me entirely.”

“Goodness. You can just say that you can no longer live without me, you know.”

The dragon reached out with his long thin nails to snag some of the baked goods before the spirits finished them. Francheska ignored him and suppressed the urge to laugh out loud as she pointedly stuck her nose up in the air.

She tried to keep a hint of defiance in her gaze as she stared at Alkerag. He huffed before struggling with the packaging on the treat he’d picked up, looking visibly frustrated. The more he tried to avoid crushing the small almond cake inside the package, the more he struggled to control his strength, and before long, the plastic wrapper was a crinkled mess. The small spirits were gathering in an effort to reclaim their treat, and he kept having to move his hands around to avoid them, which only seemed to make him more irritated.

“Fran! Stop laughing and *do* something!”

“I must have told you a thousand times that you need to pull on that triangle there,” she said.

Before the dragon lost his temper completely, Francheska took the cake from him. She smartly opened the pitifully deformed wrapper with a blade of wind

magic. She took a bite, and the once-angered dragon smiled—she couldn't help but smile back.

The spirits were still scrambling for sugar, so she started tossing them crumbs from the treats.

Hers was a peaceful existence indeed, and it was at times like these that she really appreciated how blessed she was.

Chapter 1

“Francheska, your engagement to Prince Theodore has been called off. Elysia will be marrying His Royal Highness instead.”

I was supposed to be with my grandfather in the capital, performing my official duties. Instead, my father had called me to his private residence within the duchy, apparently to tell me that my engagement would no longer go as planned.

Shock ran through my head like I had been struck with a hammer. A wave of dizziness hit me, and I felt like I was about to collapse despite the fact that I was sitting on the sofa.

Somehow managing to still my wobbling spine, I studied my fiancé—or perhaps, my ex-fiancé—as he sat across from me. Next to him sat my younger half-sister, with whom I shared a father. Though she was trembling with uncertainty, her arms were firm as she hugged herself and leaned in closer to Prince Theodore. The prince embraced her tenderly in return.

A blue-eyed, golden-haired prince and a gorgeous girl with honey-colored locks. They were like a match made in heaven...but that would mean that heaven had been willing to turn a blind eye to the fact that he had been my fiancé and she was my half-sister.

“Forgive me, Francheska,” Theodore said. “I know you have a skill, but no one is able to decipher it, and it is most likely useless. Although Ely might not have one, she possesses charm and beauty. Surely you can see that she is more worthy of becoming the duchess?”

“I-I’m sorry, Francheska,” Elysia stuttered, “but I had to be true to myself! And Theodore and I have already cemented our love for one another. The proof lies in my belly...”

The prince spoke up again. “I also took the decision to follow my heart. With Ely, I have found true love. I could never marry you—the cost would be

suppressing my feelings!”

Though they had both apologized, Theodore was lovingly scooping up a lock of Elysia’s hair. Her eyes were tearing up, but her peach-colored lips were set into a smirk as she slowly ran her hands over her belly. Whatever they might’ve been saying, they were lost in their own little world.

Lower your head if you like, but that smile on your lips says it all. You might want to try hiding it if your objective is for me to believe you.

That said, it was quite obvious that she had no intention of showing me so much as a thimbleful of sincerity.

There’s nothing to be done. Neither of them cares one bit about me, and neither does my father.

Theodore was the third prince. Upon becoming an adult, he was supposed to give up his royal status, marry me, and join our House of Vaielindt. Or that was what had been promised to me, at least. My future had been set in stone for all this time, but now, it had been upturned without a moment’s hesitation.

No wonder I had been seeing markedly less of Theodore in the capital lately. While I had been performing my duties, he had been traipsing off to the duchy to cultivate his “true love” with my sister.

I took one last glance at the pair as they repeated their empty apologies before I turned to look at my father in his armchair. His almond-shaped eyes were emotionless as he stared at me, and his fine, thin lips began to seal my fate.

“It wouldn’t do were the scandalous news to spread that the daughter of the Vaielindts has had her engagement called off,” he began. “It just so happens that the Flower Offering is taking place this year. We shall spread the word that you were chosen to be the flower, and His Highness had to take a new fiancée.”

“Very well. When shall I be departing?” I asked.

“Tomorrow. Do make sure you are adequately prepared.”

I took a moment to compose myself. “I understand. In that case, as long as there is nothing else to discuss, I shall make haste.”

The Flower Offering was a ceremony that took place every fifty years. A “flower” would be offered to a lone black dragon who lived on an isolated island in order to quell the beast’s boredom. In more pragmatic terms, the people offered a sacrifice to the dragon—a being who possessed powerful magic and the ability to curse others—in the hope that peace might prevail a little longer. It was said that a few hundred years ago, the people had skipped the offering, and that had resulted in many years of back-to-back domestic conflicts as well as famine due to drought-and frost-damaged crops. Ever since then, the ceremony hadn’t been skipped a single time.

I had never once imagined that I might be chosen as the flower. Having said that, the House of Vaielindt would not be able to abide any rumors that suggested the prince had been unfaithful to me in favor of my younger sister and that I had been cast out as a result. It would have been much kinder of them to have stopped Theodore when it had been discovered that he was seeing my sister...but it wasn’t like wishful thinking could do anything about it now.

It was all too clear that my current mother—my father’s second wife, who he had married after my natal mother passed away—had stolen his spine. And Elysia was likely more attractive than me too. She had been born to a couple who were together because of love, whereas my birth had been rooted in aristocratic obligation. Now that I thought about it, my father had never once shown me a fraction of the affection he displayed for my sister. Perhaps my grandfather was the only person who had ever shown concern for me. He had often admonished my father for how I had been treated, but in the end, it seemed his efforts had been in vain.

“You will become the dragon’s bride, even as worthless as you are. You ought to consider it an honor.”

My father’s words tore through me.

“I live to serve the House of Vaielindt.” I then lowered my head and gave a perfect curtsy—a gesture that had been thoroughly drummed into me as part of my education.

Tomorrow, I would die: sacrificed to a wicked dragon. The terror of it was

enough to bring tears to my eyes, but when I saw how Elysia glanced at me with a smirk on her face, I was all the more determined not to fall apart in front of her. Suppressing my emotions, I turned to take my leave. My sister started to chatter about their wedding plans as I did, and each dainty word weighed on my back as I retreated like a ton of bricks.

I walked down the corridor alone. As gorgeous as my surroundings were, there seemed to be a slight chill in the air.

The room that had been allocated to me before I went to the capital was extremely simple and on the outer edge of the building. As soon as I passed through the doorway, I flung myself onto the bed without even bothering to take off my dress. That was all it took for the mattress to groan underneath me—it really wasn't fit for a duchess at all.

"If only I could use my skill... Would things be any different then?" That lamentation fell from my lips, even after I had told myself over and over that I would keep it in.

In this world, some people were born with special abilities known as skills. There were several types of them. For example, some skills were related to swordsmanship or commerce. The majority of them were helpful to their holder in some way, and those who possessed them were commonly praised as having been blessed by the heavens. While I had also been born with a skill, no one—least of all myself—had been able to understand what it was, and so I hadn't been able to make use of it. And before I knew it, my family had scorned me, deciding that I was useless even though I had been born with a skill.

My mother had passed away, and now my father had a new wife and Elysia. There was no longer any doubt about what that meant for me. I had always been good at magic, so I'd decided to put everything I had into that in lieu of my useless skill. But now, I was wondering whether that had all been a waste of time. I was only just realizing that the splendid dresses, the gorgeous accessories, the fine furniture, and the skilled servants had all been given to Elysia instead of to me. And that was before considering familial affection.

When I had entered into my engagement with Theodore, I *had* been given dresses and jewelry, probably for appearances' sake. However, the worn, musty

furniture in my room had never been replaced, and I'd never been given an attendant or anything of the sort. Forgive me for being boastful, but I had to wonder whether it was because of the qualities I *did* have—qualities that were hard to discern from just looking at me. I was perfectly capable of taking care of everyday things, so maybe they thought I was too organized to require help. I had never suffered one bit for not having a servant or a lady's maid!

But even then, it had seemed that my grandfather was concerned for me. He'd lived in the capital since before my debut into society, and there, he had taught me all sorts of things relating to my duties. When Theodore had left his position behind, I had become involved with the responsibilities that came with the title and territory of a duchess. My father had been too busy gallivanting about with my stepmother and sister, leaving their duties neglected. The duchy and the capital weren't that far apart, but the rest of my family never set foot in the latter outside of the social season.

I couldn't completely hold back a groan as I buried my face in the pillow. "Is it really *that* impressive to be able to use one's skill?"

After that...I can't really remember what happened next. Perhaps I fell asleep.

"It's not hopeless! He cheated on you! He's scum!"

A woman's indignant cries roused me from my stupor. I lifted my head from my pillow to a vision of a world of pure white and a dark-haired woman stomping her feet. For whatever reason, I seemed to take it in stride. Maybe there was some corner of my mind that knew I was dreaming.

*"'True love'... 'True love'?! He's gotta be kidding! What a dumbass! That's not true love! That's called cheating, you scumbag! Fran was perfect for you! How could you not see that, huh?! That sl*tty sister of hers has got you wrapped 'round her little finger, and you fell for it all—hook, line, and sinker!"*

The woman produced a large cushion out of thin air and started throwing punches at it. Perhaps they were too ferocious to be called punches—she was pummeling it.

Fran...? I thought. Might she be talking about...me?

Though I didn't recognize her, I *did* seem to recognize this woman's words

from somewhere. They sent a warmth spreading through my chest.

Yes... I've really worked hard over the years.

I'd always wanted to be a young woman worthy of my family—a duchess whose place beside Theodore no one could question. I'd never wanted the prince, my family, or my father to face criticism because of me and my useless skill. To that end, I had put *everything* into fostering my knowledge, training in magic, and memorizing the minutiae of manners. Moreover, my father had been so preoccupied with his new wife and Elysia over the past few years that I had ended up as a representative of sorts, conducting his duties in his place. All of that, too, had transpired to be a total waste of time and effort.

“Oh my god, Fran, have you forgotten who you are?! Why the hell are you giving up?! Your man cheated on you! You're allowed to go nuts, y'know! You're supposed to!”

The woman was now holding the cushion to her chest, burying her face in it, and rolling around on the floor. Then, she started pulling at her long hair and making a real mess of it as she denounced Theodore, saying he was a “scumbag.” She followed up by calling Elysia a “sl*t.” For whatever reason, I didn't feel any secondhand embarrassment from what I was witnessing. Possibly because no one would lose their temper on my behalf anymore, with the exception of my grandfather.

Besides, I had never exactly been thrilled with my engagement to Theodore. The only reason it had come about in the first place was because there hadn't been any other young women available who were of the correct age or standing.

“Urgh! Seriously! If only Fran would remember me, or... No, if only she could remember Japanese! Her skill's not in some mystical language! It's literally just Japanese!” the woman wailed.

Suddenly, it was like something clicked inside my head. The woman turned in my direction and slowly walked toward me.

My name is Francheska Vaielindt, daughter of the House of Vaielindt.

“I'm a waste of space,” the woman said. *“A corporate drone in my early*

thirties. I don't have a name anymore because I'm dead. My posthumous name is 'Kodoin Teiren Shinyo'... Something like that, anyway."

I used to be you? A long time ago?

It seemed like she could hear my thoughts. "It's more like I'm you from a previous life. I'm still here because... Well, just think of me as a computer bug. I think that's why your skill ended up being in Japanese. Sorry about all the headaches that's been causing you."

The woman looked downcast, but I quickly shook my head. As far as I could tell, she had been inside me this whole time, watching over me.

"I wasn't alone! You've been with me all these years!" I could feel my fractured heart being restored as soon as those words had left my mouth.

We were facing each other now, and it was difficult to say who moved first as we brought our palms up to meet each other's. I might have been a little taller than her, but her hand was just a little bigger than mine. From the point where we touched each other, we began to overlap. We were gradually blending into one another.



“My failure to die completely put you through so much suffering, but I’m not gonna let that happen anymore. I’m gonna help you. So don’t cry anymore, Fran. Don’t cry, me...”

I could feel myself being enveloped by something soft and warm. It was the warmth of another human being, something I hadn’t experienced in a long time. My grandfather kept me close to his heart, but he had stopped embracing me like this when I’d started growing up in earnest.

Soft and warm...

Still in my dream, I closed my eyes once more.



When my eyes snapped open, I found myself surrounded by total darkness. I looked up to see my reflection in the fogged-up window, identical to how I’d looked before I’d fallen asleep. My hair was dark at the roots, and its mysterious gradient led it to turn silver at the ends. That was something I’d gotten from my late mother. My deep violet eyes, the same color as the sky at predawn and before sunset, were inherited from my father. Looking at myself like this, the colors that made up my features were the only proof I had that I was child to both of them—because the way I had always been treated was anything but.

I sighed as my reflection’s shoulders drooped. Her gaze fell to the floor.

No... I cannot be this gutless!

“I almost feel as though I have been reborn.”

I probably had the encounter with the “me” from my dream to thank for that. Nevertheless, the refreshing sensation I felt was very much real.

“Useless” was the last word I would ever use to describe myself!

I sat down on my hard bed again. “‘Ordering’... What an interesting skill.”

In front of me was a black square—similar to the devices they called “tablets” in the world my previous self had inhabited. For convenience’s sake, I decided to call her “Teiren.” Anyway, the details of my skill were written on this square. It was almost impossible to believe that just yesterday, this text had been

completely baffling to me. Now, not only could I read it at a decent pace, but I could even understand it. To sum it up, I could exchange money or precious metals for “points,” and I could “order” food and related items from another world.

I suppose there's no time like the present...

I was wearing a ring on my little finger. It was a gift Theodore had sent with a letter full of canned phrases for some occasion or another, and I wasn't especially eager to wear it anymore. I took it off and brought it closer to the tablet, which absorbed it.

Your accessory has been exchanged for 10,000 points. You can check your point balance at any time via your account page.

“My, that was easier than I expected.”

The message on the center of the screen was accompanied by a loud burst of fanfare and exploding pink petals. The ring had been converted into points, which I could now trade for other things. The ring had been a simple one without any stones, so I hadn't expected it to be worth so much... That said, it *had* been a ring prepared by the third prince for his fiancée, so perhaps it shouldn't have been all that surprising. I decided to take it as a positive sign of things to come.

“It appears that I am able to exchange these points for food, drink, and...kitchenware, but nothing else.”

I swiped my finger across the tablet screen to browse the possibilities that were being presented to me in rows. There seemed to be four categories from which I could choose: “food,” which included fresh and processed goods; “drink,” which included alcoholic beverages; “cookware” such as pots, knives, and frying pans; and “dinnerware,” which seemed to mean items such as plates and cutlery.

I was blessed with Teiren's memories, meaning I recognized the food and drink I was looking at. I also knew how to use the cookware listed. However,

there was hardly anything on the screen that I could recall having seen in *this* world.

Now then, there's no use just looking. Exchanging something for points has proven to be a success, so why not take it one step further?

I had just caught sight of some “ice cream,” which looked delicious, so I decided to try ordering it.

A generous array of sparkling fruit tops this vanilla ice cream, made from the freshest milk and eggs. The sweet, silky vanilla and the punchy, refreshing fruit are a match made in heaven. Why miss out?

Would you like to order this item?

“I suppose I’m meant to press the Yes option... Very well!”

Ignoring the *No* button, I pressed firmly on the other option. The very next second, I felt the mild impact of something landing on my legs. I didn’t even have time to blink: a package of “ice cream,” identical to what I had seen on the screen, had literally fallen into my lap. The top of the object was flat, and it was small enough to fit in the palm of my hand. Its packaging depicted various balls of light, sparkling like jewels set against a dark backdrop. It was eye-catching despite its simplicity.

But there it was: ice cream. Proof that I had used my skill for the first time.

“It really worked!” I gingerly picked it up and found that it was slightly cool to the touch.

Incidentally, it had cost me 230 points to order this ice cream. I wasn’t sure if that was expensive or not, but Teiren’s memories seemed to suggest that it was about right. Suddenly realizing I had no spoon, I used my points to order one. Apparently, the spoon was made of a thermally conductive material that transferred the heat from the holder’s hand to the ice cream, softening it and making it easier to eat. As for the color, I chose blue—my favorite. Theodore’s

tastes meant I had mountains of clothes and accessories in various shades of pink, but I had always preferred blue.

The spoon appeared the moment I pressed *Yes*. Taking it in one hand, I pulled open the tub of ice cream. Inside, a mass of white was dyed pink by the generous fragments of rich, red strawberries scattered on top of it.

I suppose the white substance is this so-called “ice cream”...

“Why, it’s so pretty!”

When I pushed the spoon into the ice cream, it began to melt before my very eyes, allowing me to scoop some up with ease. The product was making good on its promise. I brought the spoon to my mouth and was immediately hit by a mind-numbing coldness that gradually gave way to a subtle sweetness that spread over my tongue. It was a wholly different taste from the sorbet I had experienced just once in my life at the palace’s banquet. This was smoother, like silk on my tongue.

“A match made in heaven,” the advertising had claimed, and I could well believe it. The strawberry pieces weren’t just scattered on top but were also frozen throughout the dessert itself. They were crisp and crunchy between my teeth. My tongue was accustomed to the ice cream’s sweetness by now, and it seemed to shrivel at the smattering bursts of sourness. At the end of it all came a soft, lingering sugariness that made it feel near impossible *not* to take another bite.

“It’s so sweet...”

I suddenly realized that tears were streaming uncontrollably from my eyes.

Branded as useless for my entire life, I had tried so hard to be the good girl everyone had wanted me to be. And now, for the first time, I had made a decision based on what *I* had wanted. My mouth was filled with refreshing strawberries and rich vanilla. The subtle sweetness of the milk and the sugar was the taste of happiness, the taste of my newfound freedom. This nourishing dessert was gradually filling the cracks in my dried, ragged heart, and with it came a rush of strength.

I couldn’t just sit here letting the tears fall, and I certainly wasn’t about to cry

myself to sleep! I was Francheska Vaielindt, eldest daughter of the proud House of Vaielindt! I carried the blood of my grandfather, a warrior whose might famously rivaled that of a lion! They would deeply regret enraging me and awakening the lioness who had been forced to slumber instead of voicing her own opinions. This jumble of emotions welling up from deep in my belly must have taken me over—I heard a crunching noise come from my hand, and when I looked, it turned out that I had crushed the empty ice cream container. It was a shame because the tub was so lovely that I had been considering washing it and keeping it.

However, this wouldn't do. I had just lost control and let my emotions take over. As a participant in high society, I had been trained to quash all sentiments and carefully craft my gestures and expressions. This was no time to forget all that. Though...perhaps the passion that had been brewing within me was so great that it had overridden said training.

"I dunno whether to apologize for taking so long to wake up or for sticking around in the first place."

"You needn't apologize at all! You haven't done anything wrong, Teiren."

"But if I wasn't here, you would've mastered your skill way quicker, and you would've been treated better."

I could all but picture her dejected frown in the corner of my mind. She really did feel responsible for my misfortune. But, like I had told her, she hadn't done anything wrong. I wished that she wouldn't let it affect her so much.

Her low mood had *my* shoulders drooping now. I set the paper tub in my grip aflame and let it burn into nothingness. Magic was a remarkably convenient thing. As long as one took care to control it, there was no risk of getting burned.

"On the contrary," I said. "I suspect that my skill would have been thoroughly taken advantage of had I learned to use it earlier. In fact, I'm *glad* that I am only discovering its purpose now!"

Given the nature of my father and stepmother, it was easy to imagine that things would have been *more* difficult for me if I had mastered my skill. For example, they might have duped His Royal Denseness...sorry, Theodore—into trying to take the throne. I could even hear the argument they might have used.

“Our daughter’s rare skill proves that she has been blessed by the heavens. If she were to become Queen Consort, the country would be afforded a divine protection that would surely see it flourish even further!”

Well, perhaps they wouldn’t go quite *that* far. While those with skills might have been seen to be blessed, my father and stepmother would likely have considered an ability that comprised ordering food to be lacking. Besides, without Teiren’s memories, I would certainly struggle to explain what the items I was capable of conjuring even were exactly. On the other hand, they *might* have value as otherworldly rarities, even if they were just foodstuffs.

“Whatever the outcome might have been, I think I prefer this one.”

I wiped the ashes off my palms over the trash can and cast some cleansing magic on the spoon before sending it to my infinitory—an infinite storage of sorts.

Then, I sat on my bed and pulled my knees up to my chest, listening as the sounds of activity gradually faded within the estate. Though I knew it wasn’t especially ladylike of me, my mind was far more occupied with machinations of how I could deal the harshest blow to those who had wronged me rather than the terror of my situation or the dejection of abandonment. Meanwhile, Teiren’s memory was demanding compensation for my broken engagement, my “education” that had bordered on abuse, and all the work I’d done... So forgive me for being a bit of a tomboy.

“Let’s see... Yes, I ought to begin with these ‘points’...”

I would make a move once the servants had retired for the night, which would be fairly soon. After that, the whole estate would be asleep.

The moon still had some way to climb in the sky, and I gazed at it for a while as my thoughts revolved around what I was about to do. Then, I slowly closed my eyes. I thought I felt something warm trail over my cheek, but it must have been my imagination.

Now the only one awake in the estate, I was standing in the family vault. The door and windows were enchanted to prevent intruders, but such magic had no effect when one just teleported inside. While I might not have been able to use

my skill until recently, I had always had plenty of mana. That had allowed me to become more proficient in magic compared to the average person. I could teleport (albeit only over short distances), and I had my infinity too. Constructing that with subpar mana levels would've been impossible.

Ah, I didn't mean to brag. The reality was that I could have all the mana in the world and it would still do nothing to change this country's perception of me. I didn't have a skill—therefore, I wasn't blessed.

“Considering what I have been through at others' hands, I should think that I *deserve* what currently lies before me. Theoretically speaking, that is. But I do need to consider my survival...”

This vault was filled with more than just money. Anything that could be considered valuable was here: gemstones, jewelry, weapons, armor... All things that had been passed down through the generations of the House of Vaielindt. It was a literal treasure trove.

I was also grateful for my perception magic, which allowed me to see my surroundings despite the lack of light.

I mustn't forget my soundproofing magic either! I wouldn't want anyone to hear me from outside.

I used appraisal magic on the items that made up the mountain of treasure before me, picking things out at random until I had amassed plenty of valuable stones and jewelry. I didn't overlook the bags of coins either. Then, there were the hideous, old-fashioned dresses—but since they were amply adorned with precious jewels, I stored them in my infinity. As ugly as they were, they were made with the finest silk, and the jewels themselves were of superb quality. They'd surely fetch a good price for the materials alone.

Even though I'd secured a fair amount of riches, a quick glance wouldn't be enough for someone to notice that anything was missing. This vault really was packed. I was again grateful for my abundance of mana. The infinity had proven itself invaluable.

That reminds me: I ought to snatch up the furniture in my room too. It might just prove useful at some point.

Just then, thanks to Teiren's memories, I was struck with an idea that could help me survive for as long as possible. I dubbed the plan *One Thousand and One Nights*! Before the dastardly dragon could eat me, I would promise it something even more delicious than human flesh and order something from the other world to pacify it! Filling up the beast's belly before it could get to me would help ensure my survival, and if it developed a taste for my otherworldly delights, it might decide to keep me alive, seeing as I would be the only one capable of delivering them.

What's that? Why wouldn't I simply run away before becoming a sacrifice? If I were to do that, they would simply choose another girl to take my place. That would be awful. Meanwhile, my skill had slight potential for fighting back, and I was capable of magic on my own, to a certain extent. Though it was only by a fraction, I was confident that my chances of survival were above average.

"My plan may well end up in shambles, but it's better than nothing."

Finally, I took and stored a ring and a dress that were keepsakes from my late mother. After letting out a sigh of relief, I then released the vault from my soundproofing magic. All that was left now was to teleport back to my room. I closed my eyes, focused my mana, and by the time I opened them again, I was back in that dreary space. The room looked rather plain after the glamor of the vault. Plain? No, make that decrepit.

"This room truly is representative of the way I have been treated!" I said with a sigh, and I had to admit that I was almost astonished. I lay down on the bed, which *was* hard, but not so much that it prevented sleep. "Fluffy" was far from how I would describe it, and it did its fair share of creaking too. It certainly wasn't something I'd consider suitable for a duke's daughter. Perhaps just yesterday, I would have thought it more than befitting for the useless girl that I was, but with my new perspective, I felt that even a "useless" girl deserved more than this.

I closed my eyes and heard another voice echoing in my head.

"I didn't realize you had all that mana! You could've at least argued back!"

Truth be told, I agreed. If only I'd had the chance, I would have loved to tell my past self that she should've objected to how she was spoken to. But I knew

that, since she'd just lost her mother, she had sought my father's affection to the detriment of her own voice. She had believed that her obedience might just win her his praise, if not his love. However, it really was clear to me now that only my mother and my grandfather had truly ever cared for me.

What about now, you ask? Well, I've long since given up on seeking affection from my family. The world was full of people who were a waste of the hopes you pinned on them. They were free to play happy families if they wanted to, but I was ready to carve my own path.

I was just about ready to nod off as an urgent task popped up in the back of my mind.

"That's right! I must let grandfather know what is going on!"

Fortunately, I had plenty of my favorite stationery stored in my infiniory. Jumping to my feet, I began to pen a letter on my wobbly desk. I started by spilling out my boundless gratitude for everything he had done to raise me up until now, and then I told him that I had finally learned to use my skill. I then wrote about my rescinded engagement and how I had come to be chosen as the flower to be offered this year in as much detail as possible. Knowing my father, he wouldn't have mentioned a single thing to my grandfather.

Having said that, even if I were to send off this letter this evening, my grandfather wouldn't be able to make it here in time to stop anything even if he wanted to. Nevertheless, I wished for him to know everything. Thinking back, nothing had ever made me happier than my grandfather's affection. He had seen me for who I was, and that had always been so comforting.

Forgive me, grandfather. I was so busy lamenting my family's...no, my father's lack of love that I didn't allow myself to fully appreciate yours. Though I know it won't make up for my ingratitude, I shall be going to the dragon's lair. I am going to conquer it so that no one will have to face the devastating prospect of being chosen as a sacrifice ever again!

Imbuing the letter with magic, I let it loose into the air. It transformed into a white bird and flew toward the capital against the backdrop of the dark night.

Please don't grieve for me, grandfather. If I go down, it shall be fighting!



After sending my letter to my grandfather, even more memories started to play out before me like a flipbook. Eventually, the sun rose without me having caught a wink of sleep. Though I had stayed up the entire night, my nerves were so taut that I didn't feel the least bit tired. My skin didn't even appear particularly haggard when I looked at my reflection in the mirror.

"I'm so jealous!" Teiren exclaimed in the back of my mind. *"You've still got youth on your side!"*

Apparently, it all went downhill the moment you reached twenty-five.

Perhaps I ought to start taking better care of myself now.

Turning my attention away from Teiren as she kicked up a fuss and rolled this way and that, I used cleansing magic to wash myself up. I then put on my one remaining dress—a plain, bright green garment that my mother had apparently worn during her youth. I might have called it plain, but the majority of it had been made with fine silk, making it exceptionally comfortable.

Now, I would never complain about my beloved mother's dress, but the fact was that my father hadn't even troubled himself to have a garment made for his daughter when she was essentially being sent to her death. If that didn't paint a clear picture of the way he treated me, I don't know what would. As much as it pained me, even the smallest details reminded me of that.

Not that it mattered anymore. Soon, I would be free from my family—from my oppressors.

I sighed. Once I was finished changing and went downstairs, I would be greeted only by my discontent father, my smug stepmother, and my half-sister. Please forgive me for my lack of enthusiasm. But even so, I couldn't stay up in my room forever.

I was potentially walking to my death, and in what could be the last moments of my very short life, I would be forced to play along with their nonsensical charade. How could you *not* feel sorry for me?

"Loving the new persona, Fran. You've really grown up in the past twenty-four hours. I'm so proud of you!"

I left Teiren to bawl her eyes out while I slowly made my way down the stairs. As expected, my father, stepmother, and Elysia were already gathered in the entrance hall. Every role was accounted for. Unsurprisingly, Theodore was nowhere to be seen, even though his former fiancée was on her way to be sacrificed. I'm sure I don't need to spell out what that says about him.

I trudged down the final few steps to join my family and addressed my father. "I shall be forever grateful for the time and effort you spent raising me."

"Keep the Vaielindt name at the forefront of your mind as you carry out your duty." His words were completely void of sincerity.

I received his comment with a perfect curtsy. "I am as undeserving of your words as I am the honor that is about to be bestowed on me."

Displeased, he wrinkled his nose, knowing that this was likely the last time he would speak to me. If memory served, my mother had gone through great pains to approach my father. Just how blind had she been to his faults? I was now sure her eyes had been opened just a few months after my birth when Elysia had been born.

My father snorted and averted his gaze. "You're behaving just like your late mother! She was constantly looking down her nose at me!"

Behind him stood Elysia and my stepmother, looking bored out of their minds. In all likelihood, they had been looking forward to me wailing and despairing over my pathetically short life. Unfortunately, I wasn't considerate enough to indulge them. When my father looked over at the priests, I took the opportunity to sneer at the women behind his back. Their faces immediately turned scarlet with rage, but even they had the good sense not to cause a scene in front of strangers.

Speaking of which, the priests my father was speaking to had been sent here from the Grand Temple to perform the Flower Offering ceremony. They were steadily preparing the required magic circle. Their duty was to impart blessings on the young bride and transport her from her earthly existence into the dragon's lair using teleportation magic.

The farther you needed to transport something somewhere with such magic, the more likely it was that you would need something as grand as a magic circle.

While I could use teleportation magic myself, I didn't have the ability to teleport past the walls of this estate.

My sacrifice must have been planned for some time. It was impossible to think that these priests could have made it here if they had only been called for yesterday.

Apparently, Elysia had finally lost her patience at my lack of emotion. She approached me with brisk steps. "My dear sister, how does it feel to be walking up to death's door after already losing your fiancé to me? It must be simply awful!" she whispered, her lip curling.

"Awful? Is it so awful to have managed to shake free from a man so slavish to desire that he would leave his fiancée in the middle of their engagement? And soon, I shall also be free of the harlot who has forever been green with envy for *my* lot in life. If I had to identify what I am feeling at this moment, I could only say relief." My smirk was peppered with all the smugness I could muster.

Unable to handle the truth, Elysia's pale cheeks reddened once more. "*I beg your pardon?!*"

I was only being honest, but it seemed I had angered her.

I hummed. "I suppose I also ought to wish you luck as you study to become both a proper lady and a duchess."

"How can you keep your composure?! You *must* feel some frustration! Some terror! If only you would crawl on your knees and beg for your life, I might be willing to ask father to reconsider!" Elysia cried, spittle flying.

I distanced myself from her, allowing the full extent of my hatred to show in my gaze. "I do not need assistance from a narrow-minded child like you in order to survive. I have at last learned how to use my skill!" I then sneaked a glance at the priests—the magic circle was ready.

The mention of my skill had garnered the attention of everyone here. To back up my words, I used a burst of wind magic to send the colorful flowers I had ordered earlier fluttering through our surroundings. A sweet scent spread out over the gardens. Incidentally, these were something called "edible flowers"—they were suitable for consumption! Teiren's world was a wonderful one for

creating something that was both beautiful *and* delicious.



“You... That’s impossible!”

I laughed. “Surprised, father? I suppose this is proof that real strength is found when one is pushed to one’s limits!”

Everyone watched with wide eyes. And why shouldn’t they have been? I had been denounced for my inability to use my skill for all this time, and now I had turned the tables in an instant. Some of them had completely stopped what they were doing. Others didn’t understand what was going on. And some people looked livid. So many pairs of eyes were casting different emotions my way, but I gave them all a show by tossing yet more multicolored flowers into the path of my magic. My father looked all the more bitter each time they multiplied, and the faces of my stepmother and half-sister twisted even more. Was I enjoying myself? Beyond a shadow of a doubt!

