

Restaurant to Another World



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NOVEL

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It was that same aroma combined with the inviting shouts that managed to pull shoppers toward them.

“Hey, what’s this white stew?”

From the large crowd came a middle-aged man who stepped forward to ask Pikke the question everyone was thinking.

“Hey there, sir! This is a stew made with knight sauce! You know, that legendary sauce created in a faraway country! How about it? Care to grab a bite?”

“You seem like a real man’s man, sir. And since you’re our first customer, we’ll treat you to an extra-large serving! How about it?”

The pair cheerfully smiled at the man as they continued to tempt him.

“You know what? Why the heck not. I’ll have a bowl.”

Almost pressured into it, the man handed Pakke two copper coins.

“That’s what I’m talking about! Here you go!”

“It’s hot, so be careful!”

The man’s face changed colors after sipping the stew. It was so delicious that he nearly cried out in shock. The large, soft, square pieces of greasy pork meat melted in his mouth. The warm and fluffy tubers, soaked in the savory stew, crumbled into pieces with each bite. The oranie had been boiled after being stir-fried with butter, lending it a delicious sweetness. Meanwhile, the sweet, orange karoots were properly soft after being put over fire. This stew was on another level from the average salted stuff that the man often made himself.

The man was enjoying this hot stew in the best of conditions on a frigid day. But even without that very specific set of conditions, this was an amazing feast.

“This is amazing! Another bowl, please!” The man immediately thrust his empty bowl and some more copper coins at Pikke.

“Thank ya very much! Eat as much as you’d like!”

“The stew goes great with bread, by the way! See, you dip the bread into the stew and let it soak in the juices! It gets nice and soft, and when you bite into it,

all the stew juices come flowing out into your mouth!” Pakke explained to the man and the crowd with a smile on her face, all the while pouring the man a new bowl of stew. She glanced at the stall next to them selling rye bread. Pakke could hear the sounds of people in the crowd gulping in anticipation.

“Hey, let me get a bowl!”

“Me too! Me too!”

“Hey, don’t forget about me!”

“C’mon, everyone! We’ve got delicious rye bread here! Goes great with that stew you got over there!”

“Seconds! I want seconds!”

Just like that, the large crowd of onlookers turned into a massive herd of customers, each ordering a bowl of stew for themselves. After getting their hands on some, they then went to the stall next door and bought a small piece of rye bread to go with their stew. The sounds of satisfied sighs filled the air, and some of the customers even came back for seconds.

“All right, folks! First come, first served! We’ve only made this much for today!”

“Once it’s gone, it’s gone! Grab some stew while you still can!”

By midday, the stew was all gone. Pikke and Pakke had acquired more than enough funds to get to the next town.

“Today’s the super fun Day of Satur!”

“Yay!”

Pikke and Pakke left their belongings at the inn and sang their out-of-tune song while walking through some woods on the outskirts of town. On occasion, they could hear the growling of beasts or monsters of some sort, but the couple paid them no mind. Most wild animals were cowards and wouldn’t dare to come near if they heard loud noises like the pair were making. Even if they did try to attack, few creatures could keep up with halflings who were running as fast as they could.

“What should I get today?”

“Um, um... We didn’t have any leftovers today, so knight sauce sounds great to me!”

“Good call! Let’s do it! We got money, too!”

The halfling couple happily chatted amongst themselves, for today was a good day. The man running the bread stall next to them ended up selling out at the same time they did. Grateful for their help, the man expressed his thanks to the pair. They even got some unexpected extra funds! As luck would have it, the first customer of the day was also the man who ran the town’s inn. He paid the pair 115 silver coins and seven copper coins to teach him the knight sauce recipe. Thanks to him, they were loaded.

This was the perfect day to visit the Restaurant to Another World.

“Just a little further! It’s the clearing right over there!” Pikke happily explained to Pakke.

In Pikke’s hand was a parchment with a variety of different things scribbled on it, including a mark that looked like a cat. This was the secret known amongst halflings; the mark that signified the “Door of Nekoya.”

Halfling maps were special. This race of people was rather curious and often acted on impulse, so they tended to travel far and wide across the world. Each of them had knowledge of a variety of different areas, so when halflings came across one another, they would take out their maps and exchange information. The unspoken rule was to be honest with each other.

No secrets.

As a race that survived by going on one journey to the next, knowing the land they were headed to was increasingly important. One well-known landmark of sorts was the “Door of Nekoya.”

Once every seven days, on the Day of Satur, black doors with cat signs on them appeared all over the world. This door was linked to “Nekoya,” a Restaurant to Another World. It was there that they could eat foods from a world not their own.

The meals one could find at the Restaurant to Another World were extremely strange but amazingly delicious. It was recommended that on the Day of Satur, should a black door be nearby, one should go to grab a scrumptious bite. Pikke and Pakke were both very familiar with the door and the restaurant that existed beyond it. It only made sense that two halflings who were gifted cooks would be that much more interested in anything cooking-related than your average person. They were also known for being quite the gourmands in general.

Both of them had visited the restaurant multiple times while they were still traveling with their respective families. That's why the two of them made it a point to drop in on the Day of Satur if there was a door in the area.

"Annnnd, we're here! Awesome, it's there!" said Pakke.

"Annnnd, nobody else is here!" said Pikke.

After spotting the black door in the center of the forest, just off the beaten path, the two halflings searched the area to make sure nobody else was near.

The Door of Nekoya could only be used once on a given Day of Satur, and as such, people who lived near a door would often try to keep it to themselves. One famous example of this amongst the halflings were the lizardmen. They had an altar where the door appeared and would more than likely attack anybody from outside the tribe who tried to use it. There was also another customer who appeared late at night. She was known among halflings as the "Midnight Mistress" and wore a bright red dress whenever she popped up. Every time she visited the restaurant, the woman would order beef stew, the most expensive item on the menu. It was more than likely that if anybody ever got near the door she used, they'd be burned to ashes.

Thus, the halflings considered it good manners to search the area around a Door of Nekoya before using it.

"Doesn't seem like anybody's used it for a while."

"Then let's go!" cried Pikke.

"Yup, yup!" said Pakke.

After confirming that nobody had been near the door any time recently, the halflings held hands. As Pikke pushed open the door, the familiar sound of

ringing bells filled the air.

“Welcome! Oho, well if it isn’t Pikke and Pakke! It’s been a while.” The master took a moment to look away from the busy interior of the restaurant and greet the couple.

“Sure has! When was the last time we dropped in?”

“Um, I think it was around the end of summer!”

The pair, having been to the restaurant multiple times, smiled and responded. The small people that looked like children to the master were in fact full-grown halfling adults. Because the race didn’t live in any one place, they weren’t “regulars” who could visit the restaurant every week. He got plenty of halfling customers who just happened to be in the vicinity of a door, but he rarely saw the same people twice.

“More importantly, could you give us a menu, sir?”

“Oh, oh! And what’s today’s daily special?”

“All right, all right,” the master said. “Hold on just a second. Let’s see, today’s daily special is cream croquette.” The master couldn’t help but smile at the pair, as excitable as always.

“Cream croquette?!”

“That’s the one with the knight sauce and the fried bread crumbs!”

Maybe it was fated. The halflings turned to each other and smiled.

“Can we get two orders of cream croquettes to start with, sir? Oh, and I’d like some rice, too!”

“I’ll have bread! Oh, oh, and can you bring a menu with you, too? We’re gonna eat a whole bunch today!”

Pikke and Pakke placed their orders before even sitting down, eventually finding a spot and waving their legs excitedly from atop their chairs.

“Yup, you got it! You small people are always bundles of energy, eh?” The master once again chuckled to himself before retreating to the back to start frying the croquettes.

“Wow, there are all sorts of people here today, Pikke!”

“You’re right! Wowee, Pakke!”