I offered my father a light curtsy as he gazed in blank amazement at the fluttering flowers. “Now that I think of it, I’ve been wasting my time attempting to earn my father’s love for all these years.”

My words were perfectly true. Perhaps if he had offered me just a modicum of love, I *would* have performed my duty with our name at the forefront of my mind without spitting venom at him.

“Wh— Fran... Francheska!”

“I do hope you enjoy playing happy family with Elysia and your wife. Meanwhile, I shall be cursing you from the depths of hell,” I said with a smile.

My father’s face instantly flashed red and shifted to purple right afterward. Perhaps I had enraged him too. He had no problem trampling all over my heart, but he didn’t like it when the same was done to him in return. I suppose that’s what you call a double standard.

His fists were curled up so tightly that he must have been ready to strike me. I slipped past him and jumped into the magic circle’s faint glow. Then, I activated my magic. This was the type of magic circle that activated automatically once it had stored up enough power to send one the full distance to their destination. Since the priests had already filled it with their magic, adding my own should’ve meant...

The area around me warped like a heat haze. I had successfully activated the teleportation spell.

I gave one last grandiose curtsy. “Farewell, everyone! I hope you will give your blessings to the union of a cheat, who impregnated his fiancée’s sister, and said sister, who was promiscuous enough to steal him from under my nose!” I used wind magic to amplify my voice, letting that information spread throughout the vicinity of the estate and the houses beyond.

I saw my enraged father charging toward me, but I was enveloped in a white light before his fist could reach me.

Chapter 2

The light was so blinding that I had to close my eyes for a moment. When I opened them again, I was standing in a completely unfamiliar place. In front of me was a dark, gaping cave—likely the dragon’s lair.

“Luminescence!” I murmured, bringing my fingers to my eyes to activate my perception magic.

I doubted the cave would have any light of its own, so I hoped this would help me proceed. Since I wouldn’t need a torch this way, both of my hands would be free.

I stepped into the cave. Thanks to my magic, I could see every last bump and ridge on the ground beneath my feet. With any luck, this would put me at a lower risk of stumbling. I was also genuinely grateful that I had elected to wear shoes with a low heel.

After a while, a warm, moist wind came blowing from the depths before me, carrying with it a subtle hint of blood and decaying flesh. I pooled magic in my hand, just in case, and inched forward, but that was when the bottom of my shoe scraped against something hard. Hardly daring to look, I slowly cast my gaze downward. There on the ground was very clearly a collection of human bones.

As prepared as I thought I had been, I wasn’t quite able to contain a shriek. My heart was hammering in my chest. I gasped for air, and my battered focus was throwing off my perception magic. My view of my surroundings flickered violently.

“Calm... Stay calm, Francheska!” I put my free hand to my chest and focused on breathing deeply. I closed my eyes to temporarily block out any information coming in from my vision, and once oxygen had spread through every corner of my brain again, I noticed my frozen thoughts gradually becoming unstuck. When I opened my eyes again, I could still see the bones, but this time, the sight did not rob me of my composure.

They must have belonged to one of the girls who had been sent here before me. Realizing that the same fate might end up befalling me, I offered her a prayer.

However, I noticed something peculiar.

“I cannot see any bite marks...”

I knelt down to study the skeleton in detail. There truly was something odd about the marks left on the wrapping around them, which I supposed had been a dress. There was nothing to suggest the large fangs of a dragon had hurt her. Instead, there were slashes that must have come from a *blade*. There were scratches on the bones beneath the fabric that matched them.

“Was she killed by something other than the dragon?” I said with a frown. After all, she had been sacrificed *to* the dragon.

It was then that my ears picked up on some unusual sounds. There was an unpleasant metal clinking sound and unsettling, husky laughter. I immediately increased the amount of magic I had concentrated in my hand. It wasn’t long until two figures emerged from the cave depths, walking toward me. They were only as tall as children, wore armor, and carried weapons that were half rusted. Their skin was a greenish-gray color.

These were goblins—a type of monster. Judging from the unnatural marks on the skeleton, those single-handed swords they were carrying must have been what killed the sacrifice.

So she really wasn’t slaughtered by the dragon?

But how would that account for the peace that our lands had enjoyed for the past fifty years?

Another spate of the goblins’ grating laughter pulled me from my reverie. Monsters could locate their prey, even in the dark. They must have already known that I was in the cave.

They were getting closer, and I could see the off-putting grins on their faces.

I thrust my hand out in their direction. “Fire Storm!”

The goblins screeched as they were caught up in a violent, fiery tornado, but

their screams were quickly muffled by a screen of wind and flame. I took the opportunity to slip past them. My skirt flew up, exposing my thighs, but there was no time to worry about modesty. I just needed to get away from there as fast as possible! I ignored my tired lungs and wobbly feet and hurried deeper into the cave.

A second later, I cried out again. The heels on my shoes might have been low, but they were heels nonetheless, and running on such an uneven surface had been asking for trouble. I stumbled the whole way as I ran, certain that I must have come across as anything but ladylike. I was sure, too, that I had ruined my mother's dress.

Never mind! What matters most is surviving!

Only when the flaming tornado's roar and the goblins' cries of agony were out of earshot did I finally come to a stop. My legs couldn't hold me up any longer, and I slumped to the floor.

"Where am I now...?" I gasped. I had never been so out of breath before, not even after a dance lesson.

Slowly but surely, I managed to tame my tottering knees and got myself back to my feet. I then realized that my left heel was broken. Although I knew this would make walking difficult, I just had to grin and bear it. Even if it did mean that I had to hop forward awkwardly.

I looked down at my dress. My fall had smeared it with dirt, and not only were the sleeves and hem torn, but it was covered in rips all over. It was a total disaster. I decided that if I came across some sewing supplies, I would fix it as best I could. I was actually rather good at sewing. For example, I had made an embroidered handkerchief as a gift once, as one does when one is engaged. Now that I looked back on that, it had been a total waste of effort.

Catching my breath at last, I slowly surveyed my surroundings. From what I could make out through the blur of my tears, I had come across some derelict ruins. As I got closer, I saw broken and collapsed marble pillars here and there. The floor was paved with stones that no doubt used to be well polished, and there was also an altar that had been chipped in places. I wondered what kind of beliefs had given birth to this place. There were a number of baskets

scattered around with pale blue flames inside, and they gave off enough light for me to make sense of my surroundings without the need for perception magic.

“Could these be the ruins of an ancient shrine?”

Naturally, I was curious about my discovery and started taking in as much as I could, but that was when my eyes found themselves glued to a single point beyond the broken marble altar. Beyond the black sheet where the light stopped was a solid mass of pure darkness.

Suddenly, two golden lights as bright as the sun itself appeared within that gloom. I had only just registered that they were a pair of giant eyes when the mass of darkness began to move. The dragon’s huge forefoot crushed the remains of one of the broken stone pillars. It was then that I realized the black dragon’s golden eyes were locked on me.

It opened its scarlet jaws to reveal rows of sharp fangs just before its voice rumbled out from the depths of its belly and reverberated over my head. “Are you the one who disturbed my slumber, child?”

A powerful magic emanated from its body, pushing pinpricks into my skin. Though its mouth and that pillar-crushing foot would be perfectly capable of tearing me to shreds, for some reason, I wasn’t the least bit fearful.

“I am Francheska Vaielindt, this generation’s flower, at your service,” I said. I smiled as I picked up the hem of my thoroughly tattered dress, bent at the knee and waist, and lowered my head as deeply as I could. I could sense the dragon’s eyes on me the entire time.

It was silent for a while, and I didn’t dare lift my head. I hadn’t realized how exhausting a curtsy could be after such an intense sprint! But just as I was positive that my legs were going to get embarrassingly wobbly, the dragon gave a discontented snort.

“What might you mean by ‘flower’?” it asked. “What has been occurring whilst my back has been turned? Raise your head, child. You will tell me what you know.”

Finally allowed to look up, I was able to properly survey the dragon before

me. Its obsidian body melted into the darkness of the ruined shrine, preventing me from making out everything. But I could see a large tail that swayed leisurely, a pair of wings on its back, and two huge front feet. Sitting like a cat with its paws tucked under it, the dragon seemed prepared to be offended by the news from beyond its cave.

That said, the beast's intensity was in a league all its own. While a cat's tail would tap against the floor, the dragon's tail doing the same almost sounded like—and created—a full-blown gust of wind. In fact, I had to hold my ground against its force as I explained what the Flower Offering was.

Long ago, since the moment the dragon had landed on this small remote island, domestic conflict and natural disasters had spread through our country one after another. They had immediately stopped when a young girl had been sent to the dragon as a sacrifice. Some decades later, a plague had spread through the land, and that too had come to a swift end when another girl had been sacrificed. Ever since then, a girl—or “flower”—had been sent to the dragon every fifty years.

As I spoke, the dragon would occasionally snort softly, creating a set of deep wrinkles in its nose. Its patience seemed to run out when I explained that I had been sent as the flower this year as it slammed its tail against the ground. The impact sent a roar through the shrine, throwing up a cloud of dust and sending chips from the cracked floor scattering. It was enough to give anyone a heart attack. Fortunately, the bulk of the dragon's body shielded me from injury.

“I know nothing of this,” it said. “While I have sojourned in these lands for a long time, I have been completely dormant. I fail to see how I could have done anything with the sacrificial children who were sent before you when I have only just awakened.”

I wasn't sure how to respond.

“Moreover, I do not possess the power to control nature or to spread disease. You humans have deluded yourselves.”

“I see...” I murmured slowly.

The black dragon started smacking the tip of its tail against the floor again like it was trying to vent its pent-up anger. However, I had the sense that this creature was trying to refrain from hurting me in any way. It had just told me that all the history I'd learned was false, and now, I was left unable to hide from the truth.

Having regained Teiren's memories, I had started to realize that it didn't make sense for any of these phenomena—disease, natural disasters, or civil war—to originate from a dragon's curse. In all likelihood, this dragon, with its huge stature and immeasurable magic, had inadvertently caused harm to the people of old simply because of its movements and eating habits. They had then blamed it for threatening their survival. The fact that those disasters had come to an end after sending it a sacrifice was probably little more than a collection of coincidences. After all, the dragon claimed to have been sleeping.

I realized then that I might have been putting too much importance on the idea that my sacrifice would protect the people. The truth was that there was no need for me to be here whatsoever. Coming to that conclusion, my legs were suddenly sapped of their strength. I sank to the floor, unable to keep myself up any longer.

"What a shame that you would fall for such a foolish tale and allow it to drive you to sacrifice yourself."

"Well, that wasn't exactly my sole reason," I admitted.

Those golden eyes were steadily regarding me as if I were something to be pitied. Staring back into them was starting to soothe my soul, little by little. Even if our beliefs about the dragon *were* nothing more than folklore, I could still count myself lucky to be free of my family and ex-fiancé. This was better than having to marry that man and have him be unfaithful behind my back—or even cheat on me openly.

I stood up again with a clearer mind. The black dragon mirrored me by pulling its neck in. Its front feet were still folded, but it raised its head and continued to stare at me.

"All that being said, I *am* feeling rather hungry," it said. "I have been dormant for perhaps too long a time, after all. You say you are a flower offered to me,

yes? That being the case, there should be no problem were I to devour you.”
The golden-eyed dragon swiped its tongue over its lips.

“I am glad you brought that up. I have a proposition that I think you will find quite fair.” I offered the dragon a charming smile. “I am capable of summoning exquisite delicacies from another world. I wonder whether it might amuse you to try some before you eat me?”



“In short, you wish to use this ‘skill’ of yours to keep my belly full on the condition that I do not eat you?” the dragon asked. Its neck swung around gently.

“Essentially, yes,” I replied, puffing out my chest.

If I were to allow myself to show fear, the dragon might start to doubt my claims. And there was nothing false about the claim that I could “order” food from another world!

Whether the dragon had seen through me or not, the coiled black mass beyond the altar started to slither. I barely had time to blink before the enormous creature was standing before me in its entirety. While its wings had been visible all this time, I could now see that they were even larger than I had thought. Its golden eyes seemed to flicker like flames. The jet-black scales that covered its body shone like they were wet, and while they seemed rock-hard at first glance, they rippled with the dragon’s movements without hindering them whatsoever. This dragon was a gorgeous creature indeed, too gorgeous to believe that it had smote the world with a curse.

Craning its neck forward, the dragon held its head just in front of me. “In that case, child, you will provide for me milk, honey, and spices.”

I repeated those ingredients aloud.

“They say that those three items have constituted the divine offerings of the shrine maidens since time immemorial. If it is clemency you wish for, you will offer them to me also.”

I hesitated for just a heartbeat. “Of course. If you would spare me a moment...”

Those sharp white fangs set against the striking red of its mouth hungered for a traditional offering, and there was a real basis to the creature's request. Perhaps I ought to have studied theology a little more...

Regardless, I wondered whether I would find an item that comprised all three ingredients. It would certainly be convenient if I could.

"Ah, wait a moment," the dragon said. "You are not suitably dressed to make an offering, child."

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry..."

The dragon's full moon-shaped eyes narrowed, sending a shard of ice running down my spine.

Have I provoked its wrath?!

I ducked my head at once, only to find myself surrounded by soft orbs of light. I could only watch as each one came into contact with my dress and restored the material to its former glory. By the time the lights vanished, my once-ravaged dress was as perfect as it had ever been.

"Consider that to be a parting gift. However, if you do not wish for it to be so, you will procure that offering immediately." The dragon then chortled, swaying its head from side to side again.

"Th-Thank you!" I stammered. "I promise your gift was not given in vain!"

I dipped my head as low as I could and activated my skill. The black tablet immediately appeared before me. Fingers flying, I looked through what was available, and a certain dessert caught my eye.

Milk, honey, and spices...

"Perfect!"

I firmly pressed the button to order, and a paper carton that was neither particularly large nor particularly small appeared in my hand. The square box had a small handle on top. It made for a unique shape indeed.

The dragon's golden eyes widened in surprise, and I could again feel its intense gaze on me as I carefully opened the box. As soon as I did so, a sweet scent wafted into the air.

“I have here your desired milk, honey, and spice: honey and milk doughnuts!” I announced.

“Is that *truly* what I requested?”

“A batter made of vanilla-scented milk and ample amounts of honey has been fried in oil and topped with a sugar coating. It fulfills all three of your requirements.”

The dragon frowned at the box, so I pulled the lid back even further and held it up to give the creature a good view of the inside. There were a dozen ring doughnuts inside, each one wrapped in a glossy, milky-white sugar coating. The sweet scents of honey and vanilla were coming together to slowly turn my brain to mush. This seemed like the type of dessert you would eat to bring you happiness when you were at your most exhausted. The scent of sugar was even more overwhelmingly irresistible after having run so hard. I placed the box on the altar before I could give in and take one of the treats for myself, but the dragon’s head just continued to sway.

“Are you perhaps concerned that I have poisoned them?” I asked. “If so, I would be happy to eat one to reassure you that isn’t the case.”

“There exists no poison that would be effective against me. However, if they *are* poisoned, I would rather we are both exposed to it... You eat first. The fourth one down in the right column.” The dragon’s tone showed a severe lack of enthusiasm.

“My, how generous of you to select one for me! Very well.”

I didn’t see why the dragon wanted me to test them for it if poison wouldn’t affect it anyway. I was also rather offended that the dragon thought I would try to poison it in the first place. But, if the dragon insisted, I supposed I *could* be convinced to eat one...or two.

Still indignant, I threw all decorum to the wind and picked up the doughnut the dragon had assigned to me. Then, I hesitated. Following Teiren’s memories, I was holding the doughnut with a thin sheet of paper. However, it felt uncouth, if not outright improper, to eat something this way. Even so, it was too late *not* to eat it at this point.

From the very moment I leaned closer to the fried treat, its sweet scent started to tease the tip of my nose. Then, making sure the dragon could see me, I took a bite.

My teeth broke through the crisp layer of sugar on the outside and sank into the soft, fluffy dough beneath. The rich sweetness of milk and honey coated my tongue. Meanwhile, my mouth was filled with a rush of fragrant vanilla. The golden-brown dough, fattened up with something called yeast, already had a natural sweetness to it that went particularly well with the intense sugary coating! The entire thing had been fried in a high-quality oil. I had learned all of this from the advertising when I had selected these doughnuts, but I was indeed surprised to find that these treats weren't at all heavy or overwhelming in their flavor—something that was all too common with fried foods. As much as I wanted to take another bite, I was also hesitant to open my mouth and deprive myself of the wondrous tastes I was currently experiencing.

I brought my hand to my lips unconsciously. "It is perfectly fine by me if you do not wish to eat them!" I said. "I can eat them all."

"A-Are they truly *that* delectable?" the dragon stammered.

The creature had doubted the doughnuts' perfection, and it would be a waste to let it eat these.



A corner of my mind was telling me I had forgotten the point of this exercise, but I couldn't help but exclaim. "My tired limbs have been rejuvenated! 'Sweet' certainly is one of the finest flavors of them all!"

"You will give me one of those at once, child!"

Even though I had been hiding my mouth with my hand, I was sure that the light in my eyes said it all. The dragon snorted, opening its maw wide before me. Too intimidated to refuse it, I tossed a doughnut into the chasm, and the dragon's mouth snapped shut.

"Goodness me..." it said.

"There you have it. A honey and milk doughnut."

"I... I did not realize that such a *delicacy* existed in this plane!" The dragon's golden eyes now glimmered with added intensity. It opened its mouth again expectantly, so I tossed a second doughnut to the creature. It swallowed that treat down in an instant too, its eyes glistening with delight.

"Unfortunately, this food comes from another world. You will need me if you ever hope to taste it again," I explained.

"What?" The dragon's eyes widened at once like a pair of full moons.

I started to explain myself, and I knew I had it now. The next time I bit into the doughnut, I could taste the added flavor of victory.

"I see," the dragon said. "Now I understand the potential of this 'skill' of yours."

"I propose that as long as I stay alive, I will provide you with as much food as you like. What say you?"

"Very well. Your name is Francheska, yes? I am the dragon Alkerag, and I shall grant your request," the dragon declared, rearing its head and leaving behind a very empty box of doughnuts.

Thank goodness! It seems that I have secured my survival...

I let out a covert sigh of relief as Alkerag's head continued to sway in the air.

"What did you call these? 'Doughnuts'? They were delightful. Are you capable

of producing them in different flavors?”

“My, do you have a sweet tooth, Alkerag?”

He chuckled. “It has been a long time since a human child has called me by that name. You may call me Alk. Now, answer my question.”

“I can procure doughnuts made with different batters and with different coatings for you,” I said.

I summoned my tablet again. The dragon was far more interested than I had expected and was already trying to peer at the screen. I approached him to give him a better look and he met me in the middle, his movements as light as a young cat’s. Starting at the page for the doughnuts from earlier, I navigated to another page that listed related items. There, I saw some “limited edition” flavors—there were doughnuts with a honey-lemon filling, some with tea leaves kneaded into the dough, others with chocolate glaze... The page was packed with delicious-looking doughnuts that were just as much a feast for the eyes as I knew they would be for the stomach.

Personally, the honey-lemon doughnuts had caught my eye. The only hang-up was that they were more expensive than the ones I had just ordered...but I couldn’t be stingy now! I needed to get this dragon hooked!

“How very fortunate that I thought to collect what I was owed yesterday!” I said. I then snapped my fingers to open up my infinitory and produced one of the rings I had stored inside it.

Alk’s golden eyes were wide as he watched me. “You have an infinitory? That’s rather rare for a human to possess.”

“My mana was about the only asset I had. I learned all sorts of magic because of it.”

I was surprised to learn that even Alk found it unusual for a human to have access to an infinitory. Although, now that I thought about it, the tutor my grandfather had found for me had only learned to use one after becoming the Archmage for the previous monarch. Perhaps I was a little late to realize it, but I might have had some real potential. My father had always been quick to tell everyone how useless I was at every opportunity, so no one had ever expected

anything from me. Plus, they had been just as eager to parrot his insults back to me, so that might explain why I'd never realized my potential before.

I never knew just how potent the power of suggestion could be. And then there was Theodore, whose reputation had been greatly bolstered by the fact that he was trading in his royal status to support his "useless" fiancée. Thinking back, it seemed I had been quite the easy target...

"I wonder how many points this will be worth," I said.

Flawed or not, I was my father's daughter. When I thought about how this ring had once belonged to the people who had torn my confidence to shreds, I was overcome with a sudden hatred. I couldn't toss it into the tablet fast enough.

Triumphant fanfare resounded from the tablet, and its screen now displayed a shower of petals and confetti.

Your accessory has been exchanged for 3,500,000 points. You can check your point balance at any time via your account page.

"Goodness! I suppose I should have expected nothing less from the House of Vaielindt. I feel as though I can order to my heart's content!"

The ring had been decorated with large pink diamonds, rubies, and garnets arranged in a flower motif, not that the design had mattered much. It had proven to be worth so much more than the ring Theodore had given me. I wasn't sure whether that said more about the value of the dukedom's treasure or the value of the prince's gift, but I supposed it spoke volumes about both of them. It was more important that I didn't need to concern myself with the price of doughnuts anymore!

Awash with a mild catharsis, I went ahead and ordered one variety after another. Boxes started to pile up next to me on the altar, their sweet aromas wafting through the air.

I let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, I feel so much better! About all sorts of things

too!”

“You certainly ordered a great deal. Well, perhaps not from my perspective.” There was a certain spring to the dragon’s tone. He sounded exasperated, yet pleased.

I studied him and the mountain of paper cartons and it struck me that I might well have overdone it. Although, given the size of Alk’s body, I was fairly confident that he could make short work of the treats.

“Here you are, Alk. A variety of different flavored doughnuts. These ones have tea leaves kneaded into the dough.”

Alk immediately opened his mouth before me, so I tossed one of the tea doughnuts into it. His jaws clamped shut, and the lunar light in his eyes seemed to waver.

He hummed. “Yes, it does taste different indeed. It carries a somewhat floral scent.” Alk then opened his jaws again like a chick begging for food, so I gave him another tea-flavored doughnut.

Meanwhile, I picked up one of the treats that I had been anticipating. “They *do* look delicious, but these honey-lemon doughnuts have caught my eye, and I cannot resist them any longer!”

The honey-lemon doughnuts didn’t look all that dissimilar to the honey and milk ones, and the only difference was that there were small yellow pieces in the batter. I took a bite, and my teeth were met with the familiar crack of the sugar coating breaking and giving way to the fluffy dough beneath. The *aroma*, however, was an entirely new experience!

From my very first bite, my mouth was filled with sour-sweet lemon. Honey-soaked or not, it was more than tart enough to make my tongue shrivel after having gotten used to the sugary glaze outside. When said glaze had dissolved from the heat of my mouth, the treat’s sweetness seemed to stand out tenfold. It was, of course, the refreshing tang of citrus that prevented the whole thing from being overly saccharine. The most noteworthy thing of all, however, was how the sweet and sour flavors seemed to sweep through my tired body. The sharp acidity washed away every last hint of sludgy exhaustion within me.

“To think that the combination of honey and lemon could have such a profound effect on the body!” I cried.

“A tea-flavored doughnut?! Does all cuisine from this other world promise such novel flavors?”

I took a seat on the crumbling altar while Alk lay down beside it. We indulged in our treats for some time, as though possessed. Not only had I succeeded in charming the dragon’s taste buds, but it looked like I was to become a slave to these otherworldly desserts myself! They were diabolical!

“Alk! Why not try this one too?!”

“Calm yourself, Fran! I am still enjoying these tea—”

“Ah! You’re eating *my* share!” I whined. “I was looking forward to those!”

My honey-lemon doughnut had been so delicious that I had devoured it in the blink of an eye, and when I automatically reached out to pick up another, I instead gave the dragon’s head a few smacks—the creature had shoved his head into the paper carton to gorge himself. His scales were slightly cool and rock hard, but that wasn’t to say that I hurt myself on them. I knew I wasn’t behaving in an especially proper manner, but I wanted us to share in this joy.

At least...that was how I had felt until the moment I realized there wasn’t a single tea doughnut left.

I practically *shrieked* from the shock, making Alk withdraw his head from the box and cock it at me in confusion.

“My apologies...” he said.

As semi-bewildered as he seemed, he had the decency to hang his head, and his admission of guilt sapped me of my rage. I’d offered these delights to him so that he would spare my life. Trying to prevent him from eating them was entirely foolish. I was missing the point completely!

“There is no need to apologize, now that I think of it,” I admitted. “Those doughnuts were an offering to you, after all. My reaction was rather impudent. I hope you’ll accept *my* apology.”

Alk hesitated. “In truth, I find your meekness somewhat tedious. Raise your

head, Fran. I have heard your apology. The so-called honey-and-lemon doughnut you hold in your hand will act as recompense.”

“Of course... I am very much obliged.”

Despite my panicked apology, perhaps I hadn’t made Alk especially angry in the first place. His head was still swaying about leisurely. If anything, he appeared to be holding back a smile, as though he had found my reaction amusing.

I tossed the doughnut into his mouth, and after he had swallowed it whole, he let out a dissatisfied snort. “These tiny morsels are somewhat cumbersome to eat at my size.”

“I can see why. They’re so small compared to your mouth and claws. Shall I procure something larger for you?” I asked.

The fresh doughnut in my hand was perhaps just big enough for the giant dragon to pinch between two talons. I scanned the tablet’s screen for something bigger, but despite the wide variety, they all seemed to be of a similar size. Expanding my search to items with similar form factors, I found a “chiffon cake” and a “Swiss roll.” Both looked delicious...

I turned the tablet around to show him, but he slowly shook his head. “While I am certainly interested in larger offerings, they remain unsuited for my present size.”

It *did* seem a little silly to offer him treats that, in his eyes, were only slightly bigger. I started to let out a quiet sigh, and the dragon, who was currently lying on the marble floor like a sphinx, began to quiver. Pale blue light bounced off his obsidian scales and temporarily blinded me. When I opened my eyes again, I found myself faced with an unfamiliar man who was happily stuffing his face with a honey-lemon doughnut. I stared at him wordlessly.

“Yes, this form is much more suitable to eat such treats.” He then looked up at me and hummed quizzically.

“Um... Alk? Is that you?” It sure *sounded* like him.

This man’s hair was glossy and as dark as obsidian, and his golden eyes were as round as the full moon, just like the dragon’s who he had seemingly

replaced. He had a solid build and stood easily a head and a half taller than me. Though his sharp features made me think he was older than me, there was something boyish about his expression and the way he was cocking his head.

“Yes, it is I,” he said. “Is something the matter, Fran? You look like a duck caught in a storm.”

I could only guess what kind of expression was on my face for him to describe it that way. If I was to believe his words, this man was Alk in human form. His confirmation of that brought me back to my senses, and I dipped my head.

“I was, um, unaware that you were capable of taking on a human form. Please forgive my astonishment.”

“This form is simply more convenient for eating these desserts. I have attempted to mimic the appearance of the humans I saw before I became dormant.”

Like a duck caught in a storm—or, as Teiren would put it, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Either way, I stared at him with my mouth open in a completely insolent manner! This was not an expression a proper lady should be making!

Having said that, the man before me didn’t seem put off by my rudeness in the slightest. If anything, he was puffing his chest as if inviting me to pay compliment to his wondrous transformation. I could even see the expectant swishing of his tail, though it must have been an illusion.



Though...said tail skimmed right past my cheek the moment my eyes widened.

I suppose it's not an illusion after all.

"Forgive me," he said. "I have yet to fully perfect my control of this form."

"It's quite all right. I wasn't hurt..." Honestly, I was less concerned with his rampant tail than I was concerned with studying his new body. "Anyway, your power is most impressive. To think you could transform yourself into a human."

"I have never taken this form before, but it seems it will prove more convenient than I anticipated. A human, hm?"

I composed myself and took a proper look at him. A long, thick, scaly tail protruded from near his waist. There was still a pair of black wings on his back too.

Thinking about what Alk had said, his attempt at being a human seemed to be primarily focused on size and shape. But I still had to wonder how ancient the people that he had seen before his slumber were, exactly.

His attire was very old-fashioned. He wore a loose, ankle-length robe that was secured by a belt, and there was a short cape behind him. From his shoulder hung a cloak so long that its hem dragged on the floor. As far as I was aware, this was an ancient look that one saw only in history books. That said, it suited Alk's overall aura very well. And right now, he was happily munching away at a doughnut as his tail slapped lightly against the ground. He definitely looked more comfortable using the hands his form had.

However, he *had* lost much of his majesty. I supposed I might interpret this to mean that he'd wanted to eat my offerings so badly that he was prepared to undergo huge changes.

"Yes, it seems human beings *are* much better suited at carrying out more fiddly tasks..."

Is he planning to eat all of those doughnuts, even in human form? I certainly hope he doesn't give himself a stomachache...

As I watched him swallow down the last chocolate doughnut with a satisfied

smile on his face, I forced my lips to turn up at the corners so he wouldn't pick up on my anxieties.

"Wh-What do you suppose we ought to do with these cartons?" I stammered.

In truth, though I wasn't letting it show on my face, I was still in extreme shock at Alk's transformation. I hope you won't blame me for focusing on our disposal problem instead—it was proving to be a useful distraction. We couldn't exactly throw the boxes away since there was no dump on this island. The easiest solution would probably be to burn them...but where? It seemed wrong to use the altar or the floor, even if it was made of stone. I decided that I'd gather them all up and burn them away from the ruined shrine.

I started to pick them up, and I soon caught the attention of Alk. He cocked his head at me as though I was doing something exceedingly unusual.

"Why are you gathering up the empty boxes, Fran?" His gold, moonlike eyes slid between my face and the boxes in my arms several times.

"So that I can burn them."

He blinked several times. "Burn them? With magic?"

"Yes. At least that's what I intended..."

"Why not give them to the salamander rather than going out of your way?"

"The 'salamander'? Is that a variety of spirit?" I asked.

"You seem surprised, Fran." Alk seemed confused by my reaction. "I did not think them so rare. Salamander, I know you are here. Show yourself."

"But Alk, spirits are..."

He had spoken so casually of a spirit—a type of creature that was said to no longer exist in these modern times. Apparently, they had lived alongside humans and lent their strength to us, but had quickly disappeared as sorcery and magical tools had become more advanced. That said, Alk had probably fallen into his slumber during a time when spirits had still thrived. There was a lot he had to learn about the modern world.

As I considered explaining these things to Alk, he turned his head toward one of the flaming baskets near the altar.

I wondered whether he would be disheartened when the spirit failed to respond to him. I hurried to open my mouth, deciding that it really would be kinder to explain, but the subdued flame suddenly flared up. Something was wriggling in its midst. My mouth continued to hang open most improperly as that “something” slid out from the flames and revealed itself.

“What can I do ya for, Lord Alkerag? Sure been an awful long time since ya called on me.”

“A spirit!” I cried out.

Embers scattered from the creature’s body as it flopped onto the floor. As it spoke, it revealed a row of small, sawlike teeth. I still believe that I was correct to scream at the sight. I had never seen a salamander before, and I would compare them to the “iguanas” of Teiren’s world. If you replaced an iguana’s angles with curves and made its eyes larger and rounder, it would more or less describe what I was looking at.

The most striking difference between an iguana and this spirit was its color. Its body was covered in fine scales in a soft, stark crimson, like the fire in a heath or the setting sun. The fin on its back was made of blazing flames that constantly changed shape.

I never once thought I’d be bearing witness to a spirit!

I *had* been caught off guard by its distinctive drawl too, but I decided that it wasn’t worth thinking about too much. It seemed like I was turning a blind eye to all sorts of things today...

A chuckle rumbled in Alk’s throat. “You amuse me, Fran. I was under the impression that nothing would disturb your composure, and yet...”

I smiled at him, straightened myself, and gave him as elegant a bow as I could. “I apologize for behaving in such an unladylike manner. It was my understanding that spirits had gone extinct a long time ago. I would be most grateful if you were to forgive my insolence.”

“‘Extinct’? You’re pullin’ my leg!” the spirit said. “Though yeah, it’s true that there’re less folk able to see us since humans came up with these ‘magical tool’ things.”

The salamander then plodded over to us before hopping onto the marble altar. He was more agile and lithe than he looked. While his flaming, flickering fin was now right beside me, somehow, I couldn't feel any heat coming from it.