As the two halflings waited for their food, they began to people-watch. The Restaurant to Another World was packed with a variety of different races that day. There was a young woman enthusiastically eating a plate of minced meat cutlet covered in sauce. Elsewhere, another young woman in beautiful clothes happily enjoyed an ice-cold, sweet “parfait.” Meanwhile, a young man who looked like some sort of merchant was furiously scribbling down notes as he devoured a dish of spaghetti Neapolitan.

Next to him was a lizardman eating “omelet rice.” The creature wore a blank expression on its face, making it impossible to tell what it was thinking. Nearby was an elven man with a thin, magic sword sheathed at his waist. He was indulging in a plate of “natto spaghetti” made with fermented beans of some kind. Pikke had yet to give this menu item a try.

There was even a table of about 100 tiny people wearing the same clothes, all about the size of the palm of Pikke’s hand, eating a single plate of “pancakes.” It was very rare to see this many different races gathered together in one spot in their world, but the food at this restaurant broke down the barriers between them all. Everyone came here with the same goal and purpose: to eat delicious food. The Restaurant to Another World truly was a special place.

“This is so fun, Pikke!”

“You’re right! I bet we’d never grow tired of coming here every day if we could, Pakke!” The two continued their conversation as the master approached their table with food in hand.

“Here you are, folks. Two orders of cream croquettes.”

The master set down two hot plates. There were fresh greens, small red marmetts, and three light brown cream croquettes on each.

“Wowee!”

“Wowee!”

The two raised their voices in unison. Both halflings excitedly grabbed their

utensils, looking forward to their first meal of the day. Their knives cut through the croquettes with great ease and an ever-so-satisfying sound. From the cut oozed white knight sauce mixed with some sort of red substance. The aroma from the sauce caused the halflings' nostrils to flare. Unable to hold themselves back any longer, they both took bites of their respective croquettes.

A variety of flavors exploded in their mouths, the first of which was the knight sauce's unique, sweet and rich flavor. However, mixed in with that was the flavor of the sea. It wasn't fish meat but something else entirely.

"Mm!"

"Mm!"

Pikke and Pakke once again raised their voices simultaneously, letting the steam from the food in their mouths escape as they munched. They both swallowed, enjoying the sweet knight sauce that flowed forth with each bite into the croquette alongside the other ingredients' savory quality.

"This is super-duper delish!" said Pikke.

"I can taste the ocean!" Pakke said. The two shared their thoughts on the bites they each took. The Restaurant to Another World had knocked it out of the park yet again.

"Let's see..." Pakke said. "I'm gonna try this one next!"

"Then I'm trying this one!"

The halflings each reached for a different cream croquette, almost as if they'd planned it ahead of time.

The rice and bread mixed well with the rich flavor of the cream croquettes, producing an altogether different experience than that of the first one they devoured. They then took their time patiently explaining the innards of their respective croquettes to each other. That kind of patience was a rare virtue for halflings.

"This one is filled with smoked meat and mushrooms!" Pikke's cream croquette was just as described. Inside of it was stir-fried, finely seasoned and flavored smoked meat. This meat had its fat stripped from it and was soaked in

knight sauce. Meanwhile, the thinly sliced mushrooms were salted just right so as to carefully balance the sweetness of the sauce. They were dried beforehand, which allowed them to soak in the flavors of the meat and the sweetness of the knight sauce, producing an even more refined flavor with each bite. It was that cream mixed with the flavors of the smoked meat and mushrooms that spread throughout the mouth. The rice went well with the texture of the meat.

“This one has all kinds of yellow bits in it! It’s sweet!”

Meanwhile, Pakke’s croquette was filled with yellow vegetables of some kind. The small bits of yellow vegetables were incredibly sweet, almost like a fruit. She’d never seen anything like it before. Each bite into the yellow bits produced a sweet flavor that combined with the knight sauce’s own unique sweetness. It was so overwhelming that one couldn’t be faulted for thinking they were eating some kind of dessert. The sweet, otherworldly bread topped with butter made for an excellent side dish.

“Wow, cool! Let me have a bite! Whoa, it’s soooooo sweet and delish!”

“Then let me try yours! Wow! The meat tastes amazing!”

Pikke and Pakke each took bites out of the other’s cream croquettes, spelling the end of this first dish.

“Wowee, that was delicious! What should we have next?”

“Hm, let’s see...”

The two halflings mashed their faces together and looked down at the menu. They wanted more. While they might have only been as large as human children, the couple could eat many times more than most adults. Their meal had only just begun.

“That sure was scrumptious, Pikke.”

“Yup, yup! It’s been so long since the last time that I think I might’ve eaten too much!”

In front of the two were the remains of enough food for approximately 10

people. By the time they left the restaurant (though not before ordering sandwiches to go for the next day's lunch), it had grown dark. The couple wore huge smiles on their faces.

"Let's go home!"

"Sounds good! Can't wait to sleep on a nice, soft bed!"

The halflings exchanged words and hurried down the path home.

"Where should we go next, Pikke?"

"Let's see... That one cream croquette that tasted like the ocean was really good! I think I wanna go to the sea, Pakke!"

And just like that, the halflings decided the next destination on their journey.

"Oh, good idea! Then let's grab a boat! I've never been on a big one before!"

"Me neither! That's a super good idea! Let's do it!"

The happy halfling couple chatted amongst themselves, their path forward lit by the full moon in the sky.

Chapter 10:

Okonomiyaki The other world consisted of two continents: the Eastern Continent and the Western Continent.

The Western Continent was a series of never-ending fields and forests. Unlike the Eastern Continent, where the lost Great Kingdom unified all the nations into one, the countries of the Western Continent were still very much independent of one another.

One of those very countries was the Mountain Nation. Half of the country was surrounded by mountains, as one might imagine. Souemon worked as a bodyguard there. He had begun frequenting the Restaurant to Another World five years earlier.

At the time, Souemon found himself befriending a certain halfling. The small man traveled far and wide across the Western Continent, creating songs and reciting poems to passersby and folks in villages for money. This halfling, who referred to himself as a bard, was a bit skeevy, almost rat-like in appearance.

The two men got along well, and Souemon even invited the smaller man to his home as a guest. That was when the halfling told him the location of a magical door connected to a Restaurant to Another World, located near the capital of the Mountain Nation. Souemon could barely believe the words he heard. If anything, he had great reason not to. However, as a samurai of the Mountain Nation, he felt he should at least visit the place on the day the halfling told him to, if only to confirm the story one way or the other.

That was when he came face to face with it. That was when he discovered the Restaurant to Another World and its unbelievable food...as well as the customer he would butt heads with for years to come.

One evening...

Like always, the bell on Nekoya's door rang as Souemon walked in.

Souemon immediately recognized the man's presence as a blast of salty air hit

him upon entering the restaurant. *The same time again?* he thought. *Curses!*

He let out a sigh. "You're here again, I see. Diviner of the Ocean Nation."

Sitting there as usual was a face that Souemon had grown very accustomed to seeing. The man's skin was as pale as snow, almost as though he had never once left his house, despite coming from the Ocean Nation where avoiding a tan was considered impossible. His face was thin, masking his age. The person in front of Souemon was a regular of the restaurant and one that he did not get along with.

"Well, well," the man said. "If it isn't the sword-swinging ape... Oh, my apologies. I meant samurai of the Mountain Nation."

This fox-like man was named Doushun, and he was a diviner in the Ocean Nation's palace. He glared sharply at Souemon, returning his greeting with venom. His words greatly annoyed the samurai, but it was a rule not to draw swords in the Restaurant to Another World, so he decided to battle with words instead.

"Hmph! You're as tactless as ever. Why would you ever come here the same hour as I?"

"That's my question, too. As a palace diviner, I am quite busy. You're nothing but a court guard. Should you not be able to come here whenever you want?"

Doushun shrugged, once again spitting hot fire in Souemon's direction. The air between the men was poisonous. Since the magic doors appeared wherever they felt like, the restaurant would occasionally get customers that simply did not get along well. For example, the elves and the dwarves, the knights and the mages, or citizens of the Kingdom and citizens of the Empire.

Souemon and Doushun were the perfect example of this little problem.

The Ocean Nation had put resources into academics and the divine arts so as to make crossing the ocean a safer process. This was so that they could proceed to do trade with the eastern regions facing the ocean, especially now that they were at peace. Meanwhile, the Mountain Nation was known for its swordplay, a skill developed long ago in order to defend its citizens from demons and monsters as well as cut through mountains. The two countries were famous

throughout the Western Continent for having spectacularly bad relations. It only made sense that these two neighboring countries, with their completely different priorities and values, didn't get along well. It certainly didn't help that they were about equal in might.

Unfortunately for Souemon, Doushun had also learned of a door somewhere in the Ocean Nation from a halfling friend. And so every seven days without fail, the two men found themselves bumping into each other at the Restaurant to Another World. As a result of their jobs, they generally ended up coming in at the same time, just around dusk. This meant that these two regulars were often seen together as a pair.

Since they got along so poorly, the problem would be solved if one of them simply delayed their arrival by a half hour or so, but they both considered that to be losing to the other. This was how it had to be.

The master of the restaurant suddenly emerged from the kitchen and greeted the two sneering men with a smile. "Welcome, you two. Take a seat wherever you'd like."

"Mm, thank you."

"That I will."

After returning his greeting, the two men sat down at the same table in the back of the restaurant near the kitchen. There were a handful of other customers already inside; some easterners and other races. The pair briefly glared at one another before turning away and calling for the master. They didn't even have to look at the menu.

"Master, I'm ready to order."

"Master, might I place my order?"

Their orders were already set in stone. In the five years since the two became customers, they'd tried all sorts of dishes. Each was delicious in its own way, but these were the dishes the men settled on.

"Aye. The usual?"

Both men nodded.

“Mmhm. I’ll have pork okonomiyaki with lots of sauce.”

“I’ll take an order of okonomiyaki. Seafood, please. And as much dried bonito as it can handle.”

Both men believed this dish most capable of bringing out the deliciousness of “sauce” and “dried bonito,” two of the restaurant’s unique, amazing condiments.

“You got it. I’ll be right back.” The master returned to the kitchen.

“Seafood as usual, eh? Shouldn’t you be tired of it already? You are from the Ocean Nation, are you not?”

“And what of you? Beast meat should be common to someone from the Mountain Nation. Am I wrong?”

After commenting on each other’s orders, they proceeded to indulge in small talk while partaking in the restaurant’s famous water.

“So the Ocean Nation plans on increasing its business deals with the Empire, then?”

“I see. Dwarf swordsmithing, you say?”

Of course, nothing about their talk was small. They were gathering information about their respective nations. There were times when this could even lead to a decent payout later. The two men sat together despite not getting along in order to use each other.

Being a diviner meant being present in the Ocean Nation’s palace, which also meant having relationships with merchants and nobles alike. On the other hand, being an accomplished samurai who even became a guard of the emperor himself meant having a wide web of connections and relationships. The two men led extremely different lives, which was why they found their respective stories so very fresh and even useful.

However, just like that, their conversation came to an end.

“Here you are, gentlemen. Okonomiyaki.” The master brought out two black metal plates at the same time and placed them down in front of the pair.

“Ooh, it’s finally here!”

“I’ve been waiting for this!”

The aroma coming from the food on the hot metal dishes made Souemon and Doushun smile with glee. The fresh okonomiyaki was served on the black metal plates to keep it from getting cold. They could hear the faint sizzling noises coming from it.

The okonomiyaki was made from a mix of flour, green cabbage, yams, and a slew of other ingredients fried together. On top of the bright yellow and green vegetables was a wealth of black sauce, followed by a grid-like pattern drawn with mayonnaise. At first glance, there appeared to be wood shavings of some sort dancing across the top of the okonomiyaki, except they smelled of the sea.

Sprinkled atop of that, almost as if to add color to the dish, were thick pieces of green seaweed. All of these ingredients combined to make the okonomiyaki surprisingly colorful. However, its aroma was nothing to sneeze at. The sauce dripped off of the okonomiyaki and onto the sizzling hot metal plate, sending up an aroma that sent a shock through Souemon and Doushun’s stomachs.

“Mm. I believe it’s time to eat,” Souemon said.

“Thank you for the food,” said Doushun.

Souemon and Doushun, both unable to resist the urge to dig in any longer, grabbed their chopsticks and began to eat nearly simultaneously. The wooden utensils cut through the soft, blanket-like okonomiyaki with ease. From the opening in the cut, the black sauce dripped down to the plate and sizzled, sending up a faint burnt smell. Souemon brought a piece of okonomiyaki to his mouth, all the while enjoying the smell coming from the dish.

It was hot.

Heat was the very first thing he felt. With the metal plate there to maintain the food’s hotness, the okonomiyaki was still piping hot.

“Ho, ho, I see you Mountain Nation types still eat like slobs!” Doushun sneered.

Souemon ignored Doushun’s words and opened his mouth to let the heat out.

After releasing the heat, all that remained was the aroma of the burnt sauce

and sourness. Once the okonomiyaki was cool enough for him to chew, he could finally enjoy crunching into the crispy outer layer and fluffy cabbage-filled interior.

All of these flavors melded together in his mouth. From the seaweed pieces came the aroma of the sea, and from the woodchip-looking dried bonito, the savoriness of fish.

The fatty pork had a gentle flavor to it not entirely unlike that of lion meat, though it lacked the gamey quality of the latter. The flavor of the oil-drenched flour mixed tightly with the sweet cabbage, further enhanced by the rich taste of the eggs and spicy red sauce. Enveloping all of that was the sweet and sour, savory-yet-gentle flavor of the mayonnaise.

This was a dish that took numerous flavors of the mountains and oceans, and combined them into one fine meal. This was the reason why Souemon was willing to deal with the intense initial heat of the first bite every time; he wanted to experience all these flavors at once. After sampling a variety of foods at the restaurant, this was the one he stumbled upon. Since that fateful day, it was all he ever ordered. Souemon was nowhere close to getting tired of it.

“Can you not be a bit more elegant during meal time if nothing else?”

Doushun shook his head in disbelief and cut a small piece from his okonomiyaki. He blew on it gently before placing it in his mouth.

“Mmph. As delicious as ever. There’s not a single trace of the smell of fish. Not only has the seafood been processed beautifully, these bonito flakes are simply delightful.”

Doushun found himself nodding his head in satisfaction as he expressed his opinions of the tiny, soft shripe and the savory krakeen. He understood that his favorite part of the dish, the bonito flakes, were made using some kind of fish element, but he hadn’t the slightest idea of how that became the small, delicious flakes that sat in front of him. He felt that if he were ever able to crack the code and found his own ocean country, its food culture would be unbeatable.

Which is why Doushun made it a point to order the same dish every single time he visited. That said, he couldn’t deny that he also ate it because it was

positively delicious.

After a brief period of time, both men finished their meals.

“Master, I’d like seconds.”

“Master, could you get me another dish?”

They placed their orders simultaneously.

“Aye, you got it. Okonomiyaki for the both of you, right? What kind?” the master asked his regulars, knowing full well what their answers would be.

“I will have seafood,” announced Souemon.

“I will have pork,” said Doushun.

As usual, the two men who were more alike than they’d ever care to admit looked away from each other as they placed their orders. After seeing the other man so thoroughly enjoy their okonomiyaki, they ended up wanting some for themselves. This happened every single time they sat together.

After finishing his meal, Souemon returned to the outskirts of town, letting out a sigh laced with the aroma of sauce. If he had a single complaint about the restaurant, it was that he had to bump into that accursed man every time he visited.

“How unfortunate. Nekoya would be that much better if that damned diviner never showed up again.” Souemon let the words slip from his mouth as if he were trying to cover for the fact that he actually enjoyed their earlier back and forth.