"I suppose that is how it would seem from your—from the spirits' perspective."

"Aw shucks! Quit talkin' to me like I hung the moon! I'm not here to be your king!" The salamander waved a dismissive claw in my direction and bashfully turned his face away. Perhaps he was a rather self-conscious creature, despite the confidence in his tone. "Say, Lord Alkerag, where'd ya pick up such a purdy bride from, huh?"

"'Bride'?!"

The salamander's eyes had softened slightly, indicating that he was joking, but the word sent a slight shock through my chest. As little as I thought of it, the truth remained that my so-called fiancé had cheated on me with my half-sister, and that apparently wasn't a wound that was going to heal overnight. Fortunately, my discomfort seemed to go unnoticed.

Alk looked just as amused as ever. He shook his head and pointed at me. "She is not my bride. Apparently, she is my 'flower.' While she has been sacrificed to me, I do find her rather entertaining."

"Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier. My name is Francheska." I picked up my skirt's hem, dipped my head, and gave him a curtsy.

The salamander's vermilion eyes blinked at me curiously. "A '*sacrifice*,' you say?! Welp, you sure are a purdy sacrifice, then. I guess stranger things have happened!"

A giggle escaped my lips. The spirit was proving to be incredibly adorable.



"Goodness me! You've been maintaining the shrine's fire baskets for all these years, Salamander? How very impressive!"

"Heh! Keepin' these fires burning is child's play! For *me*, that is!"

Alk and I were sitting on the altar and drinking some tea from our glasses.

Salamander was beside us, and the tip of his long tail was twitching like he was very pleased with himself. The manner in which one of his eyes squinted slightly as he waved one of his claws at us was rather cute. According to him, this ruined shrine had originally been built to honor the King of the Underworld. He had been here since its construction, which predated Alk's arrival by about a hundred years. That said, it had been abandoned since the dragon's coming, and that'd led to its deterioration.

"Why are the flames blue?" I asked. "Given the coloring of your body, I would have expected red."

The salamander explained that it had to do with a legend relating to the King of the Underworld. Those whose blood continued to run through their veins used red flames, while those whose blood had dried up—meaning the dead—used blue.

"It all loops back to why it was built in the first place. Blue suits it better anyhow, don'tcha think?"

"I suppose it does. But why keep these flames burning all this time?"

"Maybe there weren't any people around here, but at least the fires might've made the god not feel so lonely," he said. It was a passionate argument worthy of a spirit of flame, and one which it might not have come to had it not spent a long time in the close company of humans.

Meanwhile, the very "person" responsible for the shrine's decline was sitting beside me, nonchalantly enjoying his tea. Naturally, we had become rather thirsty from the treats, so I had ordered a "cold brew tea set" that included a bottle containing the result of a blend of high-quality tea leaves that had undergone a meticulous cold-water extraction process. At first, I had been disappointed with the glass bottle's opacity, but apparently, the color helped protect the liquid inside. If its contents were exposed to light, the liquid's color, aroma, or flavor could deteriorate. I had also ordered some glasses because I was of the opinion that the aroma and flavor of tea would best be enjoyed from a thin-rimmed glass.

Alk gave a thoughtful hum. "I mentioned the floral fragrance of those doughnuts earlier, but this has a scent that is equally exquisite."

“It *is* a rich smell, and yet the taste is so clean. It is simply delicious.”

I brought my glass to my lips and let the tea’s aroma waft around the tip of my nose. It had a strong, sweet scent, like honey or fruit, but it was by no means overpowering. Taking the liquid into my mouth made the aroma blossom all the more, and even the satisfied sigh I let out after taking a sip felt sweet. The real mystique of this drink came from the fact that there was no sugar in it. The amber liquid also lacked any hint of tartness or bitterness, and I had to wonder whether it was really tea at all. With the exception of what I had been served at my grandfather’s place, I had always thought of tea as something bitter that made the inside of one’s mouth shrivel.

Were there any offerings from Teiren’s world that *weren’t* simply exquisite? That said, my reactions were informed by the foods and beverages I’d been living on for the majority of my life, and I had the sense that they might not have been of the highest quality...

“Anyhow, what did ya want from me?” Salamander asked, looking up at me from his now-empty plate. I had ordered some baked goods to go with the tea, and he had finished his share.

“Oh! I completely forgot!” I exclaimed. I had let myself get far too absorbed by his retelling of the shrine’s history. Placing my empty glass to one side, I pulled the mountain of paper boxes closer to me. “Alk suggested I give these over to you.”

“Whoa! Now that’s some fine paper!” he cried. “With this much, I won’t be wantin’ for mana for a long time!”

Salamander’s vermilion eyes were shining even more brightly than when I had shared the cookies with him. He plodded over to the mountain of cartons and took the corner of one into his mouth. In the next second, he effortlessly swallowed it whole. I should point out that the carton in question had been tens of times larger than his mouth. The scene left me staring in amazement.

Next to me, Alk chuckled. “It appears that this is all new to you. Salamanders are capable of converting burnable materials into mana, which they can then absorb.”

“So it would seem. Is that why you summoned him?”

“Indeed. While spirits are capable of passively absorbing the mana that exists in nature, it is much quicker for them to take in substances that conform to their attribute.”

The way Alk’s golden eyes softened as he watched Salamander consume one box after another made me wonder how anyone could think this dragon was the root of calamity. Was it too early to assume he was kind at heart?

Incidentally, “mana” was said to be the source of magic itself. An “attribute” referred to the nature of one’s magic. Both of these concepts were fundamental to the art of sorcery. It was common knowledge that, to improve one’s magical powers, one needed to understand their attribute and take in more mana. My attribute was the uninspiring “shifter,” which meant that I could handle any type of magic. However, that also meant that I wasn’t especially adept at any of them. I could reminisce at length about the days when I had desperately endeavored to at least build up my mana in lieu of possessing a specific attribute...

“What a day I’m havin’! First, I get to shoot the breeze with a human for the first time in forever, and then I get to supercharge my mana!” Salamander sang, running his red tongue over his lips.

The mountain of paper boxes had vanished in the blink of an eye.

My chest pricked with guilt at the thought that I had made him clean up our waste. But then again, it seemed to have made him awfully happy, so I supposed this was one of those “win-win” situations.

No, I *did* feel bad. If possible, I would have liked to repay him in some way, even if Alk remained my top priority.

“I am so pleased to see you enjoying yourself. If there is anything else you’d like, please do not hesitate to ask.”

“If you are offering, Fran, I would very much like to have some meat,” Alk said.

“Meat? I am sure that can be arranged.”

It seemed that the dragon’s claims of being hungry after his long slumber weren’t an exaggeration. Despite the numerous doughnuts and baked goods

he'd just devoured, Alk's appetite knew no bounds. I summoned my tablet and started to browse the meat section.

Salamander was watching me, his eyes round with amazement. "Wow! Meat's on the menu too?! You're really something, m'lady!"

"M'lady?" I said with surprise. It was safe to say that no one had ever addressed me like *that* before.

Four hopeful eyes, each one a gemstone in its own right, watched me as I turned my attention back to the tablet.

"There certainly are a lot of choices."

The screen was populated with rows of different types of meat. Alongside common varieties such as beef, pork, chicken, horse, and lamb, there were game meats like deer, boar, rabbit, pheasant, wild duck, woodcock, and dove. Then there was domestic fowl like quail, domestic duck, goose, ostrich, and guineafowl. Perhaps most unusual of them all was the frog meat. Not only that, but each meat had various cuts available: sirloin, tenderloin, rump, offal, and so forth... There were even processed products like ham, bacon, and sausage! I didn't even know where to *start*, let alone how to make a decision!

"Which kind would you like, Alk?"

Struggling to choose for myself, I showed him the screen. He had asked for meat in the first place, so I would have him pick which type he wanted and we could take it from there. This was going to be impossible otherwise...

However, though he studied the screen with unconcealed interest, it seemed that even Alk was bewildered by the sheer variety available. He blinked his golden eyes several times, but they stayed glued to the tablet. "I would like to know more," he hummed, "but I cannot read these characters. What types do they have, Fran?"

Given how long Alk had lived, the fact that he couldn't read it was genuinely surprising to me. However, it did start to explain why the writing was a mystery to me until Teiren had woken up.

As a bit of an aside, I did wonder about this "Japanese" language of hers. It had three scripts all mixed together—hiragana, katakana, and kanji—and

people were expected to be able to read and write in all three...

“From what I can see, there are livestock meats such as beef, pork, and lamb, game such as boar and deer, and poultry such as chicken and duck. Those are just a few examples, however.”

Feeling more confident, I sat back down on the altar, and Alk shuffled closer to me. I held the tablet between us, and I leaned in his direction to give him a better view. I slowly swiped my finger across the screen as I explained each meat in turn.

Alk pressed a thoughtful finger to his chin. “Very interesting. In that case, I believe I would like to sample some beef. However...”

The bottleneck was selecting a cut. There were so many to choose from! Tenderloin, sirloin, plate, rump, round, shank, neck...and those even branched off into further categories! I continued swiping through the catalog as I pondered what might be to his taste.

That was when something seemed to catch Alk’s attention, and he cocked his head. “Supposing you were to order this meat, would you be capable of cooking it?”

I gasped. That was a question that would have been best left unasked, and I had to look away from his prying golden gaze. He had a point, however. While Teiren’s memories might have equipped me with *knowledge* of cookery, I had never attempted to cook anything for myself.

I felt something light touch my knee as I continued to look at anything but Alk.

Salamander drew in my wandering gaze. “Why the long face, m’lady? Y’know I’d be happy to lend a hand with any cookin’!” His front feet were placed on my leg, and his fiery tail swished back and forth confidently.

My hero!

“You can cook, Salamander?”

“We used to be happiest next to the stove, right up till we were replaced by them magical tools. I can learn ya all there is to know about cookin’!”



“My, that *does* sound promising! I’m ready to learn, Chef!” I smiled at him.

Scratching his face bashfully, Salamander started to swish his tail back and forth even more vigorously. “I’m a full-fledged chef now?! I’m sure movin’ on up in the world!”

The way he spoke was a clear indication of how close he used to be to human activity. Though the flames around his body were in contact with my skin, they didn’t harm me in any way. Perhaps it was a little rude of me to think so, but I was surprised to discover how cute he could be, given his drawl. As he squirmed about, I gently stroked his forehead with a fingertip, and his vermilion eyes narrowed contentedly. Again, my finger went right through those flames, but I didn’t get burned. The flames didn’t even feel hot. It was all so strange.

“However, I think that today we should order some meat that has already been cooked,” I said. “I can begin to refine my cooking skills bit by bit afterward.”

“Ah. Then I suppose I shall have to make do with *looking forward* to your cooking for the time being,” Alk said.

“What’s this nonsense about takin’ it slow?” Salamander protested. “With me teaching, you’ll be whippin’ up five-star meals in no time!”

Considering Alk’s original form, he was unlikely to suffer from eating raw meat. However, now that he looked like a human, I couldn’t help but think that it would be safer to cook it first.

Wait a moment... Meat sashimi? There’s meat that can be eaten raw?! Not just meat, but...organ meat?!

It seemed that there was some wildly fringe cuisine in Teiren’s world...

Alk’s throat rumbled with deep, quiet laughter, and Salamander’s tail swished about in my lap. Both of them were staring at me, so I decided to stop delaying. I ordered a variety of items. Admittedly, I did give in to a few of my curiosities, but I knew those items wouldn’t go to waste. If I couldn’t eat them myself, Alk probably would.

“What are you plotting, Fran?” The dragon shot me an especially dark glance.

“You make me sound like a villain! I was simply contemplating how important it is that food be enjoyed.” I gave him my best smile as I pressed my finger to the button enshrined in the center of the screen.

There came a series of thumps as paper boxes piled up next to me once more.

Salamander’s eyes lit up, and he whistled. “Again with the fine paper, m’lady! You’ll lemme have it, right?” His tail swayed with excitement.

“Of course! You will be patient, though, won’t you? I need to remove the contents first.”

I started with the box that was primarily black. It gave off an air of majesty. Flipping the lid open, I was met with a certificate proving the beef’s superior origin and a leaflet explaining the recommended way to eat it. I moved both of those items to one side, which revealed a smaller wooden box within.

My heart was pounding—it felt like I was opening a treasure chest! I was sure that this too would prove an excellent source of mana for Salamander, so it wouldn’t go to waste. I pulled the rather weighty box out and carefully opened the lid. On a piece of red cloth, a white, frosted bag held two portions of meat. A small bottle of seasoning sat between them.

“What is that, Fran?”

“This is dry-aged Japanese Black roast beef! Here, we have one cut of round and one of sirloin.”

“Dry...aged?”

“I’m not entirely certain about the specifics myself, but it seems that the meat is stored at a cold temperature that is just a little too high to freeze it. Then, it is allowed to age gradually,” I explained.

Apparently, the long aging process brought out the meat’s umami flavor. I’d forever be impressed by the techniques developed in Teiren’s world! This meat was said to taste better if it was left at room temperature for a while, so I removed it from the container to let it rest.

Now, it was time to look through the rest of the order!

I gave the packing materials from the roast beef, including the boxes and

cloth, over to Salamander. His eyes sparkled with glee as he gobbled them up one by one to bolster his mana. The bag used to hold the meat itself was apparently made from a flammable liquid called oil, so perhaps he would be able to make use of that too.

“This next item is a tasting set of roast beef from different producers! In Teiren’s world, there are different brands of beef. I ordered this to see how they differed.”

Alk hummed. “Will the differences be so great? I had always thought that all beef was the same, more or less.”

“I haven’t tried them, so I can’t be sure, but according to the description, the cattle were raised differently and had unique diets.”

This next box was such a deep shade of brown that it was almost black. Inside it sat four pieces of meat, each one a whole size bigger than my fist. They were individually wrapped in transparent pouches that had the different beef producer’s brand names on them. Just like the last box, this one also included proof-of-origin certificates and instructions on how best to enjoy the product.

Teiren told me that the authenticity of food was taken very seriously in her world. Here, there were malicious meat vendors who bulked up their products with meat from other animals when selling to commoners. Sometimes, that led to disease outbreaks. Though attempts were made to expose and crack down on such businesses within the duchy and even the capital, the fraudsters would immediately set up new storefronts. It was an endless game of cat and mouse.

Teiren’s world had much higher standards for hygiene and quality, and that was exactly why I had chosen to order the next item I announced to the others.

“This is a carpaccio set made with Japanese black beef. It’s meat you can have raw!”

“Is that so unusual?” Alk asked.

“Perhaps not for a dragon such as yourself, but I have never eaten raw meat in my entire life,” I explained to him.

He continued to cock his head as though he was struggling with the concept of what was normal. It was a stark reminder that despite his appearance, he

was still a dragon. In this world, eating raw meat would make one sick. Even so, I had still ordered some because I couldn't help but be curious. After all, it had looked exceptionally delicious on the tablet—and it looked even tastier in real life!

The carpaccio set was perfectly wrapped so as to be impenetrable to the air, and the meat itself was a vivid, light crimson. The white fat strewn through the red muscle—which Teiren told me was called “marbling”—created a contrast that was very appealing to the eye. It was like I was looking at a large red flower with mottled petals. That gorgeous meat was accompanied by thin shavings of hard cheese, a small bottle of fresh olive oil, and a petite spice mill containing grains of rock salt. Of course, this box had its own literature about how to enjoy it and to guarantee the meat's quality as well. It claimed that to enjoy this meat best, one should serve it on a plate, sprinkle it with cheese, drizzle oil on top of that, and then season it with salt! There was an additional certificate proving that this meat had passed a safety test to be able to be eaten raw—yet another piece of evidence proving the high food standards in Teiren's world.

A strange mix of anxiety and anticipation stretched my nerves taut as I arranged the carpaccio on one of the plates I'd ordered.

“It doesn't look much like the photos...”

“Neat” was the last word I would use to describe how I'd plated it... I was used to using pens and other writing implements, but these “tongs” were quite a bit trickier to handle. The meat ended up folded over in some places and overlapping in others. The spice mill was stiff and difficult to turn, so I wasn't able to season it evenly either. And as for the cheese...well, I think I did all right at scattering it all over everything. I was still rather disappointed, however, and my shoulders drooped.

“That looks real good for your first time. Don'tcha agree, Lord Alkerag?” Salamander asked. There was a hint of desperation in his voice.

“Yes, indeed. Of course, it is the taste that is truly important,” Alk replied hurriedly from my other side.

I still had to cut up and portion out the roast beef, and I was no longer confident that it would go well. I placed the meat onto the cutting board and

brought the kitchen knife down onto it.

“Don’t saw back and forth. Instead, get the knife into the meat and then pull it back smoothly!” Teiren said, gesticulating the movements to me.

The phrase “easier said than done” came to mind. In the end, the meat ended up being cut into pieces, regardless of how it’d happened.

I let out the breath I’d been holding and put the knife down to one side. “Finished. I think...”

Both Alk and Salamander released sighs of relief and smiled at me.

“You seem to have gotten used to this, Fran,” Alk said. “The cut sections of those last pieces look quite gorgeous.”

“I gotta agree with Lord Alkerag! They’re not even rough around the edges or nothin’!”

I must have had them on tenterhooks!

Not that I could blame them. It *had* been my first time cutting so much meat, and now that I was done, I felt a sense of accomplishment. The first pieces I’d cut were a little structurally dubious, but the last ones showed that I had vastly improved. Aren’t you proud of me?

The altar was our dining table, and it was packed with dishes piled high with vibrant slices of meat. I lined the seasonings up next to them and pointed. “Here are the accompaniments that came with this set, so you can season your meat to taste.”

The smile on Alk’s face widened.

“I think I shall start with the carpaccio,” I continued, “seeing as I’ve never had raw meat before!”

“As you wish. I have never had cooked meat before.”

“Then this will be a brand-new experience for both of us! Doesn’t facing the unknown get your heart pumping?”

I watched his fine lips curve into an attractive smile as he snatched up several slices of roast beef from a nearby plate. Meanwhile, I wasted no time in

reaching for the carpaccio. The meat seemed to have turned an even deeper shade of red—perhaps because it'd been in contact with the air. After wrapping some cheese around a slice of meat, I ate it all in a single bite.

I was worried it would taste like blood, but there wasn't even a hint of that flavor. Instead, my mouth was filled with the airy taste of olive oil.

"Wow... Raw meat is divine!" I exclaimed.

"As is cooked meat. It is very aromatic."

I looked up and met Alk's golden gaze—we both must've wanted to see the other's reaction.

But the carpaccio really *was* delicious! It had a velvety texture and was so soft that it seemed to stick to my tongue. Despite how thinly it was sliced, the meat's flavor was so intense that it had a real bite to it. Each time I brought another piece to my mouth, the lightly salted meat and the richness of the cheese came together harmoniously, and I found myself swallowing it all down before I even realized it.

Speaking of the cheese, it was heavenly as well! A touch of salt left it perfectly seasoned, and although it was rich, the flavor wasn't at all overwhelming. That wasn't to say that it lacked creaminess either!

Alk seemed to sense my bliss. Having made quick work of his roast beef, he reached for the carpaccio with his fork. I mirrored him by serving myself some of the cooked meat.

The type I had selected promised to offer us the best balance between flesh and fat. The fat spread through the meat in a weblike pattern, and the nicely browned outside of the slice was a shade of peachy pink. As you looked to the center of each slice, the color of the meat deepened into a vibrant rose red as it must've been cooked only by residual heat. The whole process had created a gorgeous gradient. Because this meat had rested at room temperature for a bit, its fat had softened and now formed a glossy layer over the surface. The seared rim of the cut was a deep caramel color that contrasted wonderfully with the pink inside.

I had cut this slice just a little too thick, but it didn't matter. As unsightly as I

thought doing so was, I decided to fold the slice over and put the whole thing in my mouth. I couldn't help it! It just looked so appetizing!

"This meat also has a wonderful flavor! It simply melts in your mouth!" I cried.

And it had done so before I had even begun to chew. It was so tender that each bite simply fell apart. The heat of my mouth melted the fat, and it tasted so deliciously mild in a way one wouldn't expect from the overwhelming way it had looked. If anything, the fat complemented the aromatic browning on the meat's surface. My mouth was filled with a nutty flavor so deep that its umami remained on my tongue even after I'd swallowed. At first, I had no idea what dry aging was all about, but I certainly did now that I'd had a taste! This was worlds apart from any meat I'd ever eaten before.

"I see that even raw meat can undergo an incredible transformation just by having humans involved in its making! Human ingenuity is truly a force to be reckoned with!" Alk's eyes were glistening, and I would wager that none of the raw meat he had ever eaten in his life had been prepared or seasoned to any extent.

"If only they would limit its application to food, perhaps then we could have peace," I mused out loud.

As a dragon, he had probably swallowed chunks of meat whole. I could well imagine that there was an ocean of difference between that and eating it sliced like this. In my mind's eye, I pictured a dragon eating an entire bull in one bite. I dropped my gaze down to my plate of roast beef.

"I've only sampled one of the brands, yet I already feel so content," I said. "It is a force to be reckoned with indeed!" The sliced meat on my plate had truly packed a punch, and I poked its remains with my fork.

Alk watched me. "Am I to take it that you are finished, Fran? In that case..."

"I am not *quite* finished! Please stop taking *all* of those beef slices for yourself!" I used my fork to lay claim to some more meat, determined to defend my share.

"I sure do envy the bond between ya!" Salamander chuckled.

I had never needed to fight with someone over food before, and I was

surprised to find this to be just a little bit of fun.

I still remember clearly how the salamander had watched us then, laughing along and swishing his tail.



The rest of the meats had proven to be just as fantastic. One of the roast beef cuts had come from cattle who had been allowed to roam vast meadows at their leisure, and doing so produced the best quality meats. You could tell the impact that'd had—the meat had the perfect bite and wasn't at all rubbery! It was nothing like the meats in this world. Here, if one took too large a bite by accident, you'd likely end up chewing it for an inordinate amount of time. However, the meat I had ordered didn't taste too bloody or strangely milky either. Each bite just oozed more and more umami!

And then, there was the “sirloin” roast beef. It was so smooth that it felt like I was drinking each slice rather than chewing it! I enjoyed it with a blend of fine-ground spices that stepped in to refresh my tongue whenever it was on the cusp of getting too greasy from fat. The spices ensured that each bite was as fresh as could be. Tender, juicy, and mild... It felt like I could keep on eating slice after slice!

“Would it be possible for you to order the meat of an entire animal with that skill of yours, Fran?” Alk asked. He had finished his plate and was staring at me intently. Perhaps the taste of meat had provoked his beastly instincts.

“An *entire* animal? I suppose I could take a look.”

“It has been such a long time since I last sank my teeth into a large piece of meat. Ah, meat...”

His eyes had contracted into slits, and I felt a shiver run down my spine as I summoned my tablet.

“Well, let's see...” I said.

According to Teiren's memories, I needed to look for something called a “carcass.” My mind was full of question marks as I entered the term into the search box at the top-right corner of the screen.

“Goodness me! It seems it *is* possible to purchase an entire animal, just without its head, organs, or skin. Would you like one, Alk?”

There was only one search result, but it was better than nothing! Judging by the description, it wasn't as premium as the beef we'd just eaten. However, it still looked delicious, and it seemed like a lot of time and effort had been put into its rearing.

“Without its organs, you say? Why remove them when they are so delectable?” Alk asked. “Well, I suppose it will have to do...”

“As you wish!”

Even though Alk knew that it wouldn't be delivered completely unprocessed, the smile on his face was a clear indicator of his anticipation. If he really wanted the head, skin, and organs that badly, then I had to wonder—wouldn't he just prefer to eat the creature alive at that point?

I imagined him in his dragon form, eating an entire live cow. I doubted that I would be able to handle actually witnessing something so grotesque.

“Hmm... This says we need to make sure we have space for a whole cow carcass before we order it,” I said. The description made it seem like it would be very heavy too, and I did *not* want to be crushed! Hoping that it would appear in a sensible place, I pressed the button to order.

The whole cow cost about two-thirds of the points I had left, but it was a sacrifice worth making. It was better for me to provide Alk with what he wanted, lest he decide to eat me instead!

A large piece of meat fell onto the marble floor with a thud. The impact made it vibrate. This was the first time I had ever seen meat looking like this, and it was hard to describe the sight. “Overwhelming” was the only word that came to mind. Fortunately, the mass didn't seem very animallike as its head, tail, and the ends of its limbs had been removed. If not for that, I think I would have struggled.

While I covertly worked to regain my composure, Alk let out a small sigh. Then, he was back in his dragon form.

“It certainly looks small without its head,” he commented. There was a

distinct note of disappointment in his tone as he studied the slab of meat.

“Small? To me, it still seems enormous!”

“No surprises there, m’lady, but I betcha Lord Alkerag could finish this thing up in one or two bites!” Salamander said.

I sighed. “Certainly he could, when he’s in his dragon form.”

Looking up at Alk, I was again reminded of just how large his current dragon body was. I could only conclude that Salamander was right. When his jaws were stretched open, he could probably swallow *me* whole. Even just one of his fangs was bigger than my palm! No wonder he thought the carcass was small.

And indeed, he ate the whole thing in two bites. The bones crunched between his teeth as he consumed it, and I let out a breath that I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

His red tongue swiped over his lips, and then, he swiveled his neck around and trained those two golden moonlike eyes on me.

“That was disappointing.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Now that I have had a taste of *cuisine*, I can no longer find satisfaction in plain meat!” Alk grumbled. His snout wrinkled, forming ridges.

“Is that so? Well, fear not,” I said. “As long as my heart keeps beating, I can order whatever you desire.”

“I suppose you can... I shall never want for food for as long as you are with me.”

I reached out for the dragon’s head and gently rubbed his snout as if to smooth those wrinkles out. My finger slid easily over his scales, and his golden eyes narrowed contentedly. It seemed that the delicacies I had ordered today had already been enough to charm his taste buds. At any rate, I wondered if it was safe to assume that my life was no longer in danger... I didn’t think that Alk would go back on our agreement, but when it came to staying alive, I wanted to be free of even the slightest hint of doubt.

He pressed his head more firmly against my hand, begging for more pets. I

obliged for a moment until I suddenly sensed magic. Both Alk and Salamander must have sensed it too, because they swiftly turned their heads in the direction of the room's entrance.

This magic doesn't feel malevolent... In fact, it feels quite familiar.

A bird with a white belly and mottled taupe plumage hurtled into the room with a sharp cry.

"Pia!"

"I knew it! That's grandfather's magic!"

The familiar creature circled the ceiling once before flying straight at me. Alk and Salamander had braced themselves, ready to defend me, but it wove between them and flew toward my chest. Just before it made contact, it transformed into a letter.

"What in blazes was that, Fran?!" Alk cried.

"You all right, m'lady?! All in one piece?!"

"I'm so sorry to have caused you concern. This is a letter from my family... Well, from my grandfather," I explained.

The wax seal on the envelope was in the shape of his crest. He had sent this magically and in the same manner that I had sent off my own letter to him last night.

After offering a reassuring smile to the two pairs of anxious eyes peering at me, I opened the envelope with trembling hands.

Interlude

A frigid air permeated one of Vaielindt Estate's many lavishly furnished rooms. Dressed finely in a frock coat, a man named Urnold glared at Reimar Vaielindt. The younger Reimar sat before him impassively with one leg crossed over the other—there was no indication that his father Urnold's anger had left any impression on him. It was unsurprising, as he had been just as unfeeling when he'd all but sentenced his daughter to death in this very room the other day.

"So, the situation as I understand it is that your younger daughter has failed in keeping to a high moral standard, and yet you have devoted yourself to punishing your blameless eldest instead, which has culminated in you dispatching her as a sacrifice."

"Father, please," Reimar said. "That useless child was at fault for failing to properly secure His Royal Highness's affections. Surely you can see that!"

A loud *thump* filled the room. Urnold had thrust the tip of his cane against the floor, producing the sound despite the fluffy carpet underfoot. Despite his age, he had taken care of and built his body to be far more robust than would be expected of an "elderly" gentleman. The combination of his strike and the near-murderous rage that emanated from his entire being left the floorboards rattling.

"Reimar!" he yelled. "Are you even capable of comprehending your own words? Is that all you have to say about your daughter? The young woman who has had to single-handedly perform her duties as the eldest daughter and representative of a duke? Not to mention the time she spent establishing important relationships with other members of our high society."

"What I cannot comprehend is *your* anger. I raised her, even with her lack of ability. It was only right that she exerted herself to her fullest for the sake of the dukedom."

Urnold glared at his son with such an intense level of ire that it was a small

wonder he hadn't burst into flames. Still, the younger man shrugged as if that anger were none of his concern. It seemed that his hatred for his daughter had consumed him to the point that he was unable to judge the irrationality of his own words. Urnold's son was too witless even to be called foolish.

The older man's white-gloved hands tightened their grip on the two-headed eagle that sat atop his cane so intensely that it could have cracked. His ice-blue eyes bore into Reimar...but a few seconds later, he simply sighed and shook his ash-gray head. Something in the taut air had shattered.

"To think you were so rotten... Even I struggle to comprehend your motives."

Reimar had maintained a superficial smile up until this point, but now, veins throbbed at his temple. His fists were clenched so hard that his knuckles had turned white, as though he was being plagued by an unpleasant memory.

He shook with rage. "Father, isn't that rather rude to say about your own son? That useless child broke my beloved daughter's heart! The attitude she took when leaving for the island boggles the mind!" he yelled in a tone dripping with venom.

Urnold snorted dismissively. "I daresay the parting gift she left for the harlot who stole her fiancé was well deserved. And quite apart from anything else, you speak as if you have only one daughter," he spat bitterly at his son.

At that, Reimar's expression looked a bit incredulous, as though he couldn't believe what his father had just said. "'*Harlot*'?! You may be my father, but I shall *not* allow you to speak about my daughter in that way! And I have never *once* considered the other child to be my flesh and blood."

By this point, Reimar's face had turned a dark red. Grinding his teeth, he closed in on his elder and grabbed his father by the collar. However, Urnold seemed utterly unperturbed. In fact, the corners of his thin, well-shaped lips curled upward. He used his free arm to push his spitting, raging son's hands aside and banged the ferrule of his cane against the floor again.

"Despite the fact that she and her mother, Lady Elizaveta, provided you with the perfect opportunity to unload *all* of your official duties?"

Reimar's fervor lessened at his father's calm and composed words. He all but

staggered backward before collapsing limply on the sofa.

“You never expected, and nor were you prepared, to inherit the House of Vaielindt,” Urnold continued. “I always understood that. Your eldest brother died unexpectedly during the epidemic, and your next eldest had already been joined with another house.”

Reimar hummed noncommittally at that.

“That is why I begged Lady Elizaveta, your late brother’s fiancée, to wed and assist you. After all, she had received a future duchess’s education. Now see how you have disgraced her generosity!”

“That is unfair, father. As duke, I have...”

“Done what exactly?” he asked, cutting his son off. “Shunned Lady Elizaveta in favor of a woman you picked up off the street? Foisted your own responsibilities onto your first wife and her daughter? Tell me, what achievements are under *your* name?”

There was a thin smile on Urnold’s lips as he addressed his trembling son. His words were quiet and his glare cold. As tranquil as his expression appeared to be, it ran counter to his barely concealed rage that sent shivers down Reimar’s spine. The invisible pressure from that rage left the son opening and closing his mouth wordlessly like a fish tossed up onto land.

Slowly, the elderly man’s thin lips curved up further into a smile that was both ghastly and savage at once. “I had hoped that you would change, even if only a little bit, but it seems that I just wasted my time. Even as your father, perhaps expecting that much from you tells of a foolishness that rivals yours. I feel most sorry for Francheska.”

“I-I beg your pardon? Father, you cannot speak to me—”

“Never mind. There is more than one way to resolve things.” While shooting a terse glance at his son, Urnold straightened the collar that Reimar had disheveled earlier. Striding toward the door, he accepted his top hat from the polite servant who waited there.

He looked back at his son over his shoulder. “Things will not unfold as you would like them to, Reimar. Remember that.”