“Time to get to work again tomorrow!”

He returned to his everyday life, all the while excitedly waiting for the next seven days to pass...and thinking about his next confrontation with that man.

Chapter 11:

Pound Cake

Saturday morning.

After preparing the beef stew and having a light breakfast, the master took a brief moment to relax in the kitchen. He could have returned to his home on the third floor, but every week on Saturday at around this time, he got a visitor. It wouldn't be long before his guest arrived.

"Yo, top of the morning," a voice called. "I've got the goods."

From the loading elevator in the kitchen came a thin man with a wagon in tow.

"Thanks, man. I really appreciate it," the master replied, returning the greeting with a certain level of familiarity. The visitor was a friend of his that he'd known since elementary school. It made sense that they were casual with one another.

"It's no biggie. We're open on Saturdays anyway, so it's not like I'm doing anything crazy. Plus, I get paid." The man went to the giant refrigerator and began to unload into it cakes and treats that he had made himself.

On the first floor of Nekoya's building was a cake shop called the Flying Puppy. Its sign was, appropriately enough, that of a puppy with wings. This man inherited the shop from his father, a patissier. He was the master's childhood friend. The two middle-aged men were the same age, though the patissier already had two children of his own. The Flying Puppy's patissier was aware of Nekoya's secret business on Saturdays. When the two men were still elementary school kids, there were times when the patissier's parents were too busy to make dinner, so they'd give him money to eat at Nekoya. The previous master treated the boy just as he did his own grandson, and so he naturally came to know the restaurant's secret.

As far as the patissier was concerned, he owed Nekoya. When he was in college, he had a bike accident. When injuries from the crash left him paralyzed from the waist down, the previous master gave him a somewhat suspicious

“otherworldly elixir.” It was this medicine that saved him. Doctors called it a miraculous recovery. Truth be told, it really was something of a miracle.

And so after he finished his training as a patissier, he inherited his parent’s shop, the very same one in Nekoya’s building. He cooperated with the master as much as was possible. The patissier sold his goods to Western Cuisine Nekoya at wholesale prices, and more than half of the restaurant’s dessert items came from him.

“That’s everything! Whew, I’m starting to feel my age a bit. Hahaha. Oh, before I forget. Take this.”

The patissier finished putting the cakes that needed to be kept cold in the fridge and the ones that needed to be kept warm into warm storage. He then grabbed a box from his wagon and handed it to the master.

“The heck is this? Some kinda cake?”

The master tilted his head at the long box that had a silhouette of the Flying Puppy’s trademark winged canine on it. The sturdy gift box was heavier than it looked. From the inside, the master could detect the faint aroma of brandy. Whatever was in here used quite a bit of it. While there were cakes at the Flying Puppy that were made with some measure of alcohol, the master wasn’t familiar with any that were this obvious.

“It’s one of our prizes. You know how if you buy a hundred items from us, you get one whole cake of your choosing for free, right?” The patissier smiled as he explained the system to his friend.

At the Flying Puppy, he had a stamp system in which one piece of cake got the customer one stamp. Collect twenty stamps and a visitor got a free piece of cake. Collect a hundred and they got a whole cake. The master heard that this was particularly popular with working women in the neighborhood.

“A hundred pieces?” the master asked, confused. “Wait, don’t tell me it’s her.”

Hearing his friend’s words, the master immediately recalled the otherworldly customer in her early twenties who had undoubtedly eaten some hundred pieces of cake. She was one of his regulars.

“Yeah, her! You told me about her before, remember? She’s been showing up at your place every week for the past year, and she always orders two pieces of my pound cake! I believe you described her as a cutie. Could you get that to her? I know they don’t got fridges over there, so I made it so that it could be stored warm for at least a few weeks. Just don’t forget to tell her to eat it as soon as she opens it!”

“You got it. I’ll make sure to get it to her when she swings by.” The master agreed to his friend’s request and took the box from him. Now that he thought about it, last week she’d had something of a troubled look on her face. Something unfortunate might have happened to her. This could be the perfect pick-me-up.

Once every week was the day of trials.

“And so the day is upon me yet again...”

In the corner of the training ground appeared a black door with a picture of a cat on it. It was that very door that the high priestess of the Lord of Light, Celestine, cast her blue eyes upon, her beautiful blonde hair gently swaying behind her. She wore a troubled expression on her face.

This training ground was created specifically for the high priestess herself. Celestine was the only one with permission to enter this space. It took years to become a high priest or priestess, with most only reaching that position somewhere between their forties and fifties. Celestine, however, was granted the title at the incredibly young age of twenty. At the age of twenty-one, His Grace personally put her in charge of this monastery. Thus, the only people who knew this training ground’s secret were the previous head who was now in retirement and Celestine herself.

“Today. Today’s the day...” The young high priestess steadied herself and stood in front of the door.

Just looking at it was enough to make her mouth water, but she did her best to try and compose herself. Celestine’s “year of acceptance” was over. At this rate, she would be put face to face with her own weakness.

The Lord of Light that Celestine believed in was one that heavily prioritized self-control. Priests and priestesses were held to a higher standard than that of the average believer. This was especially the case for high priests and priestesses who would go on to lead the church itself, and so after a “year of acceptance,” they were to practice severe self-control going forward.

The Lord of Light and his loyal servant, His Grace and one of the legendary four heroes, preached to their followers that was easy enough to not be tempted by something one did not know existed. However, that could hardly be considered defeating one’s desires and gaining selfless virtue. The only true way to ascend to that level was to understand why such desires were so tempting and then train in true self-control.

The “year of acceptance” was a practice born from that idea. Alcohol, tobacco, sweets, cosmetics... It wasn’t just about matters of the heart or purity, it was also about the many luxury items in the world. And so for a full year, followers of the Lord of Light who wished to attain the high status of priest or priestess were allowed to indulge in all of these things as much as they so desired. After that year was over, they would then train to cut themselves off from all of those desires.

It went without saying that failure was not a rare thing. It was believed that self-control was something that had to come from within. And so, high priests and priestesses were capable of getting their hands on as many luxury goods as they wanted, which made cutting them out all the more difficult. As a result, the church believed that it was all right for those who became high priests or priestesses to have one or two things that they dabbled in. It was normal. Even His Grace, one of the four heroes who had saved the world from the dark lord decades ago, would occasionally enjoy a good smoke of his pipe. These things made people human.

Which was why Celestine was so odd. As the church required, she went through her “year of acceptance,” and on the following day, cut back on all of her desires. This happened some two years ago. Since then, she had been a steel fortress of self-control. It was this determination of spirit and her own talent that got her promoted to the position of high priestess at such a young age. Her exploits only grew, as one year ago during the great Lich Hunt, she

performed admirably despite being the youngest high priestess on the field. This led to her being entrusted with an entire monastery all her own.

Which is how she ended up standing in front of this black door.

This is no good. No good at all.

Celestine slowly staggered her way to the door. Just beyond it was an entire world of luxuries and magical items she would never be able to acquire in her world. When her precursor stepped down, Celestine learned of this door's existence. She stepped beyond it and found herself entranced by what she found. That was one year ago... With her second "year of acceptance" now finished, Celestine found herself unable to shed her desires.

Frustrated with herself, she slowly opened the door and was met with the ringing of bells; the sound of defeat.

"Welcome!"

Celestine quietly entered the restaurant only to be met with the smiling face of the middle-aged master. To her, he looked more like a demon attempting to lure her into depravity.

I-It's not too late...

Indeed. She could just turn around and leave. Celestine was nothing like the common folk hungrily indulging themselves in the food of this restaurant. Since she was a high priestess of the great Lord of Light, she needed to practice self-control! She internally repeated these words to herself and attempted to make her exit...

That is, until the demon—no, the master—shattered those plans.

"Will you be getting pound cake again? Oh, by the way, today's pound cake is rum raisin!"

And just like that, Celestine's legs stopped moving.

Rum raisin?!

Including the first time she visited this restaurant, Celestine had only had the pleasure of tasting that most ephemeral of flavors but three times. The thought alone was enough to revive the memories of that incredible experience on her

tongue, and she quickly swallowed the saliva building in her mouth.

“So what’ll it be?”

“I-I’ll have some!”

“Aye! Coming right up!”

The master smiled back at her. His truly was the smile of a demon of temptation. Caught in the throes of defeat, Celestine took a seat at the nearest table.

I lost... I’m such a fool!

She could see the faces of her fellow high priests and priestesses flash by in her mind. Despite having the power that one possessed in such a position, Celestine’s elders were incapable of entirely cutting themselves off from temptation. Somewhere in her heart, she had always looked down on them for it. She could feel the wave of guilt washing over her. Celestine was a steel fortress of self-control? What a joke. She was no different than her colleagues; just as weak of heart as the rest of them.

A-And what’s with this place, anyway?! If they just offered the same flavor every single time, I’d have grown tired of it by now!

Every time Celestine visited this restaurant, the flavor of its seductive “pound cake” was different. Every single time.

On one visit, Celestine found herself face to face with a type of pound cake filled with dried fruits. A different time, she indulged in one filled with slightly bitter but incredibly sweet “chocolate” of some sort. She encountered a pound cake with some kind of sweet, green stuff with roasted beans. Then there was the time when the pound cake had a yellow filling that tasted like egg... Every time she came here, the pound cake she ate was completely different. She only ever encountered the same flavor once every few months at the very most.

And then there were the special types, like the yellow “Halloween Pound Cake,” which had the sweet flavor of vegetables, and the “Hinamatsuri Special,” which featured pink, yellow, and green layers. She only saw each of these once throughout the year. This, combined with the fact that the restaurant only appeared once every seven days, made the whole thing that much harder to

give up.

And what's the big idea, showing up today and offering rum raisin of all things, just after my "year of acceptance" wrapped up?! That's not fair!

There was no way that someone of the other world could possibly know of her training, but Celestine didn't care. She needed to take out her frustrations. Just the thought of the rum raisin treat made her mouth water again. All the different pound cakes of the other world tasted amazing, but the rum raisin was on a different level altogether. It was so good that the first time she ate it, she instinctively thought to herself that it was the food of the Gods. So on those rare days that the master was serving rum raisin, she ate more than usual.

Why isn't it ready yet?

Thinking about the rum raisin pound cake in her future made Celestine grow impatient. It was so hard just waiting, but finally the time had arrived.

"Here you are. One pound cake and black tea set."

"Th-thank you!" Celestine flashed the master a smile.

The sight of the pound cake with white fluff sprinkled atop was enough to force a smile out of her.

"I'll bring out seconds as soon as you want." The master saw right through her. He knew that she'd order another one. He quickly left her table to deal with the other customers.

"Oh, Lord of Light who watches over all of us from the heavens. I thank you for this blessing of food." After praying, Celestine took her silver fork in hand and began to eat.

"Oh..."

It had been months since she last experienced the joy that was rum raisin pound cake, so she couldn't help but make noises as she bit into it. That's just how mouthwatering it was. There was something about its moist sweetness and soft texture. While it resembled bread, it really was something else entirely. She could sense the light traces of alcohol spread throughout her mouth. The dried grapes exploded on her tongue, having absorbed the sweet alcohol. That

wasn't all, however. The white, sweet fluffy stuff on top fused with the flavor of the dried grapes to create a sweetness that reminded her of any number of confectionaries.

The yellow dough, dried black grapes, and the white fluffy stuff were a power team. They were each just sweet enough, with their different layers melting together in her mouth and producing something entirely new. Celestine was intoxicated by this tremendous explosion of flavor. All the guilt and shame she had for being incapable of resisting her temptations melted away along with the pound cake in her mouth.

Once Celestine took that first bite, there was no turning back. She would have to proceed forward in her culinary journey. Her hand kept moving, and soon enough, the pound cake was gone from this world. Rest in peace.

"Mm... Excuse me, but can I have another serving of pound cake, please?"

Celestine put a single spoonful of sugar into the uniquely bitter black "tea" and cleansed her palate before ordering a second helping of pound cake. Anybody familiar with Celestine would be shocked by how far removed she was from her usual demure self. They'd be further stunned after learning that she was acting this way because of sweets, of all things.

Truth be told, Celestine wasn't particularly fond of sweets or confectionaries. When she underwent her "year of acceptance" between the ages of eighteen and nineteen, she ate sweets drowning in sugar and honey almost every day. Yet when it was all said and done, she didn't feel the urge to keep eating more. Celestine figured that she simply wasn't all that fond of them.

She was wrong. The young high priestess was forced to confront the truth after coming into contact with the demonic otherworldly food known as pound cake. It wasn't that Celestine hated sweets, it was simply that she never knew what true sweets tasted like. She also learned that her own self-control and willpower weren't enough to resist its seductive nature.

It was easy enough to not be tempted by something one did not know existed. These words rang truer than ever for Celestine. After learning of this place, she used the "year of acceptance" as an excuse to be a customer every time the door appeared. Seven days ago, she fell into despair when she realized

a full year had passed since she became a regular at Nekoya. And so today, for the first time in her life, she lost to her own desires.

“Ugh....” she groaned.

Celestine finished off the final piece of pound cake, her second plate of the day, and ultimately felt like a fool. She regretted everything. She was unable to control herself. She did it. Those feelings washed over her.

I-I'll just make sure not to come next time...

Celestine attempted to convince herself that it would all be okay as she placed down several silver coins on the table. She had no way of knowing that when she stood up to exit, she would receive a sucker punch right to the gut.

“Oh, are you already headed out? Wait just a second...” Noticing Celestine ready to leave, the master retreated to the kitchen in a hurry.

He came out holding something in his hands.

“Here, this is for you. Thank you so much for always stopping by. This is just a token of our gratitude.”

The master had a long, thin box in his hands with the picture of a winged puppy on it.

“What is this?” Celestine dreaded the answer, though somewhere deep inside, she was also excited. The master’s grin deepened as if he could see into her innermost thoughts.

“It’s a special brandy pound cake that we don’t usually have for sale. It’s a little heavier on the alcohol than the standard rum raisin cake you seem to enjoy so much. I’m sure you’ll love it.”

His words were enough to drive Celestine into a spiral of despair.

“B-brand y pound cake...?”

These words in that order were entirely unfamiliar to her, but the collective sound they made, combined with the master’s explanation, were enough to tell Celestine everything she needed to know. This thing was dangerous. If she ate it, there would be no turning back. She’d be making a pact with the devil.

I've never had this before... But since I like rum raisin, I'll surely love this...

The master's words stirred something inside of her. She could literally feel the insides of her stomach moving. She wanted to try it. She *had* to try it. That's all she could think to herself.

"If you keep it somewhere dark and cool, it should stay good for up to twenty days. Though he did say that if you open it up, make sure to eat it immediately. Hope you can enjoy it with a friend or something!"

I have to say no. I have to say no.

And yet Celestine took the box from his hands nonetheless. She couldn't help herself.

"Thank you very much." The high priestess managed to muster a smile and offer words of gratitude.

"You're very welcome. Take care!"

"Yes, see you again soon..."

Celestine finally managed to leave the restaurant, certain that she'd come again.

The next day, she broke the seal on the cake box. Celestine brought the brandy pound cake to her mouth with a certain level of resolve. The master had said it utilized stronger alcohol than the rum raisin. The moment she took a bite, everything became clear. There was no more running away for her. It was time for Celestine to make her move.

"Lady Celestine! Wh-what is this?! What type of alcohol is this?!"

The first person she visited was a nun on the path to become a high priestess named Carlotta. Celestine had set her eyes on her some time ago. Carlotta was known to have a love for alcohol that rivaled even the dwarves. The food itself was incredible, but even more stunning was the unknown alcohol used in its creation. Its fragrance was tremendous. Carlotta wanted to drink the mysterious liquor.