Reimar simply stared, dumbfounded.

As much as the pathetic look on his son's face disgusted Urnold, it was far from his main concern at present. The welfare of his exiled granddaughter was at the forefront of his thoughts instead. He would have to mull things over at length.

Shivering at the thought of what might be happening to her, he made his way out of the cold estate, his shoes clacking as he went.

Chapter 3

I was suddenly pulled from my state of unconsciousness. Enveloped in a mysterious floating sensation, I opened my eyes to see a thin gauze canopy before me.

Now that looks familiar...

I thought back to the previous night. I had accepted the letter and its contents had sapped the strength from me. It'd taken my last drop of willpower to pull my bed and partitioning screen from my infinity before I'd promptly fallen asleep. I was grateful now that the bed had been the first piece of furniture from my room that I'd decided to store. It was a bit of a slipshod arrangement, but thanks to that, the partition, and the makeshift curtains I had hung up to block out the light, I had managed to create a comfortable space for myself.

"Hey, m'lady! You up?" came a bright, bouncy greeting.

I followed the sound to find Salamander with his fiery fin flickering and his vermilion eyes staring in my direction.

"Why Salamander, I hadn't realized that you were sleeping here too."

I could have sworn that there was a hint of amusement in his thin, needlelike pupils. I poked his forehead lightly and told him he shouldn't wait upon a lady in her own bed, and that earned me a markedly insincere apology. That said, he was just a reptile—appearance-wise, at least. He likely wouldn't even see a problem if I were to cuddle him like a stuffed animal as I slept. Either way, when I told him I was going to get dressed, he had the good grace to slip out through the canopy. Perhaps he was more of a gentleman than I gave him credit for.

I took off the soft cotton dress I had been wearing in lieu of pajamas and changed into another one that I had taken from my family's estate. It was a little too simple to be considered fancy while also being a little too showy to be casual. Unfortunately, the clothing I had on hand was limited, especially when it came to items that were easy to move around in.

“It might’ve been useful were I able to order clothing as well. Perhaps there are aprons available if nothing else...”

There was no use yearning for the impossible, however. I twirled in front of the musty full-length mirror I had also pulled from my infinitory, and the ample hem of my skirt fluttered as I did so.

This one shouldn’t impede my movements too much.

I put my “pajamas” away into my infinitory, and with that, I was ready to face the day.

Tying the canopy back, I sat down on my bed, which was when I felt something dry and rough brush against my hand. That something was the very cause of the anxiety that had been afflicting me since yesterday.

I sighed. “Oh, grandfather...”

The Vaielindt crest had been pressed into wax a deeper red than blood, and it stood out against the elegant hue of the high-quality envelope. In the bottom right-hand corner of the envelope was my grandfather’s name—his signature a majestic scrawl that also belied a discomposed mind.

“What’s all the sighin’ for, m’lady?”

Salamander must have realized that I had finished changing once the rustling of clothing had stopped. He had slipped silently through the “entrance” to my room, meaning the curtains. Indeed, I *was* finished, but it would have been polite of him to confirm as much verbally...

I gave the fiery lizard a hard stare, but it didn’t seem to have any effect. “Hello, Salamander. Let us just say that I have run into an unexpected bother.”

He hopped onto the bed and studied the envelope in my hand curiously. “Does this ‘bother’ of yours have anythin’ to do with this here paper?”

“It does,” I said. “It appears that my grandfather is rather angry.”

I doubted that he was attempting to hide it either. The eyes of the fire spirit beside me burned with curiosity—and, to his credit, slight concern—as I waved the envelope in front of him. My grandfather had spilled his heart out onto the page, and it was just about clear from the state of his writing that he’d done so

in a hurry. It was a letter filled with apologies and regrets. He'd written that he would love me no matter what, and that he was sorry for not being sensitive to my feelings. He'd also accepted that, in continuing to believe that my father would have a change of heart, he had hurt me. He had then declared that he was no longer willing to be merciful. There was a powerful intent behind his words: he would come to retrieve me, even at his own expense, and even if he should be reduced to nothing but a pile of bones.

"I am in a bit of a fix... I have come to look forward to my life here more than I had expected."

"Ya look down in the dumps now, m'lady! What's going on? That letter really got to ya, huh?"

"I think it'd be more accurate to compare it to receiving a burdensome gift."

I still loved and respected my grandfather... Was I really happy to just cut off my family for the rest of my life? Though I did suppose that it was better to learn his intentions through this letter now *before* he did anything too rash. Either way, there was just one option before me.

"I must write a reply to my grandfather," I said. While I didn't think I would convince him of anything, I preferred to voice my feelings than say nothing.

The first step to doing so would be to retrieve the mildly wobbly desk from my infinity. I took it out and set it beside my bed.

"I wonder what we should eat today?" I asked my stomach. I would never say no to desserts, of course, but I needed to have proper meals too. I supposed I needed to give thought to doing some cooking of my own too.

Oh. I was thinking about my future here.

Whatever was going to happen with my grandfather, I found myself hoping that I could stay put instead of going back home. *That isn't like me...*

"Those fried...um, *doughnuts* were swell! Whaddya think Lord Alkerag liked best?" Salamander asked excitedly.

I giggled. "Excellent question. I suppose we shall have to ask him what he'd like today."

My mind was alight with visions of an enjoyable future as I dipped the tip of my pen into the inkwell. But my letter had to take precedence right now.

My hand hovered over the page as I tried to decide where to begin. Salamander was making a game of flitting his tongue and was chuckling to himself beside me.

Perhaps I ought to let my grandfather know that my life here is more fascinating and fun than I had thought it would be. I could describe it to him.

With my decision made, I started to write my letter on the slightly dried-out paper.

The first order of business was to thank him for his reply. I then made it clear that I wanted nothing more to do with my family and that it was best that he consider me dead. I went on to make an explicit statement that I had a fun-filled future ahead of me on this island and that he did not need to come for me. Further, I had no interest in enacting any revenge against my father, so anything my grandfather chose to do should be for his own satisfaction. I then hurried to write down my last point, needing to take extra care to keep my writing neat as I did so. I wanted him to visit my mother's grave to tell her that I was alive and well.

There was so much I wanted to convey to him, but I was getting awfully flustered. I needed to compose myself. I had been sitting at this desk for some time now and had lost count of how many times I had gotten stuck on what to write or had to erase what I'd written with magic. However, I managed to finish it eventually!

I pressed the seal I had inherited from my mother into some wax. All that was left now was to send the letter. I looked around to see where I might do that from...which was when I realized that I had *no* idea of this shrine's layout whatsoever!

"Perhaps I should have thought of this before I went to sleep, but where in the shrine have I placed my bed exactly?" I asked Salamander.

"Beats me. Though in the past, the folk who came by here all wore these super formal-lookin' clothes."

“You mean that they didn’t dress like other people? Might they have been shrine maidens or priests?”

The salamander on my shoulder gave me a questioning glance, so I looked away from him and surveyed the area. Behind the altar was a long narrow path—the one I’d followed to get here. From what Salamander had said, this must have been the deepest part of this ruined shrine where only the shrine maidens and priests had been permitted to enter.

As I set about, hoping to find my way out, I spotted a statue out of the corner of my eye that was in disrepair. It seemed to be modeled after a god—this shrine’s true master.

“Why, I didn’t expect to find an idol here...”

It was a rather large one too. I must have been in too much shock to have taken a proper look around this room yesterday. At the statue’s feet was a pedestal that seemed to be for burning sacrifices. Strangely, I didn’t feel any disgust at the thought that I had slept near it. Perhaps it was because there was no lingering stench of flesh or heat for burning said flesh coming from it. Or perhaps it’d been because I had felt safe sleeping in a sacred place, even if the god of the shrine had been completely forgotten.

But then, my chest tightened. Had I not aroused Alk’s interest, I would have lost my life just like the sacrificial animals that had been burned here. I offered up the tea left in my cup to the damaged idol before getting quietly to my knees and bowing my head. I didn’t know what happened to gods who had lost all their worshippers, but I felt it might be worth something to offer this one its first prayer in such a long time.

Salamander had followed me. He breathed fire beside me as I prayed. Several tiny embers sparked and glittered before vanishing into thin air.

“Thanks, m’lady. I’m sure the god appreciates ya!”

“It’s nothing, really. Besides, I shall be staying here for quite some time. It is only right that I introduce myself,” I reasoned.

Salamander chuckled and started rubbing at his eye with his front foot over and over. “You and your manners, huh?”

I gave him a brief pat on the head before imbuing the letter in my hand with magic. It twitched rapidly on my palm for a moment before transforming into a bird in the blink of an eye. This small bird had pure white plumage and blue eyes. It circled me several times before flying off in the direction of the cave's exit.

That ought to reach grandfather safely! At least, I hope so!

Now that I was relieved to have dealt with an item on my to-do list, it was time to see Alk by the altar. Salamander darted up my body and came to a stop on my shoulder. Apparently, he had decided that this was his spot. Just like yesterday, his pretty flickering flames weren't burning me. Hopefully, it was safe to take that as a sign of trust.

"Ya think Lord Alkerag's up yet?"

"I wonder," I said. "You'd think that this would be about the right time for it."

"He can be awfully slow when he's just woken up! But I don't think he'd hurt ya or nothin'."

Salamander and I passed through the crumbling entrance leading to the main portion of the shrine. There, the large dragon was resting his head on the altar like it was a pillow. He raised it slowly to look in my direction, and his brilliant yellow eyes were piercing. There had been a chilling, murderous air exuding from the ground beneath him, but that quickly vanished once he saw me. It seemed like he recognized me at once.

Alk wearily pushed up his upper body, flapped his wings once, and the next second, he was sitting on the altar in his human form.

I picked up my skirt and bowed my head. "Good morning, Alk. Did you sleep well?"

He loosely waved a hand in my direction. "Fran... I *did*, in fact, thanks to my full belly. You have done well."

Salamander whispered in my ear that Alk didn't like it when those he was fond of treated him with too much formality. But he *did* seem to be in a good mood, so I was sure he had enjoyed my offerings yesterday. I caught a glimpse of the fangs at the corners of his broad smile, which were another reminder

that he wasn't as human as he seemed. Even the way he crossed one leg over the other, rested his elbow in his lap, rounded his back, and put his chin on his hand made him look as though he was born to make that pose. I supposed there was no advantage quite like natural beauty.

I approached the dragon, whose eyes seemed very expectant, and activated my skill. I turned the screen in his direction and watched as his pupils narrowed into crescent moons.

I wonder what we shall be eating today?



The three of us squished together as we gazed at the tablet. This was the first time we had sat together like this to pore over what was on offer. It was a new experience for me. Even Teiren—my previous incarnation—had lived a solitary life.

However, we seemed to be getting nowhere fast. “What would you like?” I prompted. “Perhaps something more filling than a dessert?”

“I would be perfectly content with either the meat or the ‘doughnuts’ we partook of yesterday.”

“I wanna try this ‘dried fish selection’! I can crisp it all up with my fire!”

Alas, my suggestion had done little to help matters. It was the morning, so Alk had a healthy appetite while Salamander seemed to be feeling wildly adventurous. However, I wasn't quite confident enough to try cooking anything myself yet. But even if we couldn't agree on anything, I could hardly think of anything more fun than this. Once the food was here, all we'd have left to do would be to eat it. And we might end up disappointed at the missed opportunities.

That wasn't to say that I wasn't looking forward to a delicious meal, of course! I loved eating and laughing with my companions. It was just that I found it surprisingly enjoyable to just imagine the tastes and aromas from each product's photos and description while talking the decision over with Alk and Salamander. It felt like our conversation would go on and on if we let it.

Alk snorted impatiently and waved a dismissive hand. “At this rate, we shall

never come to a decision. Fran, you are a master of the skill. You will order whatever you like.” He was either tired of our discussion going around in circles or was reaching the limits of his hunger. Or both.

“As you wish. In that case, I shall select something light for the time being.”

Despite the short time we had known each other, right now, I was able to read Alk like a book. I could tell by the indignant look on his face and his lazy movements that he really *was* fed up. Nevertheless, when I glanced at him, his eyes remained glued to the tablet screen as I swiped through the options. Regardless of the size of his appetite, we had all just woken up. I made the judgment call that it was a little early for our stomachs to handle anything too fatty just yet.

As for what Salamander had his eye on—the products that would require cooking—I hoped that he wouldn’t mind if I let his anticipation build for a while longer. I preferred to start with something a bit simpler to build up my skills.

Some delicious cold brew tea wouldn’t be amiss, although I should try a different brand than yesterday’s. Then, I’ll get some bread and...cheese, maybe? And some ham would be sure to please the meat-loving Alk.

With the items selected, all that was left was to press the button to order!

The moment I did so, an array of packages fell onto the dilapidated altar with a *thump, thump, thump*. They really did arrive instantly. I didn’t believe that anything would come so quickly, even in Teiren’s world.

I immediately set to work unpacking everything. I passed the paper cartons and packaging over to Salamander—he was doing a poor job of concealing his excitement. The packaging also contained some...“plastic,” was it? Since he seemed to be able to gain mana from that too, that went right to him as well.

“So what have you bought for us this time, Fran?”

“Today, we have luxury roast ham and a cheese-tasting set. I have also ordered us some fresh bread and cold brew tea.”

I placed the ham and the different varieties of cheese on the cutting board I’d ordered yesterday and presented them to Alk. His golden eyes squinted in delight. Given that he was a dragon, it was only natural that he should have a

liking for such goods. I was so pleased that my hunch had been correct!

Incidentally, I had also ordered some cutlery, dinnerware, and chef's knives. I'd decided that cutting could be one of the first skills I'd try my hand at. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, as they say. I also wanted a shelf or something along those lines to store the cookware and dinnerware, although I didn't yet know when I could make that a reality.

"Oh, I know! Salamander, I would like to warm the ham and bread once I've cut them. Can you tell me how I might do that?" I asked, distracting him from his work consuming the boxes and packaging with flames.

He turned to me and blinked. "Couldn't ya use the li'l pedestal from the room ya slept in?"

"But that's for the god of the shrine. I would feel...conflicted using it for our food," I said.

Its original purpose seemed to have been burning animals for the god of this shrine. It was a sacred item. I had scruples about damaging that sanctity by repurposing it. Although I hesitated to explain my thoughts, Salamander seemed to grasp what I was trying to get at.

After setting the rest of the paper mountain alight with a smooth blue fire, he turned his body fully in my direction. "Then how 'bout cookin' over a bonfire, m'lady? Wouldn't that be nostalgic?"

Salamander winked at me playfully, and sparkling blue flames sprang up out of the ground. They came together to form a small magic circle, which then gave rise to a much larger fire.

This was my first time witnessing a spirit using magic, and I was utterly amazed. It was a truly beautiful sight.

"A li'l makeshift bonfire, courtesy of my magic! I'm in total control of the heat, so cookin' with it'll be a breeze!" Salamander grinned at me from in front of the flames, and honestly, he looked very masculine!

I was now ready to make my first real attempt at cooking!

With his chin resting in his hand, Alk let out an overly dramatic sigh. "I do

hope that whatever you produce will be edible.” Despite all that, the smile on his face wasn’t entirely cold.

I heard that, Alk! I promise that once I’m finished, you’ll be begging me for a second helping!

All I needed now was to quickly buy some metal skewers to toast the ingredients on... Since this was my first time cooking, I wanted to treat myself!

“Though I cannot claim to be...*entirely* confident,” I admitted to myself.

I had managed to get as far as slicing the ham and the bread on the cutting board, but when I put the ham on the skewer and brought it closer to the flame, I suddenly became very nervous indeed! After all, I had never been this close to a fire! I had always used magic to light the fire in the hearth, and I’d never had the opportunity to go into a kitchen.

Burning heat was prickling my cheeks. I kept bringing the skewer closer to the fire, pulling it back, and doing that again and again. At first, Salamander cocked his head in confusion, but his vermilion eyes quickly softened with concern once he realized what was going on.

“Ah, I get it,” he said. “You’re scared to get burned ’cause it’s your first time using fire. Or are ya scared the food might char?”

Hesitant, I groaned. “The food isn’t going to...explode as I cook it, is it?” I asked before glancing in Salamander’s direction.

“Not while I’m in charge!” he replied, exuding confidence.

Still, I couldn’t help but be nervous...much to the amusement of Alk, who was practically guffawing at me! But within Teiren’s memories, I had seen glimpses of cooking going up in flames or even exploding!

That said, I couldn’t allow fear to hold me back. Summoning up my courage, I held the ham skewer over the blazing fire. It did not explode. Instead, it began to sizzle, and juices dripped onto the ground. As dark, appetizing marks started to appear on the ham’s surface, the meat and fat crisped up, filling the air with a tantalizing aroma.

I’m doing it! I’m cooking!

“Don’t get too comfortable, m’lady. Ya gotta turn it from time to time so it doesn’t burn.”

“Oh, dear! I’d completely forgotten!”

Salamander’s words reminded me to check on the meat. It was a rather deep brown by now, and I supposed I should have been grateful that it wasn’t burnt completely yet. I turned the skewer as he’d instructed to toast the other side and was surprised to see how quickly it browned.

That ought to do it since it didn’t need cooking to be edible in the first place.

Putting the skewer somewhere away from the fire, I picked up the large, two-pronged fork I’d put the bread on and began to toast that too. Once the bread’s surface was a crisp, golden brown, I put it on a plate that I’d decided to have Alk hold for me.

In my head, Teiren whispered to me to grill some cheese and place it on the toast like the Onji of the Alps would. Taking her suggestion, I speared a generous chunk of cheese with a skewer.

“I am your pack mule now?” Alk snorted. “Are you perhaps starting to grow a big head, Fran?”

“If my memories are correct, grilling cheese is a race against time. I’d like you to taste it as soon as it is ready, Alk!”

“Oh? Well, I suppose I have no further complaints, then.”

The promise of eating something straight from the flame was powerful enough to tempt even the grumpiest dragon! However, the pressure was on now for me to get this right.

“To quote an ancient Shinsengumi captain, ‘Cook, fail immediately.’”

I wasn’t sure what Teiren was talking about, but Alk’s eyes were locked on me, and I could certainly feel the overwhelming anticipation in his gaze. Steeling my resolve, I brought the cheese closer to the fire. Both of us watched as the bright red flames warmed the chunk of yellow cheese and rounded its corners. The clear liquid dripping from it must have been fat. While there had been a strong smell of fermentation when I had cut it, that smell was now gradually

being replaced by a nutty aroma and the sweet fragrance of milk. I was under no illusions about the effect it would have on Alk.

The cheese was simmering nonstop, and the heat of the flames popped the bubbles of fat that were beading up on its browned surface. It was melting faster than I had expected, and I had to turn the skewer continuously to keep up! My constant efforts allowed the cheese to maintain its shape for some time, but even so, it couldn't hold out against the fiery heat forever. It was starting to collapse and began oozing heavily from its very center...

"Alk!" I called out.

"Coming!"

He immediately knew what I wanted and held out his plate of still-steaming fresh toast. I dropped the melty cheese onto it—it spread out over the bread's surface until it was completely hidden by cheese.

I gave him a look giving him permission to go ahead and eat while I started on the next slice of bread—one that would be my portion! As I turned my bread to brown it evenly, I saw Alk's shining eyes as he took the first bite of his breakfast. He kept nibbling at it, trying to catch every string of cheese that threatened to escape him. As mature as his facial features were, they looked rather adorable at times like this. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe them as "childlike." Again, natural beauty and all that...

"This is exquisite!" he cried. "I could never tire of it! Given that this was your first attempt, Fran, I shall have to admit that you are rather skilled!" Having made short work of his thick-slice toast, he gave me a contented smile. "I'm so pleased you like it!"

I supposed this meant I could be proud of my first attempt at cooking!

"M'lady, m'lady! Ya gotta keep turnin' your bread or it'll burn!"

"I completely forgot again!" I cried. "My bread!"

The edges of the slice were now a rather dark brown. I had been too quick to let my guard down!

Perhaps I ought to just move on to the cheese and promise that I'll do better

with the bread next time.

But perhaps I was forgetting that I was still a beginner and that this was no easy task. Sure, I had burned the edges of the bread a little bit, but that was all. This was my first time cooking anything, so this wasn't too much of a disaster, right?

Salamander had picked up a plate in his mouth and brought it to me. I put the toast—which was just a bit *too* golden brown now—on it and set about grilling my cheese. The aroma it released as it heated up was making my stomach rumble. Watching the cheese melt was also a sight to behold, and I would bet that a restaurant that made a show of grilling cheese and adding it to a diner's food as they watched would prove surprisingly popular.

The cheese's corners rounded, and I could see it becoming stringy before my very eyes. Desperate not to lose any of those strings to the flames, I kept on rotating the skewer. As soon as the center of the cheese started to get soft, I put it on top of my bread. The cheese flowed over it like molten gold. It looked so incredibly delicious!

Brimming with excitement, I picked up the slice. However...there was something about all this that seemed a little unrefined. Salamander had plopped himself down next to me, and I found myself turning in his direction. After all, he had a knack for making me more assertive.

"It is best to eat this while it is still hot, yes?" I asked.

Salamander seemed to sense my desperation. His vermilion eyes softened. "You got it! Gotta gobble it all up before the cheese gets tough!" he said, opening his bright red mouth in a huge smile.

With that, the matter was settled! Careful not to let the cheese drip, I let my teeth sink into the crisp, crunchy slice of toast. The bread had claimed to have been made with only the finest wheat, and I could well believe it with the flavor that was currently filling my mouth. The dry, toasted surface had a light taste, but once I'd broken through it, I was met with the fluffy, spongy insides beneath.

Then, the incredibly creamy cheese came in to flood my tongue! The lightness of the bread and the weighty cheese... It was a diabolical combination! My

inconsistent knife skills meant that the bread's thickness was uneven throughout the slice, but that made it delicious in its own right as it added variety to its texture and flavor.

I think I did a good job!

I couldn't help but squeal in delight.

"Well, Fran? Can you understand my reaction now?"

"This is incredibly dangerous!" I said. "I might forget that my stomach has a limit and keep eating!"

I looked at Alk as he'd had the pleasure of making this profound discovery before I could. He was sitting in front of an empty plate with his chin resting on his hand, and the corners of his lips were turned up into a grin. I didn't realize he had been watching me, and I hurriedly covered my mouth as I nodded repeatedly in response to his question. I was glad that we were of the same mind!

The roast ham, too, was so delicious that one would never imagine it had simply been grilled over an open flame! The meat was so moist and tender that it took almost no effort at all to bite through, even if I had cut it a little too thick. And yet it still had that *bite* to it that was unique to meat! Each subsequent chew led to more and more addictive juices washing out over my tongue.

The ham's fattier parts had also been fried until they were crispy. The meat as a whole had just the right amount of salt, making it far too easy to keep on eating. I was sure that cooking some of the fat out of it had also helped to that end.

With all that in mind, the cheesy toast with a slice of ham on top was, well...slightly overpowering. I needed something to soothe my taste buds, and so I had a sip of the cold brew tea I had ordered.

"My! It's even more refreshing than I had expected!"

As the sweet, floral liquid slid down my throat, it washed away all of the excess fat lingering in my mouth. Its subtle bitter aftertaste made my taste buds tingle, resetting my palate as if I hadn't eaten anything at all. These cold brew

teas certainly had excellent flavors! They were the perfect accompaniments to a meal!

“Fran, is there any more meat, cheese, and bread?”

“Yes, there is plenty. Shall I make you another helping?”

“Please do. My stomach still has space.” Alk looked to be in high spirits as he held out his empty plate to me, and I couldn’t help but feel just as pleased as well!

That said, it had just struck me that toasting cheese on a skewer was rather difficult. I searched the memories of the ghost Teiren, who would whisper in my ear at every opportunity she got. There, I found...that I could just as well have used a frying pan! My past self was insisting that grilled cheese sandwiches *needed* the cheese to be grilled on a skewer, and I felt unbearably smug as I shoved her words into one corner of my mind. Then, I ordered a frying pan that claimed to have a long-lasting nonstick coating on it.

Goodness me! I wish Teiren had told me that there was a much easier way!

She might have preferred an adventurous method, but I preferred a convenient one! I then prepared the same meal with the frying pan and made it completely without incident! *Without incident!* And I certainly didn’t get impatient and almost burn myself in the process! Not. At. All. And I certainly didn’t touch the pan’s edge accidentally, leading me to require an exasperated Alk to use healing magic on me. How could I make such mistakes when I had Teiren’s memories to rely on?

Or so I thought. But as it turned out, there was quite a difference between having a memory of something and trying it for oneself.

Salamander jumped up onto my shoulder and nuzzled his head against my cheek to comfort me. “No one gets it right their first time! I think ya did pretty well!”

I had to hang my head at that and sighed. “I hoped that I wouldn’t be quite so clumsy. I really did!”

“There must be some disconnect between your memories and your physical body. I suppose you will just have to keep practicing,” Alk said.

I must have seemed miserable indeed as both Salamander and Alk were quick in their attempts to lift my spirits...but that only made me feel worse! Nevertheless, Alk was right—I would just have to work to gradually bridge the gap between my memories and my physical skills. I was managing just fine for now, but there was no telling what I might have to do next...

Also, among Teiren's memories was something she called a "kitchen garden." It seemed rather interesting! Wouldn't it be amazing to be able to grow food yourself?

I had lots to do and tons to tackle, but I was enjoying myself immensely! I slapped my cheeks to top up my motivation and then gazed at the altar, which was still acting as our table.

The first thing I had to deal with was our waste disposal problem.

"I wonder what we should do with these empty glass bottles?" I wondered out loud.

There were bottles from the two sets of cold brew tea I'd ordered and a smaller olive oil bottle from the carpaccio set. I didn't think that Salamander could use them for mana in the same way he could use paper-based packaging. Burying them would mean they'd be there forever, but melting them with Salamander's flames might not have been a better solution either. I supposed my only choice might have been to sacrifice some space in my infinity to store them.

"M'lady. Are ya wantin' to get rid of those?"

"Indeed, but I am unsure of the best way to do so."

Salamander seemed to have detected the improvement in my mood. He hopped off of my shoulder to the altar and sniffed the bottles before turning his vermilion eyes back to me. Exposed to his flames, the colored glass cast dark, flickering shadows. They were rather pretty.

I considered breaking the bottles and making mosaic tiles with the pieces, but I wasn't sure where I'd procure the so-called "cement" that I'd need. It wasn't used for culinary purposes, so I couldn't order it. Another memory I found suggested that I could remove the bottoms and repurpose them as flowerpots,

but I didn't know how one was supposed to cut glass either.

Salamander looked between me and the bottles before he suddenly hummed a tune. "I think the hermit likes this sorta stuff. Want me to call him?"

"The hermit?" I asked.

Alk grunted, looking as fed up as I was puzzled. "Oh, he's far too fussy, though."

Oh dear. And just when breakfast had put him in a much better mood too... I wonder what relationship he has with this "hermit."

Alk's grumblings aside, it sounded as though this person might be able to help with our bottle situation. I thought it was worth hearing him out, at the very least.

While I was still mulling things over, Salamander hopped off the altar and slapped the ground with his front feet. He wasn't drawing a magic circle, and the ground before the altar looked completely unremarkable. I wasn't sure what he was doing, so I was confused.

"Hermit! I know you're there!" Salamander cried out. His voice and the slapping of his feet resounded through the shrine.

The sight of a lizard as large as he was shouting and striking the ground was... Well, it seemed rather perilous, to say the least. However, as he continued, I could see magic twisting and gathering at his feet.

Was he *summoning* something? And without the use of a circle or anything?! I brought my hands up to my mouth in amazement but kept my eyes peeled. I didn't want to miss seeing this!

Then, there was a *poof*, and a thick cloud of dust materialized.

"Can't you keep your voice down, Salamander? You're disturbing your neighbors." This new person's voice was deeper and gentler than I had expected.

"Wait, who...? That silhouette looks human..."

The dust settled to reveal a young man with a meek-looking face adorned with a monocle with a golden chain. His dark, classical attire and his monocle

truly suited him! He was about half as tall as I was. He didn't seem to be a dwarf, however.

The man lifted his monocle, and his hazel eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Alk. He didn't seem the slightest bit intimidated by him, however, despite the fact that he was not even half as tall as the dragon.



“Oh, now *there’s* a surprise,” he said. “I did wonder what you’d called me for, Salamander, but I see now that the dragon has awakened.”

Alk snorted. “And I suppose you’ve amassed countless accomplishments during my slumber, Gnome?”

“As argumentative as ever, aren’t we? Have you grasped the concept of getting up at a reasonable time yet? You are an ancient dragon. Must I remind you *again* of the standards that you—”

“I *knew* this would be an utter waste of time!” Alk yelled.

I had never seen a hermit before, but this man certainly seemed to fit the part. There wasn’t the slightest hesitation in his eloquent speech! Excited, Teiren compared him to an “Edo-period landlord.” I wondered what in particular it was about him that had struck a chord with her.

Moreover, if Alk was to be believed, this was a gnome—an earth spirit. If that was the case, I could understand why he’d spoken to the dragon in the way that he had. Speaking of Alk, he was shaking his head beside me, looking most put out and fed up. Clearly, he resented being told off by Gnome.

At last, the hermit noticed my presence. “My, what have we here? Are you a human, young lady?” Gnome’s eyes softened as he smiled at me.

It was only then that I realized that I’d been frozen in place, overwhelmed by what was going on in front of me. I hurriedly grabbed my skirt and bowed my head. “Oh, please excuse me! It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Francheska, and I am most fortunate to have been offered a place to stay at this shrine.”

“No need for the formalities. It makes me feel awkward.” There was a chuckle rumbling in his throat, and I didn’t feel like he was scolding me as he had Alk. Perhaps, at the root of it all, he was as genial as his appearance suggested.

Meanwhile, Salamander had made his way over to the altar and jumped up onto it. “Long time no see, hermit! We were hopin’ we could bend your ear for a spell.”

“Well, isn’t this a bolt from the blue? Speaking of which, Salamander, I must

have told you of the importance of pacing yourself until I was blue in the face. You cannot just assume someone will be happy to do you a favor.” Gnome’s hands were on his hips and he was giving the lizard a hard stare from behind his monocle. He really did give off the impression of one who was fed up with more worldly beings, especially when he began to wag a haughty finger in the spirit’s direction.

“Yeesh! Ya can lecture me all ya like *later!*”

As for Salamander, he had a strong will of his own. I could hardly believe that he was waving a dismissive front foot at Gnome and cutting him off before he had finished speaking! Gnome heaved an exasperated sigh, which the fire spirit responded to with little more than a glance. Instead, he started rolling the empty tea bottles over the altar.

Oh, right.

I had almost forgotten that the question of what to do about the bottles had been what started all this in the first place. *Why had Salamander summoned Gnome for those?* I wondered. I watched the bottles roll around, and that was when the hermit seemed to notice them too. And just like that, all the sharpness in his eyes vanished! Instead, they began to sparkle with curiosity!

“Goodness, goodness, goodness me!” he cried. “Now *that* is some exquisite glasswork! It has been some time since I have come to the surface. How long have they been producing such gems for?”

“Uh... Um...” I stammered, which was all I could manage.

“Come, young lady, and feast your eyes on this! See how the smooth surface has not a single imperfection? The thickness is so uniform. And these have color *and* transparency! Isn’t progress just wonderful?”

“Um, excuse me, but—”

“They are just so *beautiful!* I remember how rough and warped the glassworks that humans first produced were, but *these...* Identical bottles! And so many of them!”

Word vomit. Was that the phrase I was looking for? It was impossible for me to get a word in edgewise...

I had the sense that Gnome liked objects that had been crafted by hand. He was picking up each bottle and gazing at it, poring over it and sharing his thoughts with me as he went. The only snag was that they likely *weren't* made by human hands, but by automated machinery... Although I supposed you could make an argument to the contrary, given that the machines *would* have been made by humans and that humans had to control the process to a certain degree... While I felt like I normally should've pointed this out to Gnome, wiping that joyful smile from his face would have made me feel awful. It was perhaps more pertinent that those bottles weren't even made in this world!

"Did you bring these articles here, young lady?" he asked.

"Oh, er...yes. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that I ordered them using my skill."

A curious light flashed in the eye behind Gnome's monocle, and he scuttled up to me with a bottle in his hand.

I immediately began to panic. I wasn't sure how to begin explaining everything! My mind whirled as I faced the overbearing gnome, who seemed as if he became blind to everything else once an obsession struck him.

Somehow, Salamander and I managed to convince him to calm down, and after that, I was able to explain the events of the past few days.

"I see, so these sacrificial rituals still persist in human culture... How utterly heartrending." Gnome took a moment to reposition his monocle as it had been starting to slip. He looked sorrowful indeed.

Apparently, he had spent the past few hundred years underground and had been under the assumption that the barbaric Flower Offering was no longer in practice. This was his first time on the surface in centuries, and he had found himself face-to-face with one of the sacrifices. It was no wonder that he was shocked. Incidentally, I did ask why he had become a hermit, and he answered with nothing more than a meaningful smile. Admittedly, when I pictured a hermit, I had imagined someone much older.

Still holding one of the tea bottles in his hand, Gnome frowned. "However, had the custom *truly* fallen out of practice, I would never have cast my eyes on such artifacts, so overall, I am rather conflicted. In any case, I am simply glad to

know that you are alive.”

I nodded at him quietly. “Thank you. I share the same sentiment very keenly. I have been incredibly fortunate.”

He’d had a point. Had I not been chosen as the flower of my generation, this world would have never experienced the items that existed in the other. Meanwhile, Gnome seemed to be struggling to weigh his emotions on the scales. On the one hand, humans were still following a detestable custom that took life needlessly. On the other, he seemed genuinely pleased to be encountering such rare objects. The fact remained, though, that the “flowers” sent before me had been killed by those goblin-like monsters before they had even reached Alk. If I hadn’t been capable of using magic, I would have likely met the same end.

It was all rather solemn.

Then, I heard a heavy sigh—Alk’s. “There is nothing to be done about the past,” he said. “The souls in question have passed on and may return to the cycle of death and rebirth.”

“I suppose you have a point there. I shall pray that they have found peace.”

Whatever the case, I had no doubt that Alk knew more about such things than I did. I would have liked to think that the souls lost before me had found salvation. Gnome had closed his eyes quietly, and I found myself putting my hands together in preparation for prayer.

Salamander, however, practically ruined the solemn mood in an instant. “By the by, hermit, d’ya think ya could take them bottles home with ya?”

This had come from the distinguished spirit whose duty it was to maintain the flames in the shrine belonging to the King of the Underworld. I was rather shocked that he would dare to pull off something like that.

Salamander’s question had Alk narrowing his eyes suspiciously at Gnome—Gnome, who was *still* holding a bottle in his hand.

“I wouldn’t *dream* of leaving them here!” he replied. “Glasswork of this caliber has yet to be found anywhere in this world!”

“You are as eccentric as they come. Most gnomes’ interests lie in items crafted with gold.”

“You are mistaken, dragon. Metal, sand, and limestone are all minerals. I am of the opinion that crafting with glass is just as legitimate as crafting with gold as they both stem from said minerals,” Gnome explained. There was a delighted smile on his face as he snapped his fingers, and all at once, the bottle in his hand as well as those lined up on the altar vanished.

Was that what Salamander had in mind when he decided to call upon the hermit? I wondered. Now that I thought of it, I had read—or perhaps had heard—that earth spirits such as gnomes were knowledgeable about ores and all things that came from the ground. They also excelled at handiwork to boot. It seemed that Gnome had recognized the glass bottles as something to be cherished. And it was indeed true that glass was originally made from minerals, so it was very apt that it would therefore be returned to an earth spirit.

“To think that I would be presented with such fine works... Truly, longevity is a blessing. Incidentally, young lady, would you happen to have anything in a slightly different shape?” There was a teasing glimmer in Gnome’s eye as he looked in my direction.

“Differently shaped glass bottles, you mean? Well, not on hand, but my skill means I potentially have access to countless bottles!” I said, and I had summoned the tablet before I knew it.

Alk was giving me a look as if warning me not to spoil Gnome. However, the hermit’s eyes were so full of anticipation and curiosity that I couldn’t resist! Besides, we didn’t have any drinks left, so I’d been about to order some more anyway.

Feeling three pairs of eyes on me, I tapped and swiped on the tablet’s screen and navigated to the drinks section. Everyone was immediately drawn in by the sight. Alk was behind me, Salamander was on my shoulder, and Gnome stood in front of me, but they were all peering at the screen.

Now, what to order?

As I continued to swipe through the offerings, I felt very much like I was flipping through the pages of a book. My goal was to find something in an

interestingly shaped bottle!



There were plenty of bottles with interesting shapes in the alcoholic section, including those that looked like fish or other animals. It was entertaining enough just looking at them. I had never drunk alcohol in my life, so I couldn't discern each product's quality. If I recalled correctly, there were no age restrictions in place regarding alcohol consumption in this world—I just hadn't had any. Teiren *had*, but she also said that she'd never drunk anything that came in such an unusual bottle. In the end, I made a selection based on a combination of her knowledge and my gut feeling...

"I see that this other world really *does* possess an advanced level of craftsmanship!"

"Not that I have had the opportunity to observe it for myself, but apparently, their machine technology is highly developed," I said.

"My, how fascinating..." Gnome said. His hazel eyes that had been glued to the screen were now fixed firmly on me. They seemed to be concocting something as they looked up at me from below.

Perhaps I should have kept that information to myself...

"I am a little curious, young lady. About you."

"Me? I apologize if I have inadvertently done something to offend you..."

"No, no, nothing like that. What I'm feeling is closer to concern..." the hermit said as he pushed up his monocle.

All I could do was blink at him. There was a mix of intense affection and anxiety in his eyes, and I didn't know what to say. After all, it had been so long since anyone had been concerned for me. The feeling left me with the sensation that my chest could burst with something between joy and embarrassment.

"Were you perhaps deceived into coming here?" he asked. "Have you got any plans for your future?"

"Hey, I was wonderin' the same thing! Your skill sure is handy, m'lady, but ya

wouldn't wanna be trapped here for all time just 'cause of us and Lord Alkerag over there!" Salamander said, taking on a much more chipper tone than Gnome.

Was there anything I especially hoped to achieve? I had only just gained my freedom. I had barely had the time to think about anything, so I didn't have any...

"Gardening..." I said.

"And what might that entail exactly?" Alk asked, tilting his head to one side.

"I think I'd like to have a garden. Well, a kitchen garden... I wouldn't mind trying to grow something."

In truth, I was surprised to have come out with the idea myself. It must have come from Teiren's memories. Images of the "tomatoes" and "eggplants" her mother had grown in the garden flashed through my mind. She would water the plants and remove the weeds under the clear blue sky. Taking care of another life just seemed like so much fun.

Gnome's face lit up and he clapped his hands together. "That sounds like a wonderful idea! As an earth spirit, I'm sure I could be of help!"

"Oh! Are you sure?"

"I certainly am. Especially in exchange for these wonderful containers. Just leave the *ground* work to me!"

Of course a gnome would feel right at home with some gardening to do. I couldn't have asked for a more suitable helper!

"I could even call Undine and Sylph if you'd like. The more the merrier, yes?"

Salamander let out a fiery splutter. "There's no need for *them* to be involved, is there, hermit?!"

Gnome smiled. "Come now, Salamander, plants require both wind and water."

Undine and Sylph were the names of two more elemental spirits. Would they be making an appearance as well?!

“I wouldn’t get them involved, Fran. It is difficult to stop them when they get started,” Alk muttered indignantly from his seat on the altar.

“Oh? I suppose spirits *are* rather powerful...”

Indeed, I had nearly found myself swept away by Gnome’s powerful enthusiasm. I hadn’t expected such vitality from a spirit.

I went ahead and ordered the bottles. As they landed nearby, I found myself wondering whether the heated argument between Salamander and Gnome really was impossible to stop. But then, the earth spirit found the fish-shaped vessel and picked it up to inspect it from every angle. He paused as if remembering something and turned to look at, of all people, me.

“You know, if you *do* wish to summon Sylph, I think she will appreciate a pleasant breeze. And some pure water for Undine,” he said. His hazel eyes prompted me to think up a way to produce those things.

A pleasant breeze and pure water...

“I’m sure I can come up with *something*...” I said.

“I can see how you might procure water. But wind?” Alk asked.

“I can’t be entirely certain yet, but if I use my skill...”

I summoned my tablet, leading the dragon to lean in and peer at the screen with curious eyes. Salamander had hopped up onto my shoulder too. Even he was breathing quickly, and his big, round eyes were glistening. Of course, Gnome also had his gaze locked on me, watching my every action. I could feel their stares piercing into me as I navigated the menus on the screen with my fingers, only stopping when I found what I was looking for at last.

“Oh, here it is! This should do for water, shouldn’t it?”

I pressed a button to confirm my order, and a number of colorful bottles made a series of sonorous clinks as they lined up on the altar. Their shades ranged from being perfectly colorless and transparent to a light cobalt hue. There was even a light peridot-green one, and another that had a gradient like the sky at dusk! This collection claimed to comprise the world’s most delicious water.

The arrival of new glass bottles elicited a blissful sigh from Gnome. “Goodness! Yet more glass in wonderful shades! Young lady, I am constantly blown away by the technology of this world of yours.”

Meanwhile, Salamander’s reaction was more of a groan. He grimaced and waved one of his front feet dismissively. “Water? What a waste...”

Salamander’s reaction was the total opposite of Gnome’s, but then again, Salamander was a fire spirit, and Undine was a water spirit. Perhaps there was nothing to be done about their incompatibility.

“Anyhow, that plank of yours really does come out with anythin’ ya could dream of, huh, m’lady?” Salamander sounded just a touch sulky as he wiggled his tail.

I couldn’t help but smile slightly at his childishness. “Well...if only that were exactly the case. It would be much more convenient then.”

It could conjure anything having to do with food and the kitchen, but that was where the line was drawn. Having said that, what if I were able to level up my skill...? Maybe the scope of what I could order would increase. Wouldn’t that be rather exciting?

Now that the water was taken care of, it was time to come up with some wind.

As I scrolled through the screen, I started to daydream about some of the things I wanted to achieve. “Once we have found a way to start gardening, I think I would like to make an attempt at DIY...” I murmured to myself.

Alk seemed to overhear me. “‘Dee-eye-why’? And what might that be?” He was currently downing wine straight from the bottle. It ought to have been a frightful sight, but he somehow pulled it off.

“It stands for ‘do it yourself.’ I believe it’s similar to carpentry...”

I envisioned that it might be fun to use tools to create shelves, a desk, or a flowerbed, to give some examples.

“Carpentry? You strike me as far too clumsy to be capable of such a thing.”

Frustrated, I groaned. “I’m talking about at some point in the future! I don’t

expect to be a master at it *now!*”

And I had yet to consider my aptitude for it, thank you very much! There was no reason that Alk should frown at me so intensely! I was quite *aware* that I wasn’t as deft with my hands as I should like to be.

I ignored Alk’s smirk and went back to my tablet, and that was when I found just what I had been looking for. “Oh! I thought we would be out of luck because it’s not food, but look at these!”

Several cans appeared beside us in an instant, and Salamander frowned at them. “Huh? What’re these round things, m’lady?”

I giggled and picked one up to show him. “*These* are exactly what I was searching for: canned air!” Naturally, the can was light in my hands, as if it were empty. “This is a can of ice-cold air from a snowy mountain. And this one contains a wind that has blown through a row of cherry blossom trees in full bloom. As for *this* one, it contains air from the turn of the imperial era!”

Gnome had been completely engrossed in the liquor bottles, but he must have picked up on the sense of curiosity in the air. “I’m sorry?” he asked. “You are telling me that there is *air* trapped inside those metal tins?”

“Precisely. Although I am fairly certain that these are gag products...” I admitted.

Gnome picked the cans piled up on the altar one by one and scrutinized each in turn.

“It astounds me that you can procure even *this*...but air will do nothing to satisfy an empty stomach,” Alk reminded me.

“But there is a sense of elegance to it, don’t you think?” I said. “Take this can that may be filled with the scent of flowers, for instance.”

“Elegance cannot satisfy an empty stomach either.” Alk picked up a can between his fingers and snorted derisively at it. It seemed like he wasn’t one for style over sustenance—not that I would have expected anything different!

“I had underestimated you, young lady! To think you would indeed manage to procure both water *and* air!” Gnome exclaimed excitedly. His hands were now

full of cans.

“This’ll hook ’em both,” Salamander said, prodding a bottle of water. “They’ll come runnin’, no question about it.”

“That would be an honor!” I said.

They both seemed confident, so now, I was hopeful that Sylph and Undine would indeed be joining us. Gnome had responded to Salamander’s summons, so if they worked together to call the other two, I was sure it’d be a success!

“You look a little intimidated, Fran. Why not create a spiritorium?” Alk suggested brusquely.

I turned to see that he was staring at me with some indignation. While I was excited, my trepidation must have been plain on my face. “I haven’t heard of that before. What is it?” I asked. Whatever it was, I had the sense that Alk was trying to offer some advice.

“Hmmm... I wonder how many decades it has been since I last heard someone mention a spiritorium?” Gnome asked playfully.

Alk snorted and averted his gaze but otherwise remained silent.

“A spiritorium’s like a miniature garden where ya create the kinda environments we spirits like best!” Salamander explained with a swish of his tail.

“Essentially, they are built with the four elements in mind—earth, wind, water, and air,” Gnome said.

“Really? I had no idea such a thing existed!”

A miniature garden! It sounded awfully exciting, even just from the brief description I’d been given. I was sure I could make a rather stylish one if I were to put my mind to it. First, I would need a box for the garden’s base, as well as containers for the components that would create the various elemental environments. And to do that, I wanted to use parts that would make it look good...and that was when inspiration struck!

The method I had in mind wasn’t quite sophisticated enough to be called ‘DIY,’ but it would certainly scratch the itch I had of wanting to *make*

something.

“I can order a greater variety of items than I thought I could!” I said.

I wasted no time in tracking down and purchasing what was on my mind—a sizable, fancy lunch box and a blue-tinted glass bottle. After that, I ordered several party candles too. Items dropped down around me one after the other each time I pressed the button to order.

The black lacquered lunch box had fallen into my lap. “Let’s see... If I pile up some soil at the edge to create a mound and then place the glass of water opposite...” I muttered to myself as I held it up to eye level. As I did so, I could feel the piercing gazes of everyone around me!

I took the spiritorium to be something similar to a talisman in some ways, meaning that it was sacred. Because of that, I wanted to pay attention to the details while constructing one.

“I can put my imagination to work all I like, but nothing will happen until I roll up my sleeves and take a stab at it! Experience is the best teacher!” I said as I jumped down from the altar and reached down eagerly to scoop up some dirt.

“Wait a moment, Fran!” Alk shouted. His voice was unusually sharp.

My hands stopped just inches from the ground.

Alk stood up from the altar, took my hand, and pulled me back up. I looked up into his eyes. Unless it was my imagination, they looked awfully strict.

Did I cross a line of some sort?

I tried to say something, but no words came out. My mouth just opened and closed helplessly.

Alk let out a long sigh. “Never have I heard of a lady who would dig up dirt with her bare hands! Did it not cross your mind to use a tool?”

“Oh... I’m very sorry that you had to see me behave in such an unsightly manner.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘unsightly’...but I doubt that you would have had much success scooping anything up with those tiny hands,” he said as his perfect eyebrows knitted together.

He was completely correct, of course! My hands would've been totally ineffective for digging in the tough soil. Now that I thought of it, tools would also be an issue to overcome with regard to my desire to garden. It had slipped my mind... Was there anything I could order that might be good for digging?

Though lamentable, I suppose I have no choice...

"Sometimes, sacrifices just have to be made! And...ordered!"

As guilty as it had made me feel, I had ordered a single large serving spoon in hopes that I could use it for digging instead. I didn't like the idea of ignoring its intended purpose, but right now, I wanted to make the most of building my first spiritorium! After all, there was no telling when I might get another opportunity.

When I pressed the spoon into the dirt at my feet, I was surprised at how little resistance I felt.

"I had thought it would be tougher to dig than this... Not that I'm complaining!"

I spooned dirt into the lunch box, forming a pile. I then continued to scoop up more and more, adding each spoonful to the pile. After that, I placed the light blue glass on the opposite edge of the box, put a can of air in a corner to one side of the glass, and a party candle in the corner on the other side.

Gnome watched my handiwork and nodded approvingly. "Your arrangement is most impressive for a beginner."

"I'm so glad you think so!"

His reaction was highly reassuring and meant I wasn't making any major mistakes. As I continued to place items, trying to make a balanced environment, I could feel two pairs of interested eyes following my movements. While Alk's eyes weren't one of those pairs, his constant glances could not have been more obvious. He was clearly losing the fight against his curiosity.

"It would be nice if I could add flowers or moss balls to make it look more attractive," I said.

"Too bad we're in a cave. Ya could probably hunt down some moss, but I

dunno about flowers,” Salamander said, peering at my work.

“I suppose readying those would be a long-term project. Although this is likely the only spiritorium I shall ever make...”

It was already all but finished too. Thanks to the dirt, it was overwhelmingly brown—only the ornaments I’d added had given it any color. There weren’t any flowers in our vicinity, however, so I supposed that there was nothing to be done on that front.

I was just about to let out a disappointed sigh when inspiration struck!

“I know! I can use my skill!” I exclaimed.

My trump card was perfect for the job, and I had almost forgotten about it! I buzzed with excitement as I swiftly summoned my tablet. I was going to order some colorful edible flowers so I could decorate the spiritorium.

“I knew it! It looks so much more vibrant now!”

It certainly helped that I had ordered a wide variety of colors, including red, pink, white, yellow, orange, blue, and purple... Combined with the green of the leaves, the spiritorium had quickly become that much more lively!

“I see,” Gnome said, nodding. “You have created a spiritorium that makes the most of your skill.”

“Yes,” I said. “I thought the spirits might be intrigued to know that I’m capable of ordering such things.”

He chuckled. “Both Sylph and Undine do have a fondness for curios. I am sure this will capture their interest.”

A beautiful glass filled with refreshing water. A curious can and flowers that stayed in full bloom, no matter the season. All of these things had been procured by my skill. I sincerely hoped that the spirits might be interested enough in these to grace us with their presence.

Gnome, who had been keeping a watchful eye on the spiritorium’s progress from the very beginning, pushed up his monocle and smiled. Hopefully, that meant it had his seal of approval. “A spiritorium is never complete, even after it has been built. There is always much to be done, like changing the flowers each

season or rearranging the items,” he explained.

“My, I suppose you’re right! I’d better dedicate myself to my gardening so I can eventually add the flowers I’ve grown.”

I was certain that I was doing a poor job of hiding my excitement. Otherwise, Gnome wouldn’t have gone out of his way to point that out to me. My spiritorium could develop and grow through my efforts! If my gardening went well and I managed to cultivate some flowers, I would add a few as extra decorations. Either way, I was rather proud of my miniature garden, considering it was my first attempt!

“All I need to do now is pour the water into the glass and open the can of air,” I said.

I removed the metal cap from the bottle and tilted it over the ocean-colored glass, which filled up with a gentle *glug glug*. Teiren was elated and compared it to pouring a glass of beer at dinnertime. Alcohol certainly seemed to be a source of joy for her.

I let out a sigh—partially out of relief—as I gazed at the little world I’d created. Salamander walked over to the colorful party candle and set it alight with a quick exhale.

“Wow! The flame makes it give off a completely different impression! Thank you, Salamander!”

He chortled and puffed out his chest. “Don’t sweat it! Breathing fire’s as easy as fallin’ off a log!” Then, he nuzzled his cheek against me for good measure—it tickled a bit.

“Mm. I would say that is quite the result for a novice,” Alk said.

“The young lady deserves more praise than that, dragon. This is an excellent spiritorium for a first try. You ought to be more up-front with your opinions.”

“You and your tiresome lectures!” Alk shot back at Gnome.

At least the two of them were having a lively conversation...though I was using the term very loosely. Gnome had one hand on his hip and was wagging his finger, while Alk looked most fed up and bared his fangs. Seeing this was like

witnessing a quarrel between a parent and child—though Alk, the larger of the two, was the one being scolded. I had to admit that it was rather adorable...

“There they go again.” Salamander sighed, exasperated. He started to swish his tail. “Hey, hermit! Ain’tcha gonna call the others?”

“Ah. Forgive me, Salamander. I had almost forgotten.” Gnome then turned toward us at last. Putting a bashful hand to his head, he came over to inspect the spiritorium, which was now complete with flame. “Sylph!” he called into it. “Oh, Sylph! If you can hear me, would you mind gracing us with your presence? There is a young lady here who I think you will find quite fascinating.”

“Uh-huh! And the same goes for *you*, Undine! Come say hi! Or what, ya got somethin’ better to do?”

Gnome’s polite calls and Salamander’s assertive shouts resounded through the cave. Perhaps because of the high ceiling, the sounds bounced off the rock face and echoed for a while before eventually fading away. It was almost like their echoing voices were made up of tiny droplets that let out bursts of glittering stardust with each reverberation.

Meanwhile, Alk sidled up to me and brought his lips close to my ear. “Fran, if there’s anything you wish to order, I would do so now. Undine—and well, Sylph too—are much like Gnome. Once they start talking, it is exceedingly difficult to make them stop.”

“Good idea. Thank you! I probably ought to order something sweet, something savory...and some more alcohol and drinks.”

Such valuable advice! And doubly so if the spirits were really that talkative. I preferred to have refreshments ready ahead of time rather than having to interrupt them. Fortunately, I still had plenty of points left, so there was no need to compromise! And if Sylph and Undine did join us, we’d be six...“people” strong, essentially. I was sure that nothing would go to waste even if I made a large order.

Now that that’s settled—

“Why, hermit, whatever is the matter? Normally you give me some warning before calling on me like this.”

“Yeesh! Did you guys really hafta make such a racket? I could hear you just fine!”

A series of thumps on the altar marked the arrival of my order just as our guests made their appearances. One of them had a gentle, flowing voice, while the other’s was clear and bright.

Could it be?!

The air just above the spiritorium seemed to twist before a graceful figure suddenly emerged.

“Goodness! Were we summoned by a human child? By no means was I expecting *that!*”

The voice would’ve led me to envision a kindly woman, but instead, a large bird with fluttering, light green plumage was floating in the air. A pair of large, elegant wings were attached to her body. She had long eyelashes and a crest on top of her head. Though her coloring was different, she resembled a long-feathered secretary bird. All of this led me to assume she was Sylph.

After flying one rotation in the air, the bird came down to land on the altar. She had long, slender legs, and I must say that she was rather gorgeous! There was even a dignity about the way she preened herself.

While Sylph had me enraptured, the water in the glass inside the spiritorium started to ripple. The liquid at the center of those circles rose up...

“You called us? Imagine that! Human kids are a rare sight on this island.”

The small glass of water had given rise to transparency in human form. The figure had sparkling eyes and her skin was so pale it was almost translucent. Her long hair started off light blue, but it gradually changed into a shade as dark as the ocean’s most ancient depths.

And this must be Undine.

Undine floated up into the air and circled around me. Her cute, inquisitive face came close to me and tilted quizzically. “It’s like Sylph said. This place is so remote that we don’t see a lot of human beings. Are you the dragon’s bride?”

I couldn’t blame Undine for wondering that, but I really wasn’t sure how to

answer her question. After all, in a sense, I was—that was the meaning behind the Flower Offering. But practically speaking, there were no plans for us to be wed, and he hadn't eaten me as a sacrifice either.

How do I explain this to her? Should I start explaining the festival's origins?

While I thought things through, the newcomers assaulted Alk with a barrage of questions.

"Nuisances, the pair of you!" he snapped back, and his bellow echoed through the cave. "Can you separate yourselves from your obsessions of romance for one second?!"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Unfortunately, there is nothing quite as exciting as a passionate love story! At least not to us."

"You got that right! I'd love to hear a good lovey-dovey tale. Otherwise, I might as well not've shown up!"



The dragon slapped his palm over his eyes. He truly did seem awfully put out by it all.

Either way, a hearty relationship between us would begin with a hearty greeting!

I turned to the squealing pair, lifted up my skirts, and curtsied. “Thank you so much for responding to my call. My name is Francheska.” I could feel their eyes, as beautiful as any gemstones, on my skin. “Meager as they may be, I have prepared some drinks and refreshments. Please feel free to make yourselves at home,” I said before raising my head and motioning to the altar.

“Goodness gracious me!” Sylph exclaimed. “How long must it have been since I have been offered such hospitality by a human?”

“Wow, look at this stuff! Tons of snacks and plenty of water! You prepared all this for *us*?” Undine cried.

They both sounded even more excited than they had been before.

Does that mean I’ve made them happy?

As I watched the jade-green and ocean-blue spirits press close together in joy, the tension finally began to lift from my shoulders.



How many times had I repeated this same exact explanation now? Although it was Sylph and Undine’s first time hearing it, as far as I was concerned, it had lost much of its novelty. Still, as they listened, they reacted with indignation and tears. It was truly heartening to be with those who would sympathize with me and share in my anger.

Sylph sat before her glass of cold green tea and looked at me with sorrow in her eyes. “It seems you have suffered quite the ordeal.”

“I have, but I am incredibly grateful to Alk for allowing me to live here by his side.”

Undine was enjoying a sweet water dumpling beside the wind spirit. “Course he did!” she said. “What kind of heartless monster would turn you away after hearing what you’ve been through?”

The items I had ordered were from a special selection of Japanese desserts and candies. Rice crackers, fried snacks, and items made with red beans... Savory or sweet, it didn't matter—our table was chock-full of them.

Right in front of me, Alk was munching on a fried manju bun with a pout on his face. He seemed to have a taste for both alcohol and sweets. Salamander seemed to like the roasted mochi pieces, which came in a variety of flavors. As for Gnome, he seemed partial toward the shrimp-flavored rice crackers. Undine was enjoying some red bean jelly and the soft kuzumochi rice cakes. Meanwhile, Sylph had been pecking away at the crispy bean kakimochi crackers for some time now. I was confident that the spirits were developing a fondness for Japanese snacks!

As for me...I had my eye on an unconventional variety of rice crackers. There was one type that held a smooth layer of red bean paste between two crisp crackers, and I found myself reaching out for one of those before I knew it. The way they tasted cycled through sweet, salty, sweet, salty... They were a diet's worst enemy!

"Are there no more of these peculiar doughnuts left, Fran?"

"Oh dear, are they all gone? Might I recommend this deep-fried bun together with this deep-fried mochi instead?" I suggested. "It is quite the devastating combination."

Alk grinned. "They *devastate* you, do they, Fran?" And with that, he snatched up the last fried bun.

I supposed I couldn't complain. My *raison d'être* was to satiate his appetite, after all, but he didn't need to snort at me like that! Puffing my cheeks out to make sure he knew I wasn't pleased with his teasing, I ordered us some more deep-fried buns and mochi.

"They are devastating indeed! The very sight of them makes me want to burst into tears!"

Alk genuinely seemed to be enjoying himself as he waved a deep-fried bun right in front of my face with a smile. "Really? The items you procured with your own skill have that much of a negative effect on you?"

I've got him now!

“Yes, exactly! I cannot bear to look at them, truly!” I said.

“Wh— Fran! How dare you?!”

Alk had let his guard down completely, allowing me to snatch the bun from his hand. It took him a split second to understand what had just happened, but by the time he cried out, it was too late. Before he could recover his snack, I'd already taken a bite!

The bun's crisp fried surface gave a satisfying crunch as I bit into it, while the inside was as soft as anything. The dough had a subtle sweetness to it and had been fried in a high-quality rice bran oil. In truth, I would have been happy enough if the whole snack had consisted of just its outer layer.

And speaking of devastating, how about that velvety bean paste filling?! It melted in your mouth, and I could think of no better companion to the rich flavor of the outside of the bun than the inside's unassuming sweetness.

After eating the whole bun, a hint of sweetness lingered inside my mouth. I followed that treat up with the salted, savory fried mochi. The result? The greatest bliss it was possible to experience in this world!

And while I was indulging in such pleasure, Alk was grinding his teeth!

“I-I thought you said they were devastating!” he said.

“Precisely. Which is why I decided to store them in my stomach—that way, I don't have to lay my eyes on them!”

“It pains me to say that sounds entirely logical!”

I kept my eyes on the frustrated dragon as I washed away the last vestiges of delicious joy from my mouth with some cold brew tea. As delicious as the snacks had been, they were still deep-fried. The aftertaste they left was inevitably heavy, which made for the perfect prelude to the slight bitterness of the green tea! I sighed happily after having drunk some down. Was this delicious enough to be described as “nectar”? To be honest, nothing so far had been as devastating as the tea—since it'd been allowed to steep longer than usual, it gave it a flavor that was quite strong.

From one corner of my mind, Teiren was telling me that Alk looked far more devastated than I was pretending to be. *Well, perhaps he should have thought twice before teasing me!* I thought. And besides, it wasn't as though our bun and mochi supplies were running low.

I heard a chuckle and turned to find Gnome looking both amused and exasperated.

"Honestly," he said. "Dragon, young lady, you two are squabbling like children!"

His remark brought me back to my senses. I had been far too concerned with getting back at Alk!

How embarrassing...

"Ah... It seems I forgot myself," I mumbled, my mind going blank.

"I don't see what's so bad 'bout that," Salamander said. "Means both of ya get along!" However, his comfort only served to show that I was a little more mortified than I'd thought.

Sylph, however, was chortling. "Well, I don't think we have to worry about any *real* discord between the two of them."

"It's great that you can rib each other. Way better than having to hold it all in, right?"

Even Sylph and Undine seemed to find us endearing, but their comments only made me feel even more awkward. *Where's the nearest hole? I need to hide myself away!*

Alk was eagerly finishing off his replacement bun and stared at me intently. "Incidentally, Fran, where were you intending on doing that gardening of yours?"

It was only when he had pointed it out that I realized I had only thought about the *idea* of gardening and not the practicalities, such as where to have it.

"Um... I was hoping that I might be able to borrow part of this space."

Salamander was shocked. "Huh?! Not to insult ya, m'lady, but how's about somewhere with a little more sunlight, eh?"

“I would have to agree. It is difficult for wind spirits such as myself to traverse caves,” Sylph said. “If nothing else, you might wish to consider somewhere with a short path to the outdoors.”

I had thought I might be able to grow simple plants here because of the basket fires, but it seemed that was naive. Both Salamander and Sylph were quick to correct me. I *was* aware that sunlight and wind would make for a better garden, but I just didn’t know where I could find a suitable place on this island.

“I realize now that I am all too unfamiliar with this cave’s layout, let alone the geography of the entire island,” I admitted.

Sylph looked up from her glass and swallowed her beakful of green tea. “Is that so?”

I nodded solemnly. “I was sent to the cave’s entrance by a teleportation spell cast by several other people, so I simply have no idea what else is here.”

Not only that, but I had immediately leaped inside without taking the time to scout out the area. My ignorance of where the sun hit the island was just one example of the knowledge I lacked. It was no wonder that I didn’t know where I wanted to plant my crops. All I knew was that we were—probably—in the deepest part of the cave. And I didn’t even know where on the island this cave was located!

Gnome was crunching on some fried mochi slices that he was sharing with Salamander. “Well then, dragon, why not give the young lady a tour of the island?”

The very prospect seemed to horrify Alk. The blood drained from his face. “Excuse me?” he barked. “Why should that duty fall to me?”

“That’s usin’ your noggin, Gnome! Ya were asleep a long time, right, Lord Alkerag? Probably ’bout time ya stretched those muscles,” Salamander agreed.

The dragon grunted. “My muscles are in prime condition, thank you very much.”

It seemed that the suggestion had truly taken him aback. That said, the fact remained that several generations of sacrifices had escaped his notice, which

meant that he had to have been dormant for at least a hundred—if not two hundred—years. That hardly seemed like a significant amount of time to the spirits since they were like an intrinsic part of nature, but I had to wonder how that compared to a dragon’s average lifespan. But as I was considering this, my feet suddenly lifted from the ground, and the view before me changed completely!