"It's... bitter. But sweet? Delicious," whispered the half-elf Anna as she focused intently on eating the cake in front of her. A changeling, Anna had a

long life span and tremendous magical powers. Having lived with the church since shortly after birth, this was a first for her. The fragrant cake in front of her initially tasted bitter, but then that only served to strengthen the sweetness that came after. This was a tremendous discovery for Anna, raised at the Monastery of Light.

“Lady Celestine... This is incredibly delicious. I’ve had confectionaries in the Kingdom, but nothing like this. Who made this? Where are they?”

Anna wasn’t the only one who didn’t recognize the cake. Julianne, born of noble blood in the Kingdom, had experienced all the luxuries that were available in the capital city. If they didn’t recognize this confection, it was entirely likely that nobody on the Eastern Continent or the Western Continent would recognize it. Celestine’s description of it as a “special gift” was apt.

Nobody had a clue who could make something like it.

Celestine had decided to share her special gift with the three elites of her monastery. Once they were gathered together, she presented them with the long, thin box made from tough paper, wrapped in a strange, seamless, transparent bag. The three disciples opened it, and the entire area around them was flooded with the gentle, faint aroma of some sort of unknown alcohol. It wasn’t altogether dissimilar to the fragrance of wine.

And so Celestine cut three pieces of the baked cake for each of them.



They were overwhelmed.

“This is...”

Celestine wore something of a defeated smile on her face as Julianne turned to her.

“It’s the devil’s cake. A demon gave it to me,” the high priestess whispered, taking a much larger bite of the cake than she offered her disciples. An almost radiant expression spread across her face.

Celestine had come to a conclusion all her own.

Yes, I must overcome this trial from God. And the only way to do that is to identify everything in this cake and feast upon it until I grow weary of it.

One could argue that she was taking one step forward and fifty steps back.

Celestine Fragan would eventually be known as the female saint who rose up to become the pope. As one of the Lord of Light’s followers, she possessed incredible magic power and great compassion. However, there was but one luxury, one desire, that she loved too deeply to ever give up: “devil’s cake.” One day, she shared this ephemeral cake with three of her most promising pupils, jokingly adding that it was given to her by a demon. It was a tremendously sweet and aromatic cake with a dash of bitterness to it, made from alcohol. This confection was so delicious that Celestine herself, never mind her pupils, could not win against its allure. It was rumored that this was the primary reason that the Temple of Light eventually became extremely familiar with the creation of sweets, ultimately attracting a plethora of patissier believers to the church.

With the help of her pupils, Pope Celestine managed to perfect the recipe for the cake. It was said that she always wore the biggest of smiles on her face when she ate it. Even after rising to the position of pope, she never quite stopped being embarrassed by her inability to cut this luxury from her life. Yet even then, the magical taste of the pound cake never failed to put a smile on her face.

Chapter 12:

B-Steak Romero nearly fell into despair as he watched the loathsome morning light illuminate the entrance to the cave.

“It’s already dawn?” he whispered.

“Wh-what’re we gonna do, Romero?” Julietta, his lover, gripped his hand tightly.

“It’ll be okay. I’ll protect you no matter what.”

Romero could feel her hand trembling in fear as he bit down on his lip. Having lived in the darkness on his own for so long, he thought he understood. He thought he understood what it would mean to be together with Julietta. But he couldn’t stop himself. After finally knowing the warmth of her love, there was no way that Romero could return to the darkness.

That was why it hurt so much, knowing that their pursuers were growing ever closer...

Death was knocking at their door.

Damn it all! If I were on my own, at least...

Indeed. If Romero were alone, he could at least accept his fate. His hands were already stained with blood. He was a being of the darkness that had taken many lives just to feed himself. He wouldn’t complain about meeting his end. He deserved it.

But Julietta was different. She chose to follow Romero out of the world of light but committed no sins of her own. She was still pure. The two of them fell in love and chose to live together. That was why Romero refused to let it end this way. He refused to drag his beloved with him down to the world of the Goddess of Darkness.

There has to be a way, Romero thought. Something, anything!

They couldn’t leave the cave. Their pursuers were already hot on their tail, and worse, the sun had risen. It was only a matter of time until they located this tiny cave. Things might have been different if the moon were still out, as it

granted those who lived in the world of the dead its powers. But the sun, the symbol of light and life itself, was not their ally. Should their pursuers catch them in the daylight, their future would be gone forever.

Then it happened.

“Ah! Romero, look at that! It’s... it’s...!” Julietta raised her voice as she noticed something in the depths of the cave.

“What? A door?!”

It was as though the heavens had extended one last helping hand, for there was suddenly a mysterious door in the cave.

What’s going on? Why is there a door here? No, wait a second...

A black door with a picture of a cat on it appeared seemingly out of nowhere. After recovering from shock, Romero began to think. He grabbed Julietta’s hand and walked in silence.

“Romero? What is that door? Do you know what it is?” Julietta and her lover drew ever closer to it.

“No, I don’t. But it can’t be any worse than staying here.” Romero answered her question and put his hand on the surface of the door. *What awaits us on the other side?* he wondered. *Despair? Or perhaps...*

With the sun already up, they would be forced to remain in the cave until nightfall, no matter what. At this point, their only option was to proceed forward and try to grasp at any sliver of hope they could. The ringing of a bell sounded off as the door opened, leading into a somewhat dark room. Romero was relieved. The sun couldn’t reach wherever this place was.

“Let’s go.” Romero urged Julietta on.

“Of course, my love. I decided long ago to follow you wherever you go. I’ll be with you until the end.” Julietta nodded, her face still pale. The two took hands and stepped into the dark room beyond the door, and as it closed shut behind them, it disappeared.

A short time later, multiple men came storming into the cave. The warriors gripped silver swords in their hands, said to be powerful against beings of the

darkness. Alongside them were wise sorcerers and priests of the Lord of Light. The latter had silver seals and spears made of white trees, crafted specifically to kill Romero. Around their necks were beautiful wreaths made from the aromatic galileo flower.

“Dammit! He’s not here, either!” one of the men cried.

“Blast it all! Where the hell did that cursed monster go?”

“It’s already morning!” a warrior said. “There’s nowhere left for him to run! Find him and kill him!”

“Oh, Lady Julietta, please be all right.”

A priest sighed. “No, I imagine it’s already too late. The young lady is probably already...”

The men were searching for the local lord’s young daughter, who had been kidnapped. As the sun rose into the sky, they continued their desperate search, unaware that the two had already fled to a place where they could no longer be found.

The couple looked around the lightless room, searching their surroundings.

“We’re in a basement, it seems...” Romero said.

Beyond the door was a somewhat narrow room.

“What is this place?” Julietta quietly brought herself closer to Romero, trembling with fear.

The room before them was a bizarre one. It was hard to imagine that a place like this was connected to the cave they were just in. There were lines of clean tables and chairs organized in the space. Each table had glass containers of some kind on top of them. On the walls were various pictures, and the wood floor was smooth and polished.

Is this some wizard’s room? Romero asked himself. *I know for a fact this place utilizes a kind of teleportation magic, but...*

Romero had lived some ten times longer than Julietta and was able to sense

the magic flowing throughout the room. This place was overflowing with magical energies. He could sense the power of fire and darkness in it. Fortunately for the two of them, it didn't appear to be the sort of dangerous magic that attacked uninvited guests, but that didn't change the fact that he didn't know what it was.

A tiny bit of light crept into the room from the back, where Romero could sense someone's presence. He assumed that must be the master of this bizarre locale.

What do I do?

Things moved quickly. Suddenly the room was as bright as day. Julietta screamed, and she and Romero immediately moved into defensive crouches.

"Dammit! A trap?!"

"Wait," said Julietta. "This light doesn't hurt..."

The light of this room was nothing like that of the sun or the holy light that the annoying servants of the Lord of Light wielded. There was nothing magical about it: it was meant to simply brighten the room.

"Whoa there!" said a voice. "Hey, welcome. You folks are certainly early."

Romero and Julietta heard a deep voice call out to them. It was coming from a middle-aged man standing at the far end of the room. He was a large, bearded man, appropriately fit for his age. He didn't appear to be a sorcerer or warrior.

Judging by his stance and the limited magical energy of the man, Romero could tell he wasn't someone who could hurt them. With that clear, Romero let down his guard for the time being. Unaware of any of this, the man continued to talk.

"Man, I'm sorry. We're still just getting ready... Is everything all right? You both look pale as a ghost."

Romero blinked. "Oh, uh, don't worry about it. We've always been like this. We're both fit as a fiddle."

The man seemingly still had no idea what he was face to face with as he questioned the couple. Romero answered his question truthfully. While they

both lacked sleep, they were feeling relatively healthy thanks to the lack of light.

“Might I ask, what is this place?” Romero collected himself.

He understood that the door in the cave was some kind of teleportation magic, which meant that it was safe to assume that they had surfaced somewhere else entirely.

“This is Western Cuisine Nekoya, a restaurant! Folks from your side call us the Restaurant to Another World, though.” As the master of this place, the man answered as he always did.

“This is a restaurant?” Romero asked.

“Are you telling me we’re in a different world right now?” Julietta gasped. They both shot their questions to the man at the same time.

“That’s right. For folks like me who live on this side, this is just a regular old restaurant. But for you ladies and gents over there, yeah, this is another world. Apparently.”

The man continued, flashing them a smile.

“So now that that’s outta the way, would you care to grab a bite to eat? Despite our size, we’ve got great ratings you know?”

Julietta whispered, “Romero, we should probably eat something. That way, we can, um, be a ‘customer’ here.”

“Hm, good point.”

Romero nodded his head to Julietta’s keen advice. If this truly was a restaurant, then by placing an order, the two of them would become customers. This meant that as long as they ordered something, they could stay at their table even until sunset without the master complaining. If they could use this place to hide out, that would be perfect.

“Understood. Then could we have two orders of your most expensive dish? Oh, and if you have any blood-red wine, we’d love two glasses.”

And so Romero placed their orders. Fortunately, he had money. He knew nothing of what the food from the other world was like, but surely the master

wouldn't complain if they ordered the most expensive meal on the menu.

"The most expensive dish, eh? Let's see... That'd be the b-steak cooked beef. Are you okay with that? The stew's not ready yet, unfortunately. And yes, we do have red wine."

B-steak was the most expensive dish Nekoya had other than the beef stew. The previous master always used to refer to the beef steak as b-steak, so it became something of a tradition. Unfortunately, the meal wasn't particularly well-liked in the other world. Apparently, beef just wasn't all that popular. Recognizing this, the master made sure to confirm the order with his customer.

Romero instinctively made a face upon hearing that the b-steak was made from cooked beef but then remembered himself and nodded politely at the master. "Cooked beef, eh? Fine. We'll have that. Also, would you mind not using any garlik? The both of us are terribly sensitive to its scent."

At the end of the day, they were only placing orders so that the master wouldn't give them a hard time about sticking around. It didn't matter if the food was terrible or not. As long as there was no garlik in the dish, they could handle it. Beings such as Romero and Julietta were highly vulnerable to the herb.

"You got it. Hang on just a moment, and feel free to sit wherever you'd like." The master returned to the back.

"He's gone..." Julietta murmured.

"I think we're safe now."

The couple grabbed seats and let out sighs of relief, all the tension draining from their bodies. It had been three days since Romero and Julietta hit the road running. It was highly doubtful that their pursuers would ever find this place.

"So, cooked beef is the most expensive thing here, eh? What kind of restaurant is this?" Finally relaxed, Romero whispered to his partner as he looked around the interior.

"Good question. It's too bad. This place is so nice-looking." Julietta agreed with her lover and also took a glance around the room. It was a well-kept, comfortable little restaurant. The temperature was neither too hot nor too

cold, and while the furnishings and decor were rather plain, the way everything was polished and organized made it all seem that much classier. Furthermore, on each table were a set of glass containers filled with herbs, spices, and sugars, free for them to use. As far as Romero and Julietta were concerned, this was clearly a fancy restaurant.

And yet they served beef.

For Romero and his partner, beef could best be described as the absolute bottom of the barrel. In their world, cows were most often used as farming tools to help create fields for growing crops. This was primarily due to the fact that they were much slower than horses but significantly more powerful. They were also used to produce milk. Those were the primary reasons that a farmer might own a cow. One would find themselves eating cow only after the creature had grown old, gotten injured, or could no longer produce milk. Only then would they be killed and eaten. It went without saying that the quality of the meat was significantly lower than that of a lamb or sheep, which would be killed and eaten immediately after harvesting its wool. It also paled in comparison to beast meat acquired by skilled hunters. Beef was tough and gamey, so it was primarily used as food for the poor, farmers, or dogs. That was just the way it was.

Not to mention the effort needed to stew the beef for a long period of time and extract the scum from it. Simply cooking the beef would only make it leathery and hard to eat. Romero and Julietta weren't the only ones who felt this way; most people in their world believed this to be the case.

"Well, whatever. It's not like I actually want to eat anyway." In his mind, Romero was paying for the right to sit in the restaurant.

Having made peace with his own logic, he let out a yawn. "I'm dreadfully sleepy."

"Me, too," said Julietta.

Being in such a cozy environment caused their exhaustion to catch up with them. At this time of day, the two of them would normally be fast asleep, and given their current set of circumstances, their fatigue was unavoidable. Eventually, the master returned with their food.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here are your b-steaks, topped with chaliapin sauce. I know you both said no garlik, but what about oranie?” The master asked the couple.

He only realized it after having made both b-steaks, but most folks in the other world that couldn’t handle heavily aromatic herbs like garlik frequently disliked oranie. In other words, onions. If these customers were the same, he’d have no choice but to go back and remake the b-steaks with soy sauce.

“No, that’s fine,” said Romero. “As long as there’s no garlik, I can handle it.”

“Me as well. Thank you.”

Garlik was the only herb that had any effect on them. Plus, using a strong taste to mask the smell of the beef was a smart idea. That said, they still didn’t expect much from the meal.

The master smiled. “Thank goodness. All right then, here are your b-steaks.”

With a relieved expression on his face, he grabbed the food from his cart. He brought out plates of sizzling meat, bowls of soup, and bread.

The steak had an incredible aroma.

“You’re telling me that this is beef...?” Romero couldn’t help but let the words slip from his mouth. This was far different from what he envisioned when he made their order.

“Yup! Unfortunately, we don’t serve wagyu beef here, but I can guarantee you that we use the good stuff! It’s dang delicious.” The master replied to Romero and lined up the food in front of them. The b-steaks were on black metal plates, and the meat was topped with an assortment of colorful vegetables, meat juices, and a sauce mixed with some kind of thinly cut brown stuff. The beef sizzled on top of the metal plate, its great smell wafting into the air.

“Ah, and here is your red wine,” the master said.

“O-oh, you have my gratitude.”

After checking with the couple, the master began to carefully pour wine for them. The thick red liquid filled up the finely crafted glasses.

“Oh, and bread and soup refills are on the house. Take your time and enjoy.” With his job done, the master returned to the back of the restaurant.

“This is quite a ways better than I expected.” Romero whispered his reaction to the food lined up in front of him. Everything looked delicious. The fragrant aroma and even the visuals of the food made his mouth water. He didn’t expect much from the meal, which in turn ended up making the smell of the b-steak in front of him that much more appetizing.

“Shall we eat?” Julietta asked.

“Of course.”

The couple nodded at one another and grabbed their utensils. Come to think of it, the last thing they had eaten was a rabbit they caught the night before. They even bit into the animal while it was still alive. At this point, they were simply grateful to have any kind of decent meal at all. The pair stuck their forks into the meat and cut with their knives.