“Alk?!” I cried.

“I am no fool, and I shan’t allow myself to be made out as one. Watch closely, for I shall *not* be granting you this opportunity again!” he said.

His arm was digging into my stomach, making it slightly hard to breathe. It was only then that I realized he was holding me under one arm! I had carelessly forgotten how susceptible he was to goading...

“Alk, if... If you wouldn’t mind putting me down... I’m perfectly capable of walking!” I said.

Then, I raised my head to see Alk glaring at Gnome and Salamander.

With a grumpy snort, Alk began to swiftly stride toward the exit. His one arm was still holding all my weight—as a result, it was putting a lot of pressure on my body.

“Silence, Fran! I refuse to accept their ridicule. My dignity is at stake!”

“That may be so, but you’re hurting my stomach!” I cried.

Alk hesitated, then grumbled again. “I didn’t realize your discomfort. You humans are such fragile creatures.”

It seemed that my desperation had finally gotten through to him. He rearranged his grip so that he was supporting me with his arm under my rear, much like one would hold a toddler. While this meant that I was able to breathe properly, it was a whole new level of humiliating! Having said that, Alk offered me a quiet apology. I felt a little too awkward to make any further fuss, so in the end, I held my tongue.

Is it just my imagination, or are the other spirits watching us...fondly?

As a young human, perhaps I *was* like an infant from their perspective, but

that didn't make this any less embarrassing! What I wouldn't give for one of them to step in and put a stop to this! I supposed the only thing to do was distract myself from it all by focusing on observing my surroundings.

That should work as a means of escapism—even if it does nothing to solve the root of the problem!

"This path is wider and taller than I thought," I said.

"It is enough to accommodate me in my original form."

"Really?! Even as a full-size dragon?"

The way he was holding me meant that my viewpoint was a head above his. Even then, there was still some space between the top of my head and the cave's ceiling. As for the width, we could have easily walked side by side here. Moreover, although I had been too preoccupied to notice it on my arrival, the cave was rather complex, and various, narrower tunnels shot off in different directions. The path to the shrine was wide and easy to follow, but I would wager that wandering into one of those tunnels would run the risk of never coming out again!

"As I mentioned, Fran, I shall only be doing this once. Make sure you memorize everything."

"I-I will," I stammered out. "My apologies for burdening you with this."

Honestly speaking, I had still barely registered that we were on an expedition of the island, but Alk continued on relentlessly toward the cave's exit.

"Speaking for myself, I slept for such a long time that I do not know exactly *when* I fell asleep. This ought to help me readjust somewhat."

From the way his nose wrinkled slightly, it was safe to say that he still wasn't pleased, but I was relieved that he didn't seem to be taking his anger out on me. Before I knew it, I was able to spot a light at the end of the cave. We were almost there.

"Alk! Alk, look! I can see light!"

"Fran! Stop flailing!"

When I saw the blue sky, I thoughtlessly leaned forward from Alk's grip, so he

set me down on the ground. It felt as though I hadn't seen natural light in a long, long time, and I rushed toward it. To my eyes, the bright sun was glaring.

"Ah! It's dazzling!" I cried.

"It's...quite overwhelming!"

My eyes had gotten so used to the cave's gloom that they had become incredibly sensitive to the light. I threw my hands up in front of them immediately and could feel Alk writhing beside me. Perhaps he was suffering just as much as I was. We were like mere insects against such a grand force of nature, and for a while, we could only stand there and groan with our hands shielding our eyes. I almost felt like I was going to melt into a puddle...

Alk was all but gasping for breath. "The might of sunlight is not to be underplayed..."

"No, but the weather is lovely once one gets used to it," I remarked.

Very gradually, our eyes recovered from the pain and grew accustomed to the sun. Mine had been the first to do so. Unlike Alk, who had been sleeping in a dark cave for at least a century, I was used to living under the natural light. The first thing I could see were the clouds—they were as fluffy as sheep against an unblemished blue sky. So much had happened that it felt like an age had passed since I had last seen them.

When I looked at Alk, who was still blinking a little rapidly, I realized that I didn't know how he was planning to show me around.

That was when he placed his hand on my arm. "Fran, while it would be no trouble for me to return to my dragon form to fly you around, I would rather not catch the attention of any humans who might see fit to attempt to slay me. I shall stay as I am," he said.

"As you are now? Are you sure?"

He snorted. "Why don't I *show* you how sure I am?" he said, parting his jaws and flashing his sharp teeth at me. By the time I realized he was *smiling*, he had lifted me up onto his back.

"Ah! Um, Alk?"

“Be quiet for a moment, lest you bite your tongue.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a powerful headwind forced my eyes shut. I let out a strange scream. This was perhaps the most mortified I'd been all day! The roaring, billowing wind in my ears continued for some time, only to come to a sudden stop just as I experienced a split second of weightlessness. I opened my eyes tentatively to see vast stretches of blue and white spread out before me. I couldn't help but gasp.

Alk snorted. “They said I needed to stretch my muscles, hmph! How ironic, coming from a group of geriatrics!”

Holding tightly to his shoulders, I took another look at the view beneath us. At the center of the island was a mountain surrounded by plains in all directions. Directly below us—meaning the area closest to our current position—was a beach with dazzlingly white sands. However, most of it was overgrown with thick vegetation that spread right to the water's edge. In one corner of the beach, however, was a gaping hole—undoubtedly the cave we had just come from!

The island was bigger than I had expected. There were certain spots that seemed to twinkle, and I had to wonder if they were springs. Virtually untouched by human hands, the base of the mountain seemed to be drowning in a veritable sea of trees. I doubted one could easily find one's way out after wandering into it...

Anyway, there was the green of the mountain, the blue of the ocean, the white of the beach... What a truly beautiful world we lived in!

Perhaps I had tightened my grip on Alk's shoulders then because he turned to look at me. “Am I to take it that you are enjoying yourself, Fran?”

“I certainly am!” I said. “And I wouldn't be seeing such a wonderful view if not for you. It's so moving!”

“You are expressing a little *too much* joy for something so trifling... Although, I suppose humans are somewhat childish from my perspective.” Despite his words, he sounded rather pleased.

He had started to glide downward, and now, he shook his back to readjust

where I sat on him. It was a relief to know that he didn't intend to throw me off.

Now, what can I learn on this trip that'll prove useful for life on this island?

As I tried to pay attention to taking in the sights again, Alk slowed down for me. We were fairly high up but not so high that I couldn't analyze the island's topography. I needed to memorize as much of it as I could while I was here!

If I were serious about my gardening endeavors, it would be a good idea to choose a location as close to the cave's entrance as possible that also had easy access to water. I could imagine it would be quite tiresome to have to make a trek every time I wanted to water something. Selecting a spot close to the cave also meant I could return to my room and rest if I grew tired.

"I had expected there to be more places suitable for gardening than this..." I murmured to myself.

Alk glanced back at me. "Oh? Well, what about that open area over there?" He motioned with his chin to a wide patch of brown land with very little vegetation on it.

It looked spacious enough from our current altitude, so it would probably be even bigger from the ground. So while its size certainly wasn't a problem...

"It does seem suitable, but...I daresay I would struggle to make it there on my own."

"Really? It only seems to be a short trek through the forest."

"Your 'short trek' is anything but from a human's perspective," I reminded him.

I was unexpectedly confronted with the difference in size between us. But regardless, now that we had spotted *one* empty plot of land...

"Oh, but look over there! Doesn't that spot seem like it has potential too?"

There was a large empty meadow right near an opening that looked like the entrance to another cave. I pointed at it excitedly, directing Alk to look at it. He immediately made a nosedive for it, and the sudden change in elevation made the wind screech past my ears. Once we landed, the relief of being on solid ground again was like nothing else!

After that, though, I was truly sure that Alk hadn't been intending to throw me off his back. Though I could see that he was struggling to fight back against his instincts.

"My heart won't stop pounding!" I said. I put a hand to my chest to calm it and looked around.

We had landed just in front of the cave. A soft meadow spread out in front of me—an open space created by the trees seemingly avoiding the cave's entrance. Though the vegetation beyond this area was rather dense, the meadow itself received a refreshing breeze and plenty of sunlight. It seemed like a highly suitable candidate.

While I was enraptured by the view before me, Alk turned his sharp gaze in my direction. "I am not sure how much space this 'gardening' of yours requires, but would this not be enough for the time being?"

"Oh, it's *more* than enough!"

I supposed he was making himself look stern to hide the fact that he was interested in an insignificant human's thoughts. We hadn't spent all that much time together, but I had the sense that he was a trifle stubborn *and* easily embarrassed. Teiren might've described him as a "tsundere." As much as he grumbled about it, he *was* doing a lot to help me. Perhaps he was just kind at heart, but that didn't detract from how happy it made me. After all, wasn't it human nature to revel in the kindness of others?

Alk was still looking away from me pointedly, so I left his side to explore the sun-warmed meadow. The grass under my feet felt amazingly soft.

"This grass is incredibly springy!" I commented.

More than that, the ground beneath was very pliant. It was as though it had been tilled to perfection, even though this area had never been touched by human hands. Delighted, I let my feet carry me this way and that. Alk kept his eye on me the whole time, even though he seemed exasperated. I supposed he really was considerate.

I hadn't expected to find such a perfect stretch of land, so I was overwhelmed with joy. I laughed. "This is like a dream! It's *so* soft! There isn't a single

vegetable that would struggle to grow here!”

The corners of Alk’s lips curled upward. “How do you know when you have never grown anything before?”

He just has to rub it in, doesn’t he? And just when my spirits were at their highest! His remark had been so perfectly timed and worded that I couldn’t help but think he might have done it on purpose.

I groaned. “Though it pains me to admit it, that is a very pertinent question.”

While it was true that I didn’t have any gardening experience myself, I had spoken with farmers at length before when my grandfather and I had carried out inspections of the duchy. I could still remember how willing they had been to answer all my questions...

“According to the farmers in the duchy, soft ground allows for plants to spread their roots more easily, allowing for better growth.”

The presence of earthworms was another marker of good soil, or so they’d said. The earth mustn’t be too coarse, nor too dense. Growing the same crop in the same field repeatedly would result in a bad harvest too, so one had to grow that crop in a different spot every year. A field was like a bed for vegetables, so it had to be made as comfortable as possible, and so forth.

The one thing that *all* the farmers had said was that a field’s soil had to be suitably soft with a good amount of drainage and permeability, but it also needed to retain water properly. Combined, all of these factors made for the best possible growing conditions. After selecting a spot that met all those criteria, one then needed to plow it on a daily basis, mix in fertilizer, and be willing to experiment a bit to see how to bring out the soil’s full potential. There was so much hard work going on behind the scenes to produce the vegetables we ate every day.

Anyway, I did believe that this meadow fulfilled all the necessary requirements! I was still giddy with joy at my unexpected discovery.

Alk offered me his hand. “Since we are here, Fran, would you like to have a look at the forest?”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “As you know, I’m completely unfamiliar with this

island, so I would be incredibly grateful if you would offer to escort me.”

“You do not need to think of this place as some sort of exotic paradise. I simply thought it would make for a pleasant stroll.”

What a wonderful suggestion! I had just been thinking about how lovely it would be to take a brief walk while we were out here. Brushing the grass from my hands, I took his offered hand, and he raised his jaw slightly and gave me a smirk.

Oh dear. It seems that my escort isn't very gentlemanly at all.

On the other hand, he did match my tentative pace as I entered the forest, and quite naturally too. I wondered whether it came from the patience he had for me as a younger entity or whether it was simply something that became common sense as one got older.

From outside the forest, it'd looked rather dense. But now that we were here...

“I had expected traversing a forest to be a struggle, but the ground is much more level than I had imagined.”

The paths that wove through the trees here and there were just a little too neat to be game trails while also being just a little too overgrown to have been created by human hands. I was wearing the shoes that Alk had fixed for me recently, and even with their low heels, I was able to walk quite steadily. His suggestion had been a good one indeed—this *would* be a lovely place to walk in between some gardening work.

Alk came to a sudden stop. “Oh? It seems that something rather rare has grown here during my slumber.”

“Something that *you* deem rare, Alk?”

If that was the case, it had to be something worth seeing. He was a creature who had lived for hundreds of years. His gaze sparkled with curiosity, but when I followed it, all I could see was more forest.

What is it that has captured his interest? Even when I strained my eyes, I still couldn't see anything.

Alk must have noticed my struggle. “You still don’t see it? It is beyond that tree, the one covered in ivy.” With a slightly smug look on his face, he raised a long, slender finger to guide my gaze.

I followed the line of his finger and looked deeper into the forest. Something was weaving between the thick tree growth in short, erratic movements. At first glance, it looked like nothing more than a tree itself. I noticed the two thick, leglike roots that it was using to drudge through the forest. It also seemed like a face was protruding from its trunk, though in reality, it was likely just crevices in its bark. Dense, green leaves rustled every time it moved. If I had to describe it...it was like a walking green afro! I could see why Alk considered it a rare creature.

“Why, is that what you were referring to, Alk?” I asked quietly. I didn’t want whatever it was to feel threatened, though I couldn’t quell the excitement that was rising up within me.

“You finally see it, yes? It is a treant sapling,” he explained. “They are sometimes born when a tree feeds on mana present in the ground.”

With each step the sapling took, it snapped off twigs that had been sticking out in his path. Its leg-roots flattened the undergrowth and the ground beneath as it moved around. This explained the strangely level pathways!

“It would appear that this treant has only just been born. It’s wandering around in search of sunlight and nutrients so that it might hasten its growth.”

I giggled. “Since it is capable of moving itself to a prime location, I would wager that it’ll find somewhere with plenty of those things that it can keep all to itself!”

“Treants are meek by nature,” Alk said. “It shouldn’t attack us if we leave it be.”

Now and then, it would panic as it got caught on ivy that was wrapped around other trees. It would shift its own roots *very* slowly as it avoided stepping on a flower in its path sometimes too. Just watching the treant was enough to warm my heart. “Meek” was a good way to describe it.

My first encounter with monsters had been those goblins, and it had ended

up being quite traumatic. It was only now that I realized that monsters came in many forms. While some might attack the moment they laid eyes on you, others—like this sapling—were content to simply ignore us. Now that I thought of it, perhaps I was incredibly lucky that Alk was spending time with me and that the other spirits were willing to make friends with me too.

“What is it, Fran?”

I supposed it was a bit rude of me to have been staring at Alk. My face stiffened when he spoke. *I probably look silly now...*

“Oh, nothing,” I said. “I was just reminding myself how much of an honor it is to be able to spend this time with you.” I smiled at Alk, feigning composure. After all, there was no technique more fundamental to a lady than being able to prevent her agitation from appearing on her face.

It looked like he wasn’t going to fall for it.

He hummed. “Allow me to commend that attitude of yours, Fran. It will be interesting to see how long you can maintain it.”

Are you serious? I wished he would have *pretended* that he hadn’t seen through me! I sighed, half in anger and half in resignation. Meanwhile, the sapling was still ambling about in search of its ideal location.

“I had thought it would spot us immediately, but it doesn’t seem wary of us whatsoever,” I commented.

“Although it is a monster now, it used to be a tree. A tree’s thought process is more or less incomprehensible.”

“That’s a rather...inoffensive way of putting it.”

“Before my slumber, I once came across another treant,” he said. “It was dispirited because its leaves and bark were being consumed by a young deer.”

It sounded like said treant had been caught up in the struggle for survival. *Had* it survived? *Could* it even survive if it was stripped of its bark? Perhaps it could simply regrow it if its roots were intact. I really wasn’t sure. Considering that it was capable of locomotion in the first place, I figured it should have been able to run away from lumberjacks or animals.

It might've just been my imagination, but the lumbering sapling had somewhat of a self-important air about it. The scenery before us had a prevailing sense of peace until Alk had led me to think about things a little differently. I sighed as if to release the pressure from the indescribable feeling that had built up in my chest.

Suddenly, the treant looked around the area. Its foliage shook—the creature seemed panicked.

What's wrong?! I wasn't thinking anything rude about you, I promise!

Well, I *had* been imagining it sitting there miserably while a deer stripped it of its bark... Had it sensed that somehow?!

I straightened up due to my own nervousness too, and that was when something buzzed right past my ear.

"Fran, move!"

"Wh—" I began, but my own shriek cut me off.

My vision went blank, covered up by darkness so devastating that it was enough to extinguish the dazzling sun.

Is Alk...embracing me?! And what was that sound?

My thoughts were muddled as I turned to look at the sapling. I regretted doing so almost immediately.

"Alk...?" I asked, my voice quivering. "Wh-What *is* that...?"

"A giant longhorn. Though it is rare for them to be quite so giant."

"I... I cannot *stand* those insects!" I screamed.

The sapling was shifting this way and that as it tried to repel the huge *thing* that was thrusting its mandible forward toward it. What I was seeing was probably a bigger version of a longhorn beetle...but just picturing those insects—no, even *acknowledging* the thing before me made me feel all creepy and crawly and...*EEK!!!* It was even affecting my word choices! Those long antennae... The black luster of its body... AAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!

"It is a surprise to see you so agitated. You dislike them that much?"

“If you think it’s pathetic enough to laugh about, then be my guest! B-But *those* insects...” I whined and shoved my head into Alk’s chest, desperate to dislodge the image of what I had seen from my mind. I even nuzzled into him, hoping that the sensation of doing so might somehow help me forget my woes.

Oh dear... I could deal with lizards, snakes, and even *frogs*, but insects of *that* particular body type were *not* my forte! It wasn’t *all* insects that I had issues with—butterflies, ladybugs; I didn’t mind those. But when a creature’s antennae started squirming faster and glistening and gleaming...!

Perhaps I should give up on my dreams of gardening...

My thoughts were so overwhelming that tears sprang to my eyes. *Oh, but as a lady, I’m supposed to maintain my composure at all times!*

“You are rather entertaining when you’re panicking, Fran.” I could hear Alk’s gleeful remark from above my head just as the arms around my waist slipped away.

“What?”

I had no time to work out what was happening before I felt his torso begin to rumble. Soon after, I could smell something burning. I warily opened my eyes to see the sapling shaking its green leaves joyfully and that there was something black beneath its branches.

“Charcoal...?”

Then, I realized that Alk had slain the insect! I was still trying to forget what it had looked like before it’d been burnt to a crisp, but it certainly wasn’t all that scary anymore...

“You will be thankful that I allowed you to pass without suffering,” Alk told its charred remains.

“Th-Thank you, Alk! Though I do not wish for you to exterminate all of them—they’re free to exist as long as they stay out of my sight!” I rambled, my words all coming out in a single breath.

Ecosystems were important, and I was undoubtedly aware that some insects were beneficial to mankind. But, just like everybody else, I had my

weaknesses...

Alk hummed thoughtfully. “You seem even more elated than I had expected, Fran. You truly detest those things, don’t you?” If I wasn’t mistaken, he seemed the slightest bit exasperated.

My gaze was still glued to the ground when I sensed something moving from the corner of my eye. The sapling was stretching out slowly, its entire body rustling as it seemed to glance in our direction.

“The treant seems to be all right too,” I said. “Thank goodness...”

A strong sense of affection was coming from it—though I couldn’t say I’d done anything to help it *personally*. It stayed like that for a while, thanking us, until it suddenly tucked in its roots and set off again.

“Giant longhorns have a particular fondness for mana-rich trees. That sapling must have seemed like the perfect meal,” Alk explained.

“I’m just relieved that it will live to see another day.”

Creatures eat and are eaten by each other—that was just how the world worked. I knew that, but it didn’t mean I was willing to watch a living thing get devoured right in front of me. However, it might’ve been true that I lacked some resilience...

“Shall we turn back? You wanted to see where that new cave entrance leads, didn’t you?” Alk asked.

“Oh, right! Yes, we must have a look! I wonder which part of the shrine it will take us to!”

We watched the lumbering sapling swagger away into the forest before we turned on our heels to return to the meadow.

Chapter 4

“Ah, so you managed to find something you can convert into farmland,” Gnome said. He seemed as pleased as if it had been a discovery he had made himself. His interest made sense, considering that he was an earth spirit.

“We did!” I said. “It receives plenty of sunlight, and the soil seems to be of excellent quality. It’s accessible from my chambers too, so it really is perfect.”

The new cave entrance we had found earlier led to the rear of the area I had adopted as my bedroom. The bones and ashes from burning sacrifices might have been thrown out via that opening, which would explain why the soil there had become so fertile after all these years.

I concluded my report of my findings at just about the same time I finished the tea I had ordered to quench our thirst.

The other spirits had been eating the leftover snacks while I’d been sneaking around, but then, they jumped on me! It was as if they had been waiting for this moment.

“What about the tour?” Undine demanded. “Were there any other cool places?”

“You didn’t run into any dangers, did you?” Sylph pressed. “Oh, well, I suppose it wouldn’t matter if you had, given the dragon was there to protect you...”

The wind spirit had landed on my shoulder while the water spirit clung to my arm. They were staring at me from so close that I could *feel* their breath. And...although I am aware of how uncouth this is—there was something soft pressing against my arm... Yes, we were both ladies, but even then, the sensation of a gorgeous woman’s chest against me was difficult to ignore!

If there was someone who could calm this chaos, surely it was Alk?! I shot him a pleading glance...but he was too engrossed in his cold brew tea! With a sigh, I realized that wandering around outside must have left him parched. Still, I

would really have appreciated his assistance here. I cried deeply inside.

But then, Gnome came to my rescue! “While I can understand that you are eager to hear from Fran, I wonder whether you might see fit to let go of her...?”

“Yeah, listen to the hermit! Ya gotta give her some room to speak!” Salamander urged.

“Huh?! It’s not like it’s a big deal!” Undine shot back.

Salamander wasn’t having it. “She’s uncomfortable! So it *is* a big deal!”

For a split second, I could’ve sworn that I saw literal sparks flying between them...

“Come now, settle down, you two. You are only making things *more* uncomfortable for Fran,” Gnome said. There was a troubled smile on his face.

Sylph gave an exasperated sigh. “It is only natural that there should be strife between you two, given your attributes, but you mustn’t drag a human child into your squabble.”

Undine whimpered.

“Uh, I guess you’re right...” Salamander said, conceding as well.

Fortunately, the more levelheaded spirits had intervened before all hell had broken loose. I had yet to hear about the specific power dynamics between the four of them, but Gnome and Sylph seemed to possess more authority than the other two. It reminded me of the kind of relationship between parents and children, though I wasn’t sure how accurate an analogy that was.

While Undine continued to cling to me, Salamander hopped into my lap.

“So ya found yourself a field, huh? Decided what you’re gonna grow there?” he asked, rapping his red feet on my lap.

It was like I had been struck by lightning. “Oh my! I forgot to even consider it!” I had been so excited by the *idea* of gardening that such specifics had eluded me. “Oh dear... Oh my! And I don’t think I’m able to order anything beyond food and tableware...”

“Huh? Really?” he asked. “And here was me, thinkin’ ya were gonna order the

stuff ya wanted to grow.”

“That *would* have been convenient... Oh!”

Panicking, I summoned my tablet to search through it. But, as I suspected, there were no seeds or saplings available. What was the use of having a perfect field if I had nothing to grow there?

Suddenly, Undine pointed at something on the screen. “There are some potatoes there. Couldn’t you grow them?”

She had pointed out a limited-time potato promotion. There were potatoes for baking, sweet potatoes, and several other types I had never seen before. It was a lot of fun imagining how they might taste! The problem, however, was that they were all meant to be eaten as is.

I voiced these concerns out loud. “...and it seems that trying to use them as seed potatoes will run the risk of cultivating disease or pests.”

“Oh, really? This all sounds like too much effort if you ask me.” Undine sighed.

Sylph didn’t say anything, but she did look slightly disappointed.

Apparently, potatoes sold for growing purposes would be inspected several times to ensure they hadn’t been infected by any viruses. Only safe ones made the cut. However, people could eat an infected potato without the virus having any effect, so such inspections weren’t necessary for plants meant for human consumption. This explained why Teiren had heard of potatoes meant for food becoming diseased after being planted.

Alk was pretending that he wasn’t listening to our exchange, but I knew he was keeping an ear out. It felt terrible knowing that I couldn’t fulfill his expectations!

Smiling at me, Gnome extended a helping hand. “I think I might be able to help, Fran. Everything that grows in the soil is within a gnome’s purview.”

“Gnome!” I cried. “Oh, but you were already going to help with cultivating the meadow itself...”

“Come, don’t worry about that. I am as interested in these potential crops as I am in the crafting techniques belonging to that other world. I hope you will

share several samples with me in exchange for my assistance.”

He was like a gift from the heavens! However, I had to wonder whether it was all right for Gnome to be so kind to me. Of course, I was happy to give him the samples he wanted, but even then, it felt as though our arrangement was benefiting me far more than him.

“Should you still feel guilty for relying on my help, perhaps you could order me some more interesting bottles? It doesn’t matter if they contain alcohol or water—anything is fine,” Gnome said, giving me an extra push.

Now that he was being even more considerate of my feelings, I didn’t want to waste that consideration by refusing him.

“Seeing as you’re insisting, I wouldn’t want to be rude and turn you down,” I said. “And so, Gnome, I would very much like to ask for your assistance.”

He chuckled. “Then negotiations are complete. Now, if you would provide me with what you intend to grow...”

“Hey, m’lady! What if ya planted the seeds from this here fruit? Somethin’d grow then, right?”

“Oh! And this ‘lotus root’ looks like it grows in water! That means I can give you a hand too!”

With one big push, the underground shrine was bustling with excitement. Salamander and Undine were chattering about their plans as they peered at the tablet. Gnome and Sylph shrugged in exasperation. As for Alk, he was drinking his tea like it was none of his concern while I was being pushed closer to making a decision about what to order. It was all very busy, but at some point, being busy had become amazingly fun!

It took some back-and-forth, but our heated discussion helped us to narrow down our choice of crops to a more manageable number.

“Seeing as we have several potential contenders for crops, why don’t I show you the area I was planning to cultivate?” I offered. “We should probably think about how *much* we can plant in the space we have.”

“That sounds sensible,” Sylph said. “It is no use firming up ideas before we

have even seen what we are working with.”

“Besides, we need to actually cultivate the land before we can grow anything. I won’t order anything until that’s finished.”

So far, Alk and I were the only ones who knew how big the meadow was and what the surrounding area was like. I wanted the others to be able to picture it too.

“When Alk took me into the skies and I saw the field from above, I thought it seemed quite a distance from the cave. But it turns out that it isn’t so far on foot, which I found rather curious.”

“It is because we were flying all over the place. I daresay that your sense of distance became distorted.” That was the first thing Alk had said since we had all set foot in the part of the cave that led to the meadow.

I had thought as much when we had last passed through here, but it seemed that humans had done some work on the cave’s floor. It had been made relatively flat, and I was grateful that it was easy to traverse.

We arrived at the meadow. While the sun wasn’t as bright as before, it still made me squint. The spirits, however, seemed unaffected. Instead, their eyes sparkled as they touched the soil and felt the wind on their skin.

“This is a lovely place!” Sylph exclaimed. “I would say that it fulfills every requirement.”

“I can sense veins of groundwater. I’ll definitely be able to help with this!” Undine said.

“This plot also receives plenty of sunlight, and there’s a nice breeze,” Sylph went on. “How fortunate you are to have found such a place.”

Alk knelt down and placed his palm on the ground, nodding to himself several times. “There seems to be mana within the soil here. I cannot see that it should cause any issues.”

“It’s right in front of a cave that leads from the shrine, so it doesn’t surprise me to hear that,” I replied.

Not only was that shrine originally built to honor a god, but it was where Alk

had slept for so long. I wondered if it might've received sacred powers from the former and mana from the latter all this time, making it ideal for cultivation. The thought had me more excited than ever!

What shall I grow here?

Would hard work be enough to allow someone like me to grow delicious vegetables? There was only one way to find out! I was also desperately curious about Undine's observation that this island was rich in groundwater.

Salamander climbed up onto my shoulder and nuzzled my cheek. He chuckled. "Sounds like we got a ton to look forward to, right, m'lady?"

I smiled back at him. "Yes, indeed we do. I have no idea what's in store and my heart is pounding, but that's precisely what makes it so exciting!"

My life had changed so radically, and all that had happened to me so far made my head spin. But perhaps all of that had been leading up to this moment.

"Will you be growing anything other than potatoes, then?" Alk asked.

"I wonder..." I paused for a moment to think about it. "Since Gnome offered his assistance, I have been considering tomatoes too."

Alk's nose wrinkled, and he gave a discontented snort. "That hardly sounds exciting. Do vegetables even taste of anything?"

He was a dragon, after all. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that he was so dismissive of foods that weren't meat. Hopefully, he could see that asking me to rear cattle would be too much for me...

"I'm glad you asked, Alk, because these potatoes are supposed to be especially delicious."

"'Delicious' potatoes are still potatoes. They are good for nothing but staving off hunger," he grunted out and folded his arms.

He clearly wasn't open to appeasement. I was hoping that he'd be able to find enjoyment in this meadow too, given that I wouldn't have found it without his help. Maybe it would help if he were to sample the potatoes I was planning to grow. If he knew what they tasted like, he might even look forward to harvest time!

“I wonder if I could ask for your assistance, Salamander,” I whispered to the lizard sitting on my shoulder.

He puffed his chest out at once. “Always happy to help if I can!”

“Thank you,” I giggled. “I’d like you to roast the items I’m about to order.”

I was blessed to have such trusty allies!

“Let’s see...” I said, thinking out loud. “I think I shall get a box of these fluffy potatoes and another of this rarer variety. As for sweet potatoes...I’ll go for the stickier kind!”

While I was at it, I also ordered some high-quality salt, butter, and shiokara, which was a paste made of fermented seafood. What, you’re thinking I ordered too much? Blame Teiren. She promised me that *all* of these items were delicious. Was I so wrong to give in to temptation here?

Anyway, Alk’s eyes widened as boxes fell at my feet one after another. The spirits also picked up on the fact that I had ordered some things. They came back to gather around me, their faces alight with curiosity.

“Those just look like ordinary potatoes,” the dragon said.

Gnome picked one of the vegetables up from a box that was fit to bursting with them. His eyes softened tenderly. “Perhaps, but they seem to be of a rather high quality. They’re even more fascinating when you consider that these tiny potatoes contain the love and devotion of the people who grew them in abundance!”

He was right. It was easy to forget when there were so many of them, but each potato was a result of the care that had gone into each crop in hopes of making them that much tastier or even yielding just one more. It was, therefore, important to savor each one.

Undine was looking at me, her eyes shining. “Fran, there’s a reason you’ve ordered these, right?”

I nodded. “Indeed there is. I thought we could try them before planting them.”

All of the spirits cheered. They were so excited that I couldn’t make out what

exactly they were saying to one another, but I knew it couldn't be anything negative. Alk looked curious too, despite his complaints. While the corners of his mouth were still downturned, his eyes followed my every movement.

I tried to follow Teiren's instructions to prepare the potatoes. "First, they need to be wrapped in wet paper, and then in something called 'aluminum foil,' right...? Sorry, I think it's 'newspaper'? Well, I don't think we have that, so I can use paper towels, can't I?" I picked some paper towels to get started.

Undine was barely an inch away from me and was staring at my face. "That white paper's meant to be wet, right? I'm gonna make you a little watering hole, then! Might as well cultivate the field too." Before I could even process what she'd said, she threw a near-translucent arm up above her head.

The air vibrated with a sweet, sonorous vocalization that was somewhere between song and speech. It was in no language I recognized, yet it sent tremors through my soul. It felt like there was something calling to me in it. As I listened to that ethereal voice, another joined in. The second one was deeper, with a powerful, weighty tone to it.

That's Gnome's voice...

It was like a muddy stream with the power to erode the earth. It then intermingled with another one—a soft, calming tone that had to belong to Sylph.

"My goodness..." I whispered.

The ground in front of me began to ripple. The undergrowth vanished in the blink of an eye as the bare earth beneath twisted, expanded, and churned. Air steadily mixed into it. The dark, nutrient-rich soil was raked away in clumps as a small spring, surging with clear water, appeared right next to it.

Gnome nodded. "Yes, I think this should suffice as a rough-and-ready solution."

"It was way easier than I thought 'cause of the mana in the ground!" Undine said.

"I have to wonder how long it has been since we all worked together like this," Sylph remarked.

The spirits were all smiles as they admired their work. They had just produced a perfect field, all ready for planting, and it had only taken seconds! I was stunned—surely I was dreaming!

But when I came back to my senses, I began to panic. “Y-You’ve done all this work for me... How can I repay you?!”

“Work?” Salamander asked. “Can ya really call it work when we can get this kinda stuff done in a jiffy?” He let his tail trail soothingly over my cheek.

Alk patted my shoulder. “He is right, Fran, so worry not. I daresay they could have completed such a feat even in their sleep.”

Be that as it may, the least I could do was prepare some delicious tea for them all. Well, that, and continue preparing to roast these potatoes! I got back to work and got the paper towel wet with Undine’s spring water.

Gnome hummed thoughtfully. “Given that this field is for the use of a young lady, perhaps we could do something to make it a little less barren? I could build her a fence or something if only I had access to some metal ores...”

“It would be cute if we could put some more flowers or decorations beside the spring!”

“I could ask the wind to bring us some flower seeds if you’d like.”

They had to stop—I had to order something for us to eat *immediately* to distract them! The field that the spirits had provided me with was wonderful enough, but they were already making plans to improve it! My heart couldn’t take much more of this!

“Um, excuse me. I’ve ordered us some tea and refreshments. I thought we could take a break while we wait for the potatoes to cook...?”

“Ooh! What did you get?” Undine asked.

“I got us some sandwiches since it’s lovely weather for a picnic.”

Salamander had started a bonfire for me, and I was currently using it to roast the potatoes. While those had cooked, I’d hastily ordered a picnic selection that came in a rattan basket. I held it up to show Undine, who started to jump for joy. Salamander leaned forward from my shoulder to peer inside it.

“It’s more than just sandwiches—we have plenty of choices. There are three kinds of appetizers, two types of baguette sandwiches, and two types of pastries. We also have salad, quiche, a main dish, seasonal fruits, and dessert!”

What I’d ordered was a multicourse meal in a basket—and that naturally made for a *heavy* basket too! The container itself wasn’t exactly small either, so even just holding it was rather laborious. I placed it on a patch of grass on the field’s edge, and everyone gathered around it.

“Conveniently, it came with plates and cutlery too! It is very much the ultimate picnic basket!” I said, starting to unpack it.

Alk’s eyes lit up as I did so. “I see that it also contains meat. You have chosen well, Fran.”

“Indeed it does! You may have the thickest cuts!”

Just as I thought, he’d picked up on his favorite food right away!

We had jellied consommé packed with seafood, terrine filled with vibrant veggies, and grated carrot to cleanse the palate. The baguette sandwiches looked so crispy that you could almost *hear* them break by sight alone. Half of them had prawns and avocado inside, and the other half were filled with generous portions of ham, cheese, and greens. As for the pastries, I was fairly sure that they were berry and peach varieties.

And if that wasn’t enough, the basket was crammed with even more delicious offerings! Like the quiche—where the green spinach and pink salmon created a beautiful contrast—or the radiant fruit. Then, there were thick slices of roast pork that were intended to be eaten with a luxurious sauce.

And what’s more...!

“There’s a whole selection of mini desserts! I’m certainly going to have trouble deciding which to eat!” I commented.

“These look just as delicious as the snacks we had earlier! Your skill really is so fascinating, Fran,” Sylph said.

“You got that right! I can’t wait to get started!” Undine cried.

I knew just how they felt. We hadn’t even tasted anything yet, and this was

quite the feast for the eyes! A pretty box dotted with bite-size gems like shortcake, roll cake, chocolate cake, mille-feuille... Surely this couldn't be legal!

"Please help yourselves while we wait for the potatoes," I told them. "Just eat whatever takes your fancy!"

For me, the first order of business was to use the cutting board and one of the knives I'd ordered earlier to cut the baguette sandwiches into pieces. The outside of the bread was so crisp and crunchy! Just touching it told me how delicious it would be. And don't worry—I could handle cutting a baguette or two!

The scent of wheat burst from the bread with each movement of my knife. The sandwich fillings were perfectly fresh too. This bread was nothing like the hard, acidic stuff we had in the duchy, which had needed to be dipped in soup to make it edible. Now that I thought of it, while I was far from perfect, I was still the eldest daughter of a duke. It struck me that my treatment might have been even crueler than I'd realized. The fact that I was surrounded by smiling faces right now was like something out of a dream!

I continued cutting the bread as I enjoyed my reverie, and everyone's hands shot out the very moment I was finished. They must have been eager to try some—as was I!

I hummed in delight. "What wonderful flavors! You can really taste the homemade butter they used!"

"I very much like the variety of tastes and textures," Alk said. "It isn't monotonous in the slightest."

My teeth had broken through the crunchy outer layer of the bread, releasing the fluffiness within. The bread had been toasted after being opened and before being filled, and the butter was seeping into that crispy inner part. The way the butter overflowed with each bite was simply indescribable! Alk was right about the wonderful variety of textures in the sandwich—there were plump shrimp and soft, pulpy avocado all in a single mouthful! And it was so lovely how the crisp, plentiful greens kept the other flavors from becoming too rich.

"This ham and cheese sandwich is to die for! How are the flavors so strong

without any kind of smell? Unless it's not *real* ham and cheese..." Undine's eyes were sparkling as she munched on her ham-and-cheese sandwich.

Salamander's were too. "This cheese is so gooey—it's meltin' on my tongue! Goes swell with the salty ham!"

I was shocked to watch him devour the entire thing, given how small he was compared to the baguette! Just where was he putting it all?

"C'mon, m'lady, I'm a fire spirit, remember? I can burn, melt, and gobble up *anythin'!*"

I giggled. "Maybe so, but while you're with me, I would appreciate it if you saved your fiery powers for the likes of potatoes and meat."

"Ya don't hafta tell me twice! Anythin' for the young lady who's offerin' me all the good grub I can eat!" he said happily.

Salamander was wearing a satisfied smile after having swallowed all the packaging of the items I had ordered. I gave his head a gentle pat. I was sure that he hadn't intended to come off as adorably as he had and was trying to play the villain, but I doubted he was capable of any actual evil. Of course I knew that he was brimming with the awesome power of flame, something that was beyond human control, but for now, he just seemed content to stay by my side. Did he really expect me to be frightened of him?

"This one was 'jellied consommé,' wasn't it? It almost glides into your mouth before melting inside it... Utterly wonderful," Sylph said. "It makes me hungry for more."

"I can also highly recommend the terrine, especially with how the vegetables in it have retained their flavor," Gnome said, sharing his own thoughts. Both he and Sylph had helped themselves to appetizers while I'd been fooling around with Salamander.

I was over the moon to hear praise for those items and not just the sandwiches. It seemed they were as delicious as they were gorgeously presented. I was ready to call this basket a successful purchase!

"Would you like some roast pork, Alk?"

“Yes, I think I would,” he said. “Pork comes from pigs, doesn’t it? I wonder how it compares to the beef from yesterday.”

“It’s considered to be a very different type of meat,” I said with a laugh. “They are somewhat incomparable. It’s more a question of which you prefer.”

As lighthearted as our conversation was, I had to remember that Alk was a dragon. Between him and Salamander, perhaps I needed to be more prudent in my behavior—even if I was a little late to be coming to such a conclusion. Having said that, I doubted that *this* dragon had any designs on world domination or anything else so grand. And I would be happy just as long as I could continue with my carefree life on this island!

“Oh! This isn’t just meat! It looks like there’s an apple and prune stuffing.”

“It isn’t purely meat?”

Alk was very clearly disappointed, perhaps because of the fact that there was stuffing taking up space that could have been meat. While that was technically true, this was an artisan product. It was special in a way that differed from a uniform slice of pork!

I had to laugh again. “Come now, at least take a bite before jumping to any conclusions. You might find that it’s to your liking!”

Alk took some roast pork from me and studied it carefully. He huffed. “Never have I eaten meat cooked in this manner.”

“Oh... I suppose you wouldn’t have,” I said.

His reaction had me thinking about things slightly differently. Before he had met me, Alk had only ever eaten raw meat. To him, the word “meat” had no reason to lead him to think of anything other than pure flesh. I doubted he had ever considered that it might be served stuffed with something else.

“In that case, I’m going to order all kinds of meat dishes!” I said. “Dishes you’ve never tasted before, but I’m *sure* you will enjoy!”

“Yes, there must be countless foods out there that I’ve never even heard of. I suppose I shall have you working for me for a good while yet,” Alk mused.

I offered Alk the largest piece of roast pork, and a satisfied smile rose to his

handsome face. He truly was fond of my otherworldly delights, and I couldn't blame him! This picnic selection was just as delicious as everything else I'd ordered! Not to boast, but I was pleased as punch with my skill. Well, perhaps I was boasting a little...

"Mmm! The inside's sweet, but it goes real well with the richness of the meat!" Salamander said. "This is great!"

"I *was* dubious about the combination of meat and fruit, but they complement each other better than I'd expected. I daresay I shan't tire of salty and sweet together."

Neither Salamander nor Alk had wasted any time in stuffing their cheeks with the meat dish. Their joy was palpable. Not wanting to be left out, I took a bite for myself.

"My! I've never tasted anything quite like this!"

The juicy, velvety meat encompassed the soft, pliant filling in the center. Within that filling were fat pieces of prune and crunchy bits of apple. Though the prunes were dried, they had absorbed the juices from the meat and apples, so they weren't the least bit hard. The pork had just the right amount of marbling, and it dissolved with each bite, making the flesh overflow with sweet, fragrant fat. Combined with the refreshing sweet-and-sour juice of the apple, the deep juice of the plum, and the rich sauce, it was like paradise in your mouth! The moisture-rich stuffing saved the well-cooked pork from seeming dry at all.

Teiren surmised that the enzymes in the fruit had kept the meat soft throughout the cooking process. I didn't really understand what she was saying, but it seemed there was reasoning for cooking meat and fruit together.

While Alk, Salamander, and I busied ourselves enjoying the meat, the other spirits excitedly exchanged their own opinions.

"Wow! This is my first time eating something like this!" Undine exclaimed.

"The wind tells me much of how the little humans live, but never have I heard of such a dish," Sylph said.

Gnome nodded to himself. "It appears that a small change in a recipe can

affect the end product in large ways.”

Whether human or spirit, we were all blown away by the delicious taste of the meat dish, and I was elated to see everyone enjoying it!

“M’lady! M’lady, I think they’re ready!” Salamander whispered into my ear, much like he was my conspirator. The flickering flames on his body might not have been hot, but the peach fuzz on his body felt slightly ticklish! His fiery tail was pointing at the bonfire burning at the edge of the field.

“My, what perfect timing! I can think of no better accompaniment to meat than roasted potatoes!”

Salamander cackled. “My powers’re pretty impressive, huh?”

“They certainly are!” I said. “We would never have been able to sample those potatoes without you!”

I’d hastily ordered some metal skewers earlier, and I now approached the bonfire with them in hand and Salamander still on my shoulder. Because it was a magical fire, there was nothing physical fueling it. Though it made sense in my head, the sight of a fire burning all by itself was a curious one indeed...

I’d asked Salamander to adjust the flames so that they were more like crackling embers rather than a roaring blaze, but a fire was a fire. Even though I was standing a decent distance away, it felt like my skin was burning!

“Oh, you can smell that a mile away!”

“Careful ya don’t get burned!”

“I know! It would be awful if I were to get hurt now, considering how much I’ve been looking forward to this!”

There was still so much I wanted to do, from sampling these vegetables to planting some of my own. I would be heartbroken if I couldn’t do those things because I got burned now. No amount of lamentation would ever be enough! So, I was as careful as could be as I pushed the skewers through the potatoes that lay on the bright red embers.

“They slip through so easily,” I said. “You got the timing perfect, Salamander, just as I knew you would! I was right to depend on you to manage the flames!”

“Aww, shucks!” he chuckled. “I’m gonna get a big head if ya keep showerin’ me with compliments over every li’l thing!”

Despite his protests, Salamander looked completely thrilled. This was one of the aspects of his personality that made him so adorable! Fire shot out from all over his body, and he let out sparks that looked like tiny celebratory fireworks. I bet if he had a human form like some of the others, he’d be rubbing his finger under his nose in a terribly smug manner! It was so easy to picture that the image came to mind immediately. I had to giggle at it.

“By the by, m’lady, do ya know which potatoes are which?”

“Let’s see... I think these smaller ones are the mild ones, the bigger, round potatoes are the fluffy kind, and the long, narrow ones are the sweet potatoes.”

Except for the sweet potatoes, they were wrapped in paper towels and aluminum foil. It was difficult to say which they were when I was basing my assumptions on size alone. But both varieties seemed delicious, and there were plenty of them to go around! Seeing which type of potato you got would be like playing the lottery!

A thought suddenly struck me. “Perhaps I ought to have ordered those ‘surprise’ potatoes as well...”

Those potatoes had looked wildly different, but stocking up on them might have been fun! For example, there were those that looked like sweet potatoes with red skin and others that were purple on the inside!

“Eh, just save ’em for next time! I’m thinkin’ that bitin’ into these and findin’ out how delicious they are is gonna be fun enough for now!”

Salamander might have had a point. Everyone would be happy enough with how delicious these would be. The surprises could wait.

I giggled. “You’re right, of course. Anticipation is something best built up for a while!”

My objective today was to show everyone how delicious the food from the other world was, and I drew confidence from Salamander’s words. With my resolve bolstered, I carried the platter of potatoes to the rest of the group.

Alk was frowning at me slightly—or rather, at the plate in my hands. “Those are the promised potatoes, aren’t they?” he asked.

“You still don’t look particularly enthused, dragon. What is it that you so dislike?” Gnome tutted, pushing his monocle up his nose. I wondered whether even Alk was socially obligated to treat him with respect.

Now that I thought about it, spirits were representatives of nature’s power. Alk might have been a dragon, but he was still a living thing, and that meant he was bound by the laws of nature. However, spirits were once much more prolific. Was I detecting a case of what Teiren would call “power creep”?

I groaned inwardly. The more I thought about it, the more I felt I would be sucked into a whirlpool of rumination!

“Potatoes are as hard as rocks. I may as well eat stones,” Alk muttered, pulling me from my reverie.

“Oh... Say, Alk, have you only ever eaten potatoes raw?” I asked.

The realization that struck me then was enough to push all thoughts of spirits and their hierarchies from my mind! No wonder he wasn’t looking forward to the potatoes!

“Allow me to put your mind at ease! *These* potatoes have been properly cooked!” I told him. “I would never expect you to eat them raw!”

Was it pity that I felt when I considered Alk’s eating habits? It was almost unbearable like my heart was being crushed...

“Take a breather there, m’lady. I know Lord Alkerag doesn’t look it right now, but he *is* a dragon! It’s normal for him to eat *everythin’* raw, meat or otherwise!” Salamander said.

Gnome gave his piece too. “Precisely. There is no need to get worked up, Fran. Wild animals have similar diets, yes? Although they can’t afford to be quite as fussy.”

I knew they were right. Animals didn’t use fire to cook their food. I was less sure about monsters, but I was confident that the same could be said for the majority of them, at least. So yes, I could see that it was “normal” for Alk to eat

his food raw. But since he had me now, I wanted to ensure his meals were as delicious as could be.

“Those are the potatoes you just ordered, right? The smell is something else!” Undine exclaimed. She leaned forward in my direction, prompting Sylph to do the same.

“They may be fragrant, but they are still nothing more than potatoes. I would think that there is only so much you can do with them,” Sylph said.

“I guess. How good can they be, even if they come from Fran’s—from another world?”

They looked conflicted, and their expressions sat somewhere between anticipation and uncertainty. I supposed I couldn’t blame them. That said, these potatoes *were* special, and I was basing that on a combination of Teiren’s memories and my own experiences!

I only knew the potatoes I’d ordered from Teiren’s memories, but I had seen that she’d been awfully excited when she had tried one of these varieties for the first time. She had been born and raised in that world, living on foods that far surpassed what we had here. So if the potatoes had been enough to excite *her*...

The picnic basket was now empty, so I moved it to one side. I confidently placed the platter piled with potatoes where it had sat.

“You can have these with a simple sprinkling of salt if you like, but I also think they go well with butter,” I said, laying out the condiments and toppings that I had ordered to accompany the potatoes.

There was some fancy salt and fresh butter. The latter had been left out for a bit, so it should have been perfectly soft and spreadable by now! And that wasn’t all...

Undine opened one of the jars, and her eyes widened. “Hey, Fran? Is this some kinda fish paste? I’m guessing there’s squid in it or something?”

“That’s right. It’s called shiokara, and that variety is indeed made from squid.” I was impressed that she had been able to tell as much from sight and smell alone.

“‘Shiokara,’ hm? I do recall hearing of a similar condiment before, but can’t remember if it was garos or garum...” mused Alk. “Anyway, I suppose every world is in the habit of creating condiments from whatever the people are already familiar with.”

I was surprised to hear the dragon beside me speak of the legendary garos! As far as I was aware, such a condiment hadn’t existed for at least a thousand years. If I recalled correctly, a devastating natural disaster had put a sudden stop to its production, and it had been impossible to recreate it since.

Salamander scrunched up his face. The scent of the shiokara must have made its way over to him. “Whew. That’s some smell... Y’sure that’s edible?”

“It apparently makes for a delicious potato topping when mixed with butter!”

I understood his reaction to some extent. Shiokara was made by fermenting squid flesh in organ meat and salt, giving it a unique smell and appearance! Teiren’s memories had told me that it was delicious, but I probably would’ve found it just as daunting if I were encountering it for the first time. The opened jar was letting out a briny scent with a hint of fish. The viscous, pink-orange substance was filled with slices of *something* dyed the same color, and when you scooped some out, it was stringy, and bits stuck to your spoon.

Maybe I can understand why one might not think it’s edible...

Teiren was stamping her feet and insisting that shiokara went great with steaming hot rice, but I think she would have a hard time convincing someone who was new to the condiment. The first step was to show everyone that you *could* eat it if nothing else!

“I shall have the first taste,” I offered. “That way, you can be sure that it isn’t poisonous!”

I’d ordered some cotton gloves for handling the hot potatoes. I had wondered why they’d been listed when they were neither food nor cookware, but it turned out that they had been part of a special selection of barbecue accessories. I supposed they must have just about made the cut as a cooking utensil of sorts.

“Wah! Ah, oh, that’s hot!”

Even with the gloves, the potato still felt flaming hot. I had a difficult time peeling off the foil and paper towels too! But I couldn't afford to dawdle here. Everyone was waiting for my feedback with eyes alight with curiosity and anticipation!

"Are you all right, Fran? You haven't met your match in the world of food, have you?"

"Th-This is nothing! Heat contributes to flavor!" I decided to take Alk's concern as a source of encouragement. "Hmm... This one's lovely and round. It must be one of the orange sweet potatoes from Okinawa!"

I finally got my hands on a potato. When I pricked it with my fork, it snapped open. It was then that I realized it might've been easier to have used the fork to remove the foil and paper from the potato earlier. Perhaps I had made a mistake...but then again, I wouldn't have thought of that had I not experienced the intense heat for myself. Said heat had been a reflection of my enthusiasm, which had to be worth something!

"Goodness! It's more golden than orange, and so warm and fluffy too..."

The insides began to flake as soon as I split it open. The description on the tablet had promised that these potatoes would practically fall apart due to their high starch content, but this was even better than I'd expected! You didn't even have to taste it to see how soft and flaky they were! Furthermore, I had always thought that potatoes were white inside, but this one really was *golden*! All that was left was to drop a pat of butter onto it...

"Oh, would you look at that! It's like water seeping into sand!"

The butter melted from the heat and sank into the grainy potato in the blink of an eye, immediately adding a glossy layer to the crumbly tuber. I didn't know if I had ever laid eyes on anything quite so appetizing! But while it looked delicious enough as it was, it was missing an ingredient...

I gulped and steeled my resolve. "Here I go!"

Alk and the spirits nodded wordlessly. Five pairs of gorgeous eyes followed my every move...

Forcing my hands to behave before they could start trembling, I poured a

helping of the thick shiokara over the buttery potato. The briny smell in the air immediately grew even more cloying, but I had to say that it wasn't *entirely* unpleasant. The potato had been cut into bite-size portions, and now, it was loaded with butter and shiokara too.

"Here goes nothing!"

I put the whole thing in my mouth. Earthy and seaside flavors whooshed over my tongue. The outside was buttery and moist and the insides were still piping hot, but thanks to the shiokara, both had a rich umami flavor. There was no longer any hint of the briny smell from earlier—instead, it'd been replaced by the butter and the satisfying flavor of the potato. And it was indeed as soft and flaky as promised, breaking down easily from my tongue and the roof of my mouth!

Though I wanted to continue savoring the flavors, the potato slid down my throat and vanished all too soon. My hands were reaching out for another before I knew what I was doing!

"Judging from your behavior, Fran, I daresay it is rather delicious," Alk said.

"So delicious that she ain't even listenin' to us!" added Salamander.

"Which is quite endearing in itself. Children deserve to smile as much as possible." Gnome nodded.

Apparently, there had been a conversation going on during my taste test, but I hadn't been paying attention to that at all! I didn't come back to my senses until everyone had grabbed some potatoes for themselves and cleared their plates, which seemed to have happened over the course of just a few seconds!

Sylph picked up a potato with the claws at the end of her long leg. She skillfully used her beak to peel away the aluminum foil.

"I don't believe it! Hey, Fran, this looks *gross*, but actually tastes really good!" For all her graceful mannerisms, Undine had finished her potato in a matter of seconds.

Sylph let out a refined chuckle. She, too, was pecking at her potato elegantly. "What a lovely, rich flavor! And here I was, believing that all potatoes taste the same. These, however, seem to be the exception."

Salamander flicked his tail with exasperation. “You guys sure changed your tune the second Fran started eatin’ with so much gusto,” he muttered as he watched them.

As for me, I was finding joy in the fact that *they* were enjoying their meal! I wasn’t sure whether I’d heard it or read it somewhere, but apparently, when people were *really* enjoying what they were eating, they would go back for seconds without waiting for the host to offer it to them! The food on the table would gradually disappear as if by magic. That was why the sight before me was more than I could have hoped for. It was proof that they genuinely thought the food was delicious, even without my prompting.



“The rich umami and crispy squid... They go beautifully with the potato. It is like a fateful encounter between the sea and the land,” Gnome said with a smile as he loaded his meal with shiokara.

His words struck me at my very core. “That’s a lovely way of putting it!” I said. “Two ingredients that have been developed in completely different environments creating a combination that’s utterly divine!”

A fateful encounter—how quaint! And speaking of fateful encounters, how about the little group we had formed, hm?

“Mmm! This is the other variety of potato!” I said. “They’re a deeper yellow than the ‘orange’ ones.”

The inside of this potato was closer to the color of a vibrant sunflower. A highly appetizing hue indeed! Stabbing it with my fork revealed a completely different texture than the other ones too. These were more moist...or perhaps more glutinous? Either way, they felt more viscous. I had the feeling that they would go well with a simple combination of butter and salt.

I loudly hummed my approval. “These have such a rich taste! A simple combination, but so delightful...”

Teiren told me these were also called “chestnut potatoes.”

Chestnuts...

I was fairly sure I’d once tried roasted chestnuts when visiting a town incognito with my grandfather, but my memories were a little too unreliable for me to make any comparisons. These potatoes, however, had a plump, dense texture, not to mention their lovely, rich sweetness! Shiokara wouldn’t suit these—adding it might’ve led to a slight clash between the flavors.

While I was busy enjoying a mouthful of bliss, a shadow fell over my plate. I looked up to see Alk. He’d eaten his butter-laden potato, skin and all, and it seemed he had become curious about what I was eating now.

“There are different varieties of potatoes?” he asked.

“That’s right. I ordered three separate ones this time.”

His eyes lit up. Apparently, this was news to him. The ordinary sweet potatoes

aside, we had fluffy orange sweet potatoes and moist chestnut potatoes. One of the latter was currently on my plate.

“Would you like to try one of these? It ought to be one of the smaller wrapped ones...” I then looked for the platter, which contained both types of potatoes.

“No, I shall have *that* one,” Alk declared. He opened his mouth and pointed at *my* plate instead.

He looked like a chick begging for food! The thought made my hands move automatically. I stabbed my fork into the remaining potato on my plate and brought it to Alk’s mouth. He snatched it away with his jaws before I fully realized what uncouth behavior I was taking part in!

“Hmm, yes...” he said. “I suppose the texture *is* different. And this one has a deeper flavor.”

“E-Exactly! I believe it is a variety that works well in a stew, but it’s enjoyable to eat it with just a few additions like this too.”

Alk seemed to be composed as I panicked. If our poor display of manners hadn’t bothered him, perhaps I shouldn’t have been flustered either. I didn’t want to be the only one making a fuss and putting a damper on everything...

“‘Stew,’ you say? With your skills as they are now, I would hesitate to ask you to make such a thing.”

“Oh, will you stop criticizing my lack of cooking ability?! I shall be making stews before you even know it, you’ll see!” I shot back.

At least his smile seemed to suggest that he had enjoyed the potato. Hopefully now he would look forward to our growing them. Anyway, I did think that adding these chestnut potatoes to a soup or stew would result in something wonderfully delicious. The plump starch would absorb so much umami from the meat and vegetables too! And then it would crumble apart in your mouth, and the soup’s flavor would ooze over your tongue... Oh, just imagining it made me want to try some right away!

I giggled to myself. “Even the ordinary sweet potatoes are delicious enough with nothing on them! They’re like a dessert in their own right!” The rich,

viscous flesh of the sweet potato clung to my tongue before melting like warm cream. It hadn't needed the addition of sugar or anything to fill my mouth with sweetness.

"And now try addin' a li'l butter and see how good *that* is!" Salamander exclaimed.

Alk shot me a teasing glance. "The potatoes are indeed delicious. Now, the question remains whether you would be able to grow them for yourself."

"I *will* succeed!" I said. "I shall keep trying until we can enjoy roasted potatoes just like these again." I was capable of more than he knew! I wasn't that low-spec. At least, I hoped not.

I pouted and looked away from Alk, which was when I noted that our platter was now empty. It seemed like the spirits had enjoyed the potatoes as much as we had.

Gnome let out a satisfied sigh and smiled brightly. "Those were delightful, Fran. I am tremendously looking forward to the specimens grown in this field."

"I'm overjoyed to hear it! With your assistance, I am sure that the potatoes I cultivate here will be delicious!"

He chuckled. "It seems I bear a weighty responsibility! But I am sure you will be able to produce something of high quality, given the mana in the soil here."

His words were indeed a relief. Surmising that the potatoes had gone over well was one thing, but having that verbally confirmed provided me with a wholly different sense of reassurance.

And as for the field's mana, perhaps it really was the case that its presence would make all the difference. Gnome seemed to be suggesting that it could influence the development of the crops we'd grow.

I wondered whether it was possible to increase the quality and yield of wheat and vegetables by learning how to imbue soil with mana by oneself. It would then be possible to keep some aside for tax while eating or selling the rest. Either way, one wouldn't go hungry. A higher yield meant more to keep for oneself, and high-quality crops would fetch better prices.

Having said that, I was struggling to think of a way to infuse soil with mana. Besides, a higher yield meant more crops on the market, which could push their prices down. It would be a bit of a balancing act.

Oh dear. There I go, wasting thoughts on something that won't be happening anyway...

"I decided I'm going to live freely, and that's that..."

"What's the matter, Fran? You look rather disheartened." Alk was frowning at me.

I knew my smile wasn't convincing, but I tried anyway. "Oh, no, I was just pondering how much effect the field's mana will have on the crops and their growth."

"You certainly ponder some strange topics."

Perhaps it was his kind heart that prevented Alk from pushing the matter further, or maybe it was arrogance. Were the thoughts of a lowly human not worth his time? I supposed it must've been a little bit of both, but I decided to interpret it as kindness. And at that moment, I was most grateful for the space he was giving me.

"Oh, that's right! Alk, there's a snack that uses potatoes that I think you'd really enjoy!"

"A snack made from *potatoes*?"

"Yes!" I said. "In fact, I'm *sure* you will like it, though I can't say it has much nutritional value..."

I presented the intrigued dragon with a large colorful bag. Inside were small snacks known as "potato chips." According to Teiren, they were oil-fried, had a fun texture, and possessed a flavor that packed a punch—all things that made me think Alk would like them. The moment I opened the bag, an appetizing fragrance burst out of it, making my mouth water all over again.

"They're freshly fried and straight from the factory...apparently!"

"I see. So they are a variety of fried potato..." Alk immediately put his hand into the bag and tossed several chips into his gaping mouth. His eyes widened

until they were as round as the full moon. “Incredible...”

I giggled. “Surprising, aren’t they? I believe they have a texture that’s quite unusual for this world.”

I tried one for myself. It was crisp, crunchy, and not at all greasy for having been fried in oil. Perhaps it was because they were fresh from the factory, but there was none of the unpleasantness you typically got with food that was fried in old oil. As a result, the potato’s natural sweetness came through, combining beautifully with the sprinkling of salt on its surface. I would severely struggle to have just one of these!

“If you were to harvest potatoes in this field, would you be able to make these so-called ‘potato chips’?” Alk asked between fistfuls of the snacks.

I gave a thoughtful hum. “That’s difficult to say. Wouldn’t it be enough for me to simply keep on ordering them?”

As much as I would have liked to say yes, deep-frying was probably a bit too ambitious for me at the moment! And then there was the matter of slicing the potatoes so thinly... Perhaps Alk was expecting my cooking skills to improve a *lot*.

“Forgive me for interrupting, Fran, but I wonder whether these are ready for planting,” Gnome asked quietly. His question cleansed the air of its slight awkwardness.

My attention was pulled back to the field. The earth spirit’s question had me rooting through my head for everything I knew about agriculture.

“Yes, I think so! Given the climate around here...”

If I recalled correctly, both regular and sweet potatoes grew well in relatively warm places, so it should have been all right to plant them now. My memories also suggested that this island was located in an area that was affected by a warm current, which stopped it from becoming too hot or too cold at any time of year. That had been part of the geography I’d had to learn in preparation for marrying the prince. I’d never imagined that it would serve me in a situation like this.

I suppose nothing in life is wasted. I knew I was gazing off into the distance,

but I was grateful that no one asked any prying questions because of it. They must have realized that it would be inappropriate.

“Hmm... Is there anything else you would like to plant while we’re at it? As long as whatever it is can grow from seeds, I should be able to use my power to make it happen,” Gnome said with a smile, gesturing with his hand.

I didn’t hesitate to accept his offer. “Really? Let’s see...” He was already helping to such an extent that I felt it would be rude to turn him down at this point. “I would love for everyone to try some extra-sweet tomatoes, and pulses like beans or lentils would be good for making both savory and sweet dishes! And, and...”

“There, there, Fran,” Gnome said, slowing me down. “I’m listening, so there’s no need to rush.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry for getting ahead of myself. I didn’t want to take up too much of your time...”

Gnome chuckled softly. “Neither the field nor I are going anywhere. Shall we look it over while discussing what is to be planted where?”

He took my hand as if to help calm my mad enthusiasm. His grip was warm and soft. It made me feel all fuzzy inside—but that’s just between you and me! He led me in the direction of the field, and Undine followed us with light steps.

“When you’ve decided what you’re gonna plant, I’ll regulate the flow of water for each crop!” she said. “That’ll be easier on you, right, Fran?”

“Oh, my! Thank you so much, Undine! I’ve never grown anything before, so to have someone take care of the water for me will be a huge help!”

The “faucets” and “hoses” of Teiren’s world didn’t exist here. People probably had to water crops with a pail and scoop. I could imagine how exhausting that would be, so I really was glad to have Undine’s assistance with that side of things. For as much knowledge as I had about the concepts behind growing things, I didn’t have any experience. I had enough on my plate concerning my gardening endeavors before even *thinking* about water. Any task I could do more conveniently would allow me to concentrate more of my efforts on other areas, which would make things more efficient overall.

“But you’re gonna hafta order me some more fresh water in exchange!”

“Of course!” I said. “It’s possible to get water from all kinds of sources and, would you know it, different *types* of water too. I am sure we can find one that you especially like!”

“Oh, I can’t wait!” Her adorable voice was as clear and vibrant as a bell’s chime, and she put her hands over her mouth as she giggled. Ordinarily, I might’ve found the gesture obnoxious, but hers was a beauty that came by once a millennium, and she had moved gracefully and flawlessly! Teiren was shouting something about wanting to come armed with fans and “glow sticks”...

Undine brought her plump, glossy lips to my ear. “Sure, I love water, but... Don’t tell anyone, Fran—I *really* like the tea and snacks you ordered!”

“Really?! In that case, I’ll keep ordering anything that catches my eye!”

She laughed. “Now I’m *really* excited! Y’know, it’s been forever since I’ve met a human who can see and talk to me.”

As she danced around me, her crystal clear body was like an overflowing spring—like the first drop of a large river, or the surface of a lake that perfectly reflected everything around it. I could almost hear the splashes as her long, ombré hair fluttered around.

“And then there’s the fact I get to have tea and eat with the other spirits... It’s like a dream come true!” she said.

“Why, and here I was assuming that you got together at every opportunity!”

“We’ve been out of touch for a while. Not that there’s any bad blood between us or anything.” A smile appeared on Undine’s face, though there was a hint of sadness to it. It seemed there was a story there that I hadn’t been told. “But we’re together again now, and I’m having a blast!”

“This is like a dream come true for me as well. I’m having so much fun that I don’t know what to do with myself!”

“You too, huh? We must be birds of a feather!” the water spirit said as she danced again, as pure as could be. She was leaving a refreshing mist behind her. It truly was a joy to watch.

I was entranced by the sunlit traces of blue she left in her wake, which were soon swept up by a pleasant breeze that separated them into a sparkling spray. Each drop was like a gemstone.

“You two appear to be having fun. What about the rest of us? Would you allow me to join you?”

Undine giggled at the other spirit. “You’re enjoying yourself too, right, Sylph?”

“I certainly am! It must have been hundreds of years since I’ve had any contact with a human. Since my presence was noticed, even,” Sylph said.

The wind Sylph had produced when she’d caught up with us felt like it was caressing my cheek. It had all the warmth of a spring breeze along with all the refreshment of a cool wind at the height of summer. It was wonderfully comforting, and it was almost frustrating that I couldn’t find a single thing to complain about!

“Me and Sylph used to spend a lotta time with human kids,” Undine said.

“Unfortunately, they gradually forgot about us, so we encountered fewer and fewer of them as well,” Sylph lamented.

“It hurt, especially ’cause we had so much fun with them.”

“It wasn’t just the children we missed either. There was a quarrel among us spirits too, resulting in some of our friends distancing themselves from us.”

There was a heavy mood in the air as they recalled those distant memories. I hadn’t realized quite how much spirits adored humans, and for whatever reason, the thought filled me with a strange restlessness. I was also learning that spirits had their disagreements too. I supposed relationships were complicated no matter what kind of being you were.

“That’s why I’m thrilled you summoned us, Fran!” Undine said. “Drinking tea and eating snacks with you reminds me of the good old days! Thanks. I really mean it.”

Sylph agreed. “I never thought I would find myself in pleasant company with other spirits again, given the vestiges of discord between some of us. And we have you to thank for that, Fran.”

Picture, if you can, how it felt to receive the full brunt of a refined bird's grace and a gorgeous water spirit's beaming smile up close. My heart felt like it would explode—and if I had a second one in my chest, that one could've burst too!

Either way, it was nice to hear that they were both enjoying themselves. It'd be okay to revel in that fact even though all of this was a team effort, right?

Salamander popped up to share his feelings too. "Hey! I'm not gonna take this lyin' down! I'm havin' tons o' fun too, y'know!"

"As am I. I have been walking this world for a long time, but never had I imagined an experience such as this in my future," Gnome agreed.

I couldn't have been happier to hear those words. They warmed my heart!

Being so full of emotion, I couldn't help expressing it myself. "I'm so glad that I was able to come to this island. There are so many fun things that I'm looking forward to experiencing with you all!"

My words were greeted with smiles. Everyone's kindness was just blowing me away. I was on the verge of tears, even as I told myself I needed to maintain my composure! My vision was beginning to blur a bit too.

But it seemed this wasn't even the end of it—in one corner of the fuzzy world before me, I could see something moving.

"I think that's the treant from earlier," Alk said, pointing at the largeish tree with its restless foliage.

"The visage in its trunk certainly looks to be of the same pattern..." I said.

It seemed we were right because the tree then spread out its branches and leaves in a show of gratitude.

"You really *are* the sapling from earlier, aren't you?" I asked.

"It must have come seeking the mana from this environment," Alk commented. "Would you be opposed to it settling down here, Fran?"

"You mentioned that they wander in search of a comfortable place to live, didn't you? Does that mean this field satisfies its needs?"

I then glanced at the sapling. It practically felt like I could see it fluttering its

eyelashes pleadingly...if it had eyelashes, that is.

Seeing as it came to find a place to settle, I would've felt a little guilty sending it away. However, if it was here for the mana, that meant it would be competing for it with the crops we'd plant, and I *was* curious to see how the mana was going to affect our harvest... Perhaps there was a way we could find some middle ground!

"Sapling, I am going to be doing some gardening here," I said. "May I have your word that you won't absorb too much mana or stretch out your roots too far? Or do anything else that would get in the way of the crops?"

The sapling shook the tips of its branches enthusiastically.

"I suppose I can take that as a yes?"

The sapling's entire body shuddered that time, from its trunk to its branches and beyond. I could only assume that I had its full agreement.

"Are you honestly going to address it as 'Sapling,' Fran?" Alk asked. His eyes were filled with a strong sense of pity.

"Hm? It makes sense, doesn't it? That is what it is..."

Was it really such a poor choice? I wasn't sure. And as for the sapling, it was still rustling its branches. It didn't seem put out in the least.

Alk turned his gaze to the treant. "Have *you* any objections?"

The sapling now had its branches and leaves stretched out as far as possible, seemingly responding to him.

"Well, I suppose if you're content with it..."

Had they come to an agreement? Alk was grasping at his head as if he had a migraine...

"What would you have called it, Alk?" I asked.

"I wouldn't have to think twice. It is clearly an ash sapling. Therefore, I would dub it 'Ash.'"

"Um... How is that any different from naming a cat 'Cat,' or a dog 'Dog'?"

Gnome kindly interjected before sparks could truly fly between Alk and me.

“If you ask me, your choice of name didn’t depart from that philosophy either, Fran.”

The tension in the air loosened somewhat with his words. Sapling had been shaking its branches nervously, but now, its movements slowed a little.

“What are walkin’ trees called in this other world of yours?” Salamander asked from his usual spot atop my shoulder.

“Hmm... Unfortunately, there were no such organisms in Teiren’s world.” And that meant there was no name for them. “Oh, but there *was* a legend about a large world tree called Yggdrasil!”

“‘Yggdrasil’? That’s some name,” he replied.

“Indeed. Well, why don’t we take some inspiration from it and name the sapling ‘Iggy’?”

It would probably grow into an enormous tree eventually, so I thought it rather fitting to name the sapling after Yggdrasil. I glanced at the sapling—or rather, Iggy—who was stretching out its branches in delight. I could only assume that it liked its new name!

“For goodness’ sake!” Alk grunted. “I can already foresee the problems that the lack of a shared language is bound to cause.”

“That may be so, but Sapling—Iggy—is a tree. We should count ourselves lucky that it can communicate through gestures,” I said.

“Well, we shouldn’t have to content ourselves with just *that*.” Alk gave a self-important snort before holding up a hand in Iggy’s direction. Light spilled out from his palm and enveloped the sapling.

“I say!” cried a brand-new voice. “Dear me! What has just transpired? I sense sorcery!”

A cry escaped me. “Iggy! You’re talking!”

“Ah! You can comprehend me? What an extraordinary stroke of luck!”

Iggy’s voice held a weighty dignity and was very pleasant on the ears...but he did have a rather old-fashioned way of speaking! However, I supposed he would have been alive for far longer than me, so it wasn’t strange in the least. Having

said that, Alk was even older than Iggy, and he wasn't quite so pompous in *his* speech, so... Perhaps that came down to a difference between dragons and trees.

"I am so profoundly indebted to you! Not only have you granted me permission to take root in this place, but you even bestowed upon me a name!"

"O-Oh. Am I to take it that you are pleased with it?" I asked.

"I know not of this 'world tree' you spoke of, but it certainly sounds magnificent! I could never have asked for a greater namesake!"

Since Alk had cast a spell on Iggy, even the face-like pattern in his bark had started to move, and the sapling was far more expressive than I had imagined. I could watch him for an age and not grow bored!

"I suppose this is the first time we've had a proper conversation, Iggy. My name is Francheska, but please call me 'Fran.'"

"Miss Fran! I see! Although I have to wonder why we can understand each other all of a sudden."

"We have Alk—the dragon, Alkerag—to thank for that. Remember how he saved you from that ghastly insect too?" I motioned to Alk with my hand.

Iggy's large body suddenly stiffened like he had been struck by a lightning bolt.

What's the matter?

"Oooh!" exclaimed Iggy. "Kind sir, had you not been there to deliver me from that predicament, I would have been rendered entirely leafless!"

"Think nothing of it. I had to vanquish that thing to stop *this* thing from chittering," Alk said, waving a hand in my direction. He shot me a mischievous glance.

I groaned back. "How rude! I-I simply dislike creatures of that particular shape... It's nothing to make fun of me for!"

Ah! Maybe I should have just ignored him...

Alk was immensely mean—and somehow had the ability to draw me into such

trivial arguments too! Despite what he'd said, I was sure that he wouldn't have allowed Iggy to get eaten alive, regardless of my reaction. I didn't see why he wouldn't just puff out his chest and simply accept that he had done good. In that sense, he could be rather bashful and overcomplicate things in the process...

"Regardless of your rationale, your heroism saved my life. I am profoundly grateful."

Iggy shook the tips of his branches gently. Alk watched on with his arms folded and a hint of satisfaction in his gaze.

He's bashful indeed... Oh!

Perhaps a little belatedly, I was struck by a very pertinent question.

"What if another insect like that comes for you, Iggy? We must think of a way to protect you!" I said.

Just picturing that giant bug again sent shivers up my spine. If they had a penchant for trees with a plentiful supply of mana, then Iggy was still vulnerable.

Perhaps we could put a mosquito net over him? Or surround him with some kind of repellent?

The problem was that I didn't know how to obtain either of those things—not even with my skill. I was still hemming and hawing over it when I felt something soft nudge my shoulder. I turned to see Sylph looking at me with a thoughtful expression. Even her frown looked gorgeous with her absolutely perfect eyebrows—I bet any expression of hers would've been equally beautiful, bird or not.

"I may be able to help with your insect problem," she said. "You struggle with them, don't you, Fran?"

"Yes, I...I don't handle them especially well, but that isn't to say that I *cannot* deal with them entirely. If they are slow or completely still, I can usually manage..."

"I see. And what do you think about spiders?"

“Spiders...?” I echoed nervously.

Spiders. They *were* bugs, and they did look somewhat unsettling...but they didn’t dart around like other insects and tended to stay on their webs instead. And once a spider had built a web and I knew where it was, I could simply make the choice not to look. If Sylph was suggesting that spiders ate those *other* monsters, I could tolerate them even more!

“Spiders don’t particularly bother me as long as they stay on their webs, I suppose.”

Alk looked down at me and stroked his chin. “Fran. Sylph intends to call on a relative of widow spiders. If the sight of it has you bursting into tears, I will only say, ‘I told you so.’”

“Widow spiders? I think I’ve seen one in a reference book before...”

Desperate to recall something, I dug fairly deeply to unearth the relevant memory. I could remember having found a sketch of one in a book in my grandfather’s study. It had a round body and...

“Is it black with red eyes? And excels in hunting?”

“Correct. However, they are rather sizable when fully grown. You nearly cried at the sight of a giant longhorn. Will you be able to handle a widow?” Alk asked.

I swallowed. “It will spend most of its time on its web, won’t it...? I shall simply ignore it, then!”

Seeing as I couldn’t ensure Iggy’s safety all by myself, I had to be ready to make a sacrifice or two. Even if it took a *lot* of willpower... Besides, unlike that *thing* from before, spiders were useful! It wasn’t like it would attack me from its web, so surely I’d be okay...right?

“You may turn that frown upside down, Fran. I shall ensure the spider I choose is an obedient one,” Sylph said.

I must have been wearing quite the expression because her wind caressed my back in a highly soothing manner. Compared to most spiders, however, I decided that the round, black creature from the sketch had actually been rather charming! I was *sure* I would be fine. I could handle it!

As Sylph spread her wings, and I could hear her singing accompanying her magic, Alk lowered his voice. “In any case, giant longhorns will tend to avoid anywhere they sense a moderate human presence,” he said.

“But there isn’t a guarantee of that, is there? Better to be safe than sorry!”

Besides, repelling those insects wouldn’t just benefit Iggy—it would allow the crops we planted to grow big and strong too!

Despite being at the root—no pun intended—of all the hubbub, Iggy was leisurely stretching out his branches.

“I don’t suppose I can blame him. This weather *is* glorious today.” I looked up at the beautifully clear sky. My hair fluttered in the tapering breeze from Sylph’s spell.

So much had happened again today. It felt like I had been rushed off my feet since the second I woke up. Still, better my day be packed with purpose than opportunities to brood!

“Now that we have a plan of action for you, Iggy, why don’t we plant some potatoes? Hopefully, it’ll all go well...”

“Don’t expect any assistance from me. Just be sure that you don’t hurt yourself,” said Alk, who had firmly settled himself beneath Iggy, who was eagerly warming himself in the sunlight. The two of them were in the spot where Gnome had left some grass, and the sapling was casting a perfect shadow over it, making for an ideal place to relax.

“I’ll be fine! Working in the fields wouldn’t suit you anyway!” I called back.

I didn’t especially mind that he had decided it was time for a break. Besides, I couldn’t imagine him working in the field under the hot sun... Sitting on that underground altar in quiet dignity suited him much better. Daughter to a nobleman, I was unused to labor myself, but with Teiren’s memories, I knew I could be a nobleman’s daughter who was *also* able to toil in a field.

“There are so many delicious-sounding possibilities! Baked potatoes with butter, potato mochi, potato pancakes...”

“Don’t ya think about nothin’ but your stomach anymore, m’lady?”

Salamander chuckled at his own jab.

I giggled. “There isn’t a single human being out there who doesn’t dream of a bountiful harvest.”

Besides, it was difficult *not* to think about food when I was enjoying myself so much! Salamander and I raced off toward the field where the other spirits were gathering. My body felt so light that I could’ve run laps around this island!

Epilogue

“Wow! To think that such a tiny creature could create such a large web!”

We watched the widow spider that Sylph had summoned spin its web. It was still just a spiderling, though it was already the size of my palm. Apparently, it had come by riding the wind that Sylph had created!

If memory served, doing that was called ballooning. According to Teiren, spiders didn’t just ride the wind—instead, they used the static electricity in the air...or something. But since Sylph had used her power this time around, maybe the electric stuff hadn’t played as much of a role.

“You really are fond of it, aren’t you?” came a soft voice from behind me.

I turned to see a woman smiling at me serenely. Her light green hair was tied up loosely, and she wore a skirt with floaty ruffles.

“Sylph! You’re in your human form today!”

“I realized that it would be more convenient to assume this form if I am to spend my time with you,” she said. Somehow, she seemed both bewitching and reserved all at once. This was my first time seeing her in this form since she’d arrived.

I supposed that it *would* be more difficult for a bird to work in the field than a human, not to mention the far more important matters of eating and drinking tasty treats!

“I almost didn’t realize it was you! I didn’t know you were capable of transforming,” I said.

“There are a fair number of spirits who can take on human form in order to blend in among them.” Sylph then grinned like a mischievous child as she told me that Salamander had a human form too. She also said that Undine’s true form was actually that of a fish! I was desperately curious to see both of them. “You know, I was worried that you might cry upon seeing the widow spider, but it seems I fretted for nothing.”

I laughed. “It was more adorable in the flesh than I’d imagined. It’s like a big stuffed animal, really!”

The way the spider kept moving about its web was surprisingly cute. Its jet-black body and bright red eyes were the same as the sketch in the reference book I’d seen, but overall, the spider had a short, wide shape. Both its head and body were rounded, and its legs were short and thick. As I watched it toddle around on the fine silver netting of its web, I found the spider impossible to hate!

The spider’s first job was to protect Iggy, who had taken root on one side of the field. We had the spider spin its web between the treant’s branches. It was doing exactly as we had asked, and it was done in no time at all—a testament to Sylph’s handpicked helper! It was amazingly intelligent.

“I selected one who was a capable hunter, but who also wouldn’t intimidate a human. I am so glad you like it too, Fran.”

“And I’m grateful! Your thoughtfulness was what allowed me to embrace it so easily.”

Had Sylph not made such a careful choice, I might have disliked it as I did most insects. I was sure that it was no coincidence that *this* was the spider who had come over. The widow spider in the reference book had been far more insect-like and had been described as an agile creature. This one, however, was more graceful and had a cuter appearance. Sylph had chosen well indeed.

“Watching it work so hard to spin its web makes me think of it as an artist,” I said.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it? Such a shame that webs are delicate enough to fall to a storm.”

“But that fragility lends itself to the web’s beauty, don’t you think? Either way, I hope this little spiderling will work hard to protect Iggy and the field.”

Sylph agreed. “Yes, me too. Oh, see how large its web is compared to its body? That allows it to catch bigger prey and is a sign of its hunting prowess. I am sure this spider will prove itself useful to you.”

As we chatted, the spider was still working on its web before our eyes. If I

were to hold my arms to make a circle, the web was already bigger than that! And now the spider was waving its forelegs at us like it was promising to live up to Sylph's expectations. I certainly couldn't fault its enthusiasm! And in case it wasn't able to catch its own food, I could always order some meat for the spider. That wasn't to say that I wanted it to slack off, of course!

"Won't you give it a name, Fran?" Sylph prompted.

"Yes, I should. After all, it's one of us now! It seems a little cruel to just keep calling it 'widow spider,' or 'spiderling.'"

What sort of name would be suitable, I wonder? Was there something I could take inspiration from like I had with Iggy and Yggdrasil? Spiders... Spiders...

I tried rummaging through Teiren's memories and found the mythical "Tsuchigumo," the "Jorougumo," and the "Yamagumo," but none of them seemed to fit... I also came up with "Arachne," but that was a feminine name—I didn't know if this widow spider was male or female. I needed a name that could fit either while still being related to spiders.

Oh!

"Atla! How about 'Atla'? It's a name inspired by a spider god with a black body and red eyes."

"Just like this spiderling! It sounds perfect."

"The god in question spun a large web in a huge valley. I hope Atla can take inspiration from that and create its own big web!"

Though Teiren's memories were vague, it seemed that the deity in question was part of a fictional myth. Nevertheless, it was a spider, and it didn't seem to matter if the original was male or female, so to me, it seemed to be a fitting namesake! That said, Teiren seemed to remember something about the world ending once that spider deity had completed its web...but I didn't think that'd matter since I was just borrowing its name! It truly *would* be disastrous if the island crumbled the moment Atla finished its web...but it wasn't like I expected that to happen!

Anyway, Atla was waving its legs around, giving off a smug sense of joy. If it was happy, I was happy!

“We wouldn’t want to get in your way too much, Atla, so we shall take our leave now.”

Sylph laughed softly. “Do your best, little one. Or should I say, ‘Atla’?”

I gave Atla a wave and quietly turned away. It seemed a little sad to see us go...or perhaps I simply imagined that?

“Things are progressing very quickly, aren’t they?” Sylph remarked with awe as she danced in midair on the wind.

“They certainly are. I cannot believe we’re seeing sprouts after a mere three days!”

I was just as astounded as she was. The cultivated field was already filled with green as far as the eye could see. I was no expert when it came to gardening, but it *did* seem a little soon for our crops to be sprouting...

“I think it’s quite clear that the mana-rich soil is influencing their growth. I’d like to do some experimenting to find out how much difference a change in mana can make...”

I looked over the vast field before us. To give you a good idea of its size... Well, if we were to level it, it would make for a perfect tennis court. A real farmer would probably think it was tiny, but in my opinion, it was more than big enough for a beginner.

Gnome got to his feet. His presence made the greenery surrounding him look even more vibrant as if it felt especially comfortable around him. “Now, that *does* sound fascinating. Do I sense some more cultivation in our future?”

“In our *far* future, Gnome!” I giggled. “Even with everyone’s help, I already have my hands full managing *this* field!”

I had started keeping a record of my observations since we’d planted the potatoes and tomatoes, thinking they might come in handy. My remark about experimenting was just an idea to jot down later and nothing more at this point.

He shot me a smile. “Yes, of course. But the more one has to look forward to, the better. Let’s just make sure this field is on the right track first!”

Gnome still seems to think expansion is a serious goal of mine, doesn’t he?

“As long as this field can produce enough delicious food for everyone, it’s large enough for me,” I said.

After all, if we were *really* lacking in anything, I could always order it. I only wanted to cultivate this field to experience growing crops by myself. Expansion wasn’t something I was especially looking to do. And besides...

“My desire to eat tasty treats with everyone is stronger than my desire to farm!”

Gnome chuckled. “That doesn’t surprise me in the least, Fran. You’re right, of course. Delicious food *is* what gives life its vitality.”

My ultimate goal was to live a carefree life with everyone on this island while enjoying the tastiest of meals. That wasn’t to say that I *wasn’t* curious about the influence of mana-rich soil on crop growth, yield, and flavor, as well as the economic outcomes of those factors...but the truth was that markets and such were no concern of mine anymore. If I did ever choose to run any experiments, they would be purely for curiosity’s sake.

“I think it is about time we had a snack break, Gnome. Is there anything in particular that you’d like to eat today?”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Something refreshing, I think. The sun is truly beating down on us today.”

“Leave it to me! I shall call Alk and the other spirits to join us, and then we can have a lovely tea time together!”

I swiped a finger across my skill tablet. As usual, the screen was crammed full of tantalizing delicacies. Gnome was right in that the sun was strong and hot today.

“Something cool would be nice, like jelly or mousse—but there are already so many varieties of both...” I pondered out loud.

Mousse could be nice, but on a day like today, it felt like a simple jelly would be more refreshing than something creamy and dense. There were jellies with pieces of fruit in them, others made with fruit purée, almond tofu, jellies made with liquor, and ones that came in the most adorable little jars... I’d been perusing the “Summer Desserts” section for some time now, but everything

looked so good, it was hard to make a decision!

Just then, a shadow fell over my tablet. It was quickly followed by a voice from above me. “Tea time already? Did you manage to make any progress in your field inspection?”

I shrieked before immediately slapping my hands over my mouth. But unfortunately, everyone had already heard the peculiar noise I’d made... Either way, I didn’t have to turn around to know that the newcomer had been Alk.

I wish he wouldn’t sneak up on me like that! If he wants to give me a heart attack, he sure is going the right way about it!

“None of those look especially filling,” he said. “That one, however, seems tempting.”

“For goodness’ sake, Alk! You already know that I’ll order you whatever you like. There’s no need to give me a fright, is there?”

Ignoring my indignation, he reached over from behind me and pointed at a colorful jelly that came in a round jar. Transparent jelly sat atop a layer of milk pudding, and it was packed with large pieces of fruit. It almost reminded me of a herbarium bottle. The item *did* seem more filling than the other offerings, though, given that it contained pudding, jelly, and fruit all in one.

“This dessert is similar and looks just as interesting,” I said.

“It’s rather blue... Are you certain that it’s edible?”

“It says it’s a deep-sea jelly! The color comes from an herb called butterfly pea. It’s perfectly edible.”

A layer of blue jelly sat on top of a layer of milk jelly, making for an altogether striking dessert. It was accented by colorful beads filled with fruit purée, making it look like jellyfish or other deep-sea creatures were floating about. In short, it was as much a feast for the eyes as for the belly! Since its coloring came from a natural herb rather than artificial agents, it was safe to eat too.

“If you’re curious, all I need to do is order it,” I said. “It’s jelly, so you’ll be able to eat the whole thing in just a few bites.”

I still had plenty of points, and not only did we have Alk with his supernatural

stomach, but we had Salamander, someone who was capable of burning up and swallowing anything! And in any case, I had a pretty healthy appetite when it came to sweets too. You could say I had an extra stomach reserved for them!

I ordered some candy alongside the jelly that we could snack on while we were working. There were flat ones made with plenty of fruit juice that had caught my eye. They came in a box that you could slide open easily to get out, so they were perfect for when your hands were covered in dirt.

I called out the spirits, who were all busy doing their own things, while spreading out the mountain of treats. “The snacks have been ordered! It’s tea time, everyone!”

I was surrounded by cries of joy, bursts of flame, splashes of water, and the calming rustling of wind and grass. The black dragon watched the scene, and his eyes softened with amusement. Though he was in his human form, the sight of the spirits frolicking by his side was like something in a classical painting. I felt a little smug knowing that I was considered to be a part of their world. I sincerely hoped that this happiness could continue, if only for a short while longer.

A prayer for eternal peace accompanied by the fragility of translucent summer jelly... How was that for poetic?

“I’m glad to see you all in such high spirits,” I said. “It just goes to show that the island is as peaceful as ever today, doesn’t it?”

I sighed for a moment, taking in the gorgeous sight of the jelly sparkling in the sunlight. And then I took a step toward the hustle and bustle, not wanting to be left out of it for even a second longer.



Afterword

It's nice to meet you! My name is Yoneori.

I started writing this work with the intention of bringing happiness to readers by allowing them to enjoy delicious delicacies so proudly produced by various eateries, and from all kinds of places too, all from the comfort of their own homes. And now, I'm able to say that *Meals Made to Order: How to Domesticate Your Dragon with Delicacies!* has officially been published! Not only that, but a manga version will be serialized in *B's LOG COMIC*! I can't stop thinking about how wonderful it is that you'll all be able to read my story in various formats. Also, volume 5 of the manga I am writing, *Suterare Seijo no Isekai Gohantabi* (*The Abandoned Saint's Otherworldly Foodie Road Trip*), should be coming out in February 2023.

I couldn't have done it without all of you! Thank you so, so much!

To round things off, I'd like to give a mention to my editor W, who stuck by me to the very end despite my incompetence and helped me out so patiently. I always want to give a mention to LINO too, who drew such wonderfully awesome and adorable illustrations.

My deepest gratitude goes out to everyone who read the web version of *Meals Made to Order* on *Shosetsuka ni Naro* as well as everyone who picked up a copy of this book.

If I can be a little selfish, nothing would make me happier than meeting you all again in another volume. I hope you'll stick with our daring sacrificial damsel, our gluttonous dragon, and our weird and wonderful spirits!



Author: yoneori Illustrator: LINO

MEALS made to ORDER:

HOW TO DOMESTICATE YOUR

DRAGON

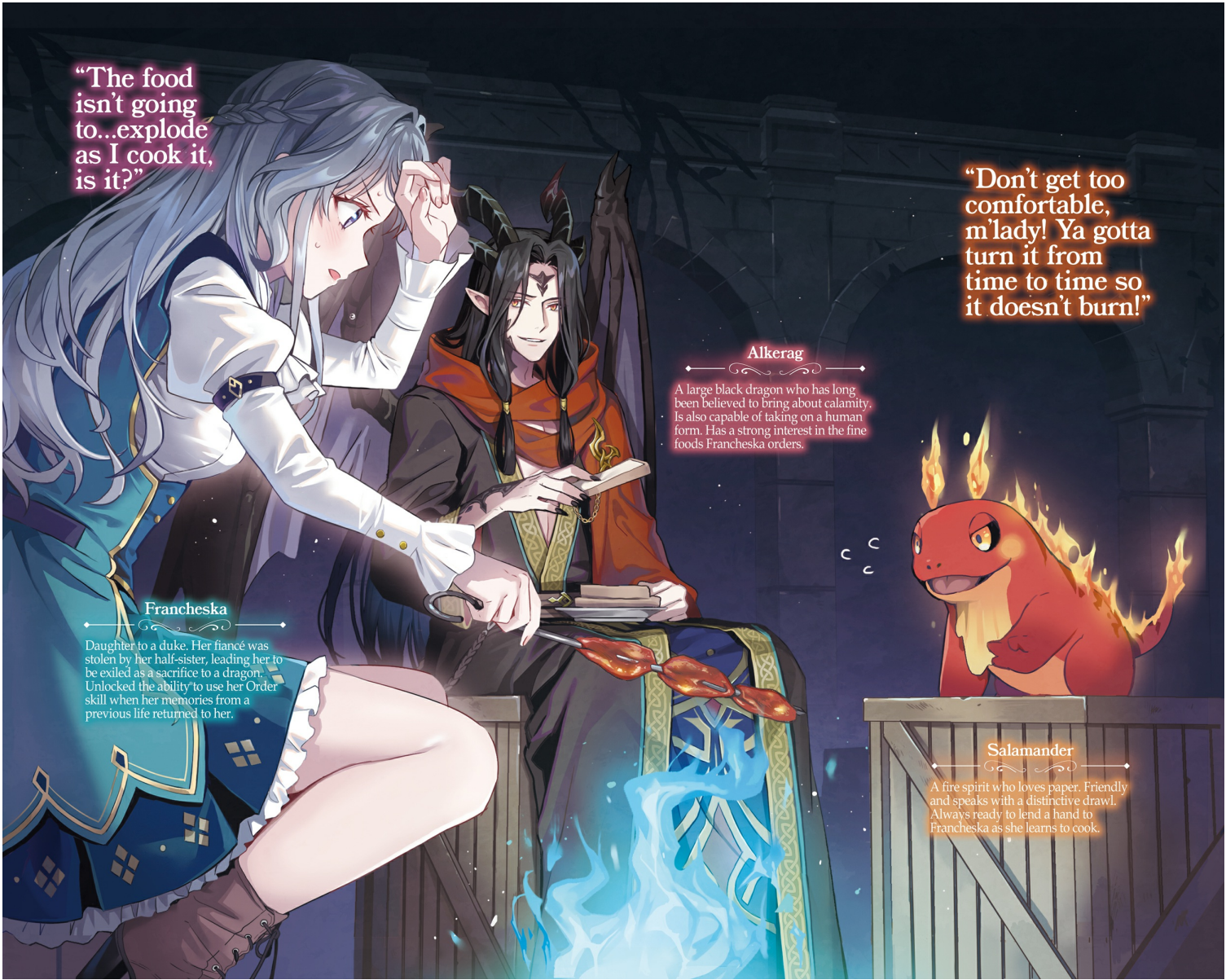
WITH DELICACIES!



It opened its scarlet jaws to reveal rows of sharp fangs just before its voice rumbled out from the depths of its belly and reverberated over my head. A powerful magic emanated from its body, pushing pinpricks into my skin.

“Are you the one who disturbed my slumber, child?”

MEALS made to **ORDER:**
HOW TO DOMESTICATE YOUR
DRAGON
WITH DELICACIES!



“The food isn’t going to...explode as I cook it, is it?”

Francheska

Daughter to a duke. Her fiancé was stolen by her half-sister, leading her to be exiled as a sacrifice to a dragon. Unlocked the ability to use her Order skill when her memories from a previous life returned to her.

Alkerag

A large black dragon who has long been believed to bring about calamity. Is also capable of taking on a human form. Has a strong interest in the fine foods Francheska orders.

“Don’t get too comfortable, m’lady! Ya gotta turn it from time to time so it doesn’t burn!”

Salamander

A fire spirit who loves paper. Friendly and speaks with a distinctive drawl. Always ready to lend a hand to Francheska as she learns to cook.



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Meals Made to Order: How to Domesticate Your Dragon with Delicacies!

by Yoneori

Translated by Alexandra Owen-Burns Edited by T. Burke

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