“Oh, how tender.”

Romero was stunned by the feel of the meat. It was so soft that he could only assume either the chef was a pro at preparing it or the quality of the meat was exquisite to begin with. The knife cut through the steak with no resistance whatsoever. The slightly red insides of the meat peered out from the cut as its juices flowed freely onto the hot plate, creating a sizzling sound. As they took in these sights and sounds, both Romero and Julietta took bites.

“Oh, my.”

Julietta couldn’t believe her taste buds. The meat was so incredibly tender. With each chew, the fine beef split apart, spreading its fatty flavor throughout her mouth. The meat juices fused with the salt and high-quality pepper, while the heat of the thinly cut, raw oranie fused with the sweetness of the lightly-cooked oranie. These great tastes were brought together by the delicious brown sauce.

“So that’s why this is the most expensive dish on the menu,” Julietta said.

Now that she’d actually eaten the dish, she understood. The already high-quality beef had been treated in order to bring out its maximum potential. It

was so tender that it was hard to believe it was actually from a cow. Meanwhile, the sauce atop it was delicious in its own right. Using colorful vegetables helped to make the dish visually appealing and beautiful.

As the daughter of a noble family, Julietta was experienced in all manner of luxuries, and yet this was a completely new experience for her. She could say without a doubt that this wasn't simply "cooked meat." She fully understood why this was the most expensive dish here.

"And this is what cow tastes like when raised specifically to be eaten. I'd heard the rumors, but..." Julietta said.

Sitting across from Julietta, Romero agreed with her assessment. Now that he gave it some thought, in the Kingdom and the Empire, as well as a handful of other large nations, cows were bred specifically with eating in mind. They would also take newly born and cook them as food. Apparently, young cows that knew nothing of the strains of physical labor produced tender, delicious meat incomparable to the average stuff. It was said to even be fit for royalty. Romero hardly expected to encounter such a delicacy at a street-level restaurant such as this.

No, that's right. This is the Restaurant to Another World.

Romero remembered the master's words from earlier. It had taken some time to get there, but he finally understood their true meaning. As far as he was concerned, he knew of no restaurants that could produce food like this in his world. He said to Julietta, "We made the right choice in fleeing here."

"Yes, you're right. I doubt that Father, the knights, or the priests can follow us here."

The couple held their transparent wine glasses up.

"To our future in the dark of night," said Julietta.

"So that we might have the blessings of the Goddess of Darkness."

Romero and Julietta indulged in the red wine after offering words of prayer, meeting eyes and smiling at one another over its delicious flavor.

For this one moment in time, despite the accursed sun's presence high in the

sky, the couple were able to share a wonderful, joyous time together.

By the time they returned to the cave from whence they came, it was already evening.

“It looks like we’ve been saved,” said Julietta.

“Indeed. For a brief moment, I wasn’t so sure what would happen to us.”

After their toast, the couple enjoyed the soft bread and soup accompanying their meal and went on to try a variety of other foods as well. They ended up staying in the restaurant until the sun set. That day, all sorts of customers came by and ordered all manner of dishes. There were commoners and even nobles. Julietta was stunned to see a princess of much higher noble rank than even herself. Knights, swordsmen, and even mercenaries stopped by at different times of the day. The pair even saw a sorcerer and a diviner. Visitors also included other races like elves, dwarves, and halflings. Much to Romero and Julietta’s shock, Lizardmen and Lilliputians even dropped in for a bit. The restaurant had all manner of customers.

Each one of these visitors ordered dishes that Romero had never seen before and indulged themselves in them.

“But I couldn’t believe my eyes when that high priestess of light showed up.”

“Heehee. You should have seen your face.”

Just as the sun was beginning to set, a high priestess bearing a Gold Sigil came to the restaurant with three young priestesses, likely her disciples, in tow. One could spend their whole life at a monastery, dedicating themselves to their beliefs, and even then it was unlikely they would ever become a high priest or priestess. Only the truly gifted were afforded that title. Judging by the shape of the high priestess’ sigil, she was a follower of the Lord of Light. What rotten luck.

The couple froze in place upon seeing the young woman and her companions. Julietta almost fainted on the spot, Romero moving close to steady her. They then spent the next chunk of time attempting to lay as low as possible.

Fortunately, the high priestess who seemed to be watching over the three girls didn't seem to notice them. If she did, she chose not to engage in a "monster hunt" so as to not disrupt the other customers. In fact, she never so much as even glanced in their direction, too focused on enjoying the confectionaries and tea that she and her disciples ordered. Once they purchased a gift to take with them, they peacefully left the restaurant. It was easy to joke about it in retrospect, but if Romero and Julietta ever had to face off with a high priestess in real combat, they would stand no chance. Those of that title were said to be capable of even annihilating liches from this world. In that sense, Romero and Julietta were tremendously lucky.

"Well then, shall we be on our way?" Julietta asked.

"Yes. I will always be by your side, my love," answered Romero.

And so, the lovers who had been saved by good fortune took each other's hands and shared a kiss. They had vowed to each other that no matter what hardships awaited them, they would be together. That was why Romero chose to drink of her blood, and that was why Julietta decided to throw everything away so that she could be with him.

"Your hideout is just a little further, right?"

"Yes. If we fly all night, we should get there. Just hold on for a little while longer. And maybe, once we've finally managed our escape, we can visit that restaurant again."

"I'd quite like that. We owe the master our lives, after all. Not to mention the amazing food!"

They'd finally gotten this far. With their hearts and stomachs full, the couple shape-shifted into a legion of bats and flew across the moonlit night sky.

Chapter 13:

Sandwiches The Restaurant to Another World had a number of regulars.

They lived all over their world, but they all managed to discover a door of their own. Once every seven days, they used this door to visit the restaurant. They were the kind of customers who made eating the other world's cooking a part of their lives.

The doors themselves appeared in locations that had relatively strong magical power but otherwise were not particularly picky about where they materialized.

It was actually quite rare for a door to appear in towns, back streets, or places like castles. More commonly, the doors would appear in areas far removed from civilization, awkwardly standing out in the middle of nowhere. In fact, there were still plenty of doors that had yet to be found or used.

As such, the customers at the Restaurant to Another World, especially the regulars, tended to be a weird bunch even among the citizens of that world. These folks who came from all over did their best not to dig too deep into each other's backgrounds. Even if there was someone world-famous present, or even someone they were mortal enemies with, it was good manners to look the other way and pretend they didn't see a thing.

After all, this was another world.

What they believed to be common knowledge didn't necessarily mean anything here, and they shouldn't assume it did. Plus, if they got out of line, the master might ban them from the restaurant forever.

And so the regulars made it a point to forget their petty squabbles and respect each other while in Nekoya, occasionally stepping in to stop new customers when they unknowingly started trouble. The only exception to this was when it came to food.

The regulars who dropped by once every week without fail all generally had a dish they loved so much that it became their nickname. Each and every one of them believed that dish to be the best of all items served at Nekoya, so when

the conversation turned to food, arguments frequently arose.

This just happened to be one of those days.

“Say what?! Are you out of your mind?! You’ve never even experienced the divine taste of bread and minced meat cutlets that’ve been drenched in sauce overnight!”

“Hmph, right back at you, girl! You know nothing! The combination of shripe and tartar sauce is delectable even when cold!”

This particular war of words was being held between the seemingly well-raised, lightly dressed adventurer known as Minced Meat Cutlet, and the young, well-built knight with a famous blade known as Fried Shrimp. The two of them had only recently begun coming to the restaurant but quickly became regulars in no time at all. They started arguing amongst themselves after just happening to take seats next to one another.

“Hm? Are those two youngsters having an argument?”

The older samurai, Teriyaki, arrived after the pair’s squabble began and so turned to his friend, Pork Loin Cutlet, for answers. The latter was a thin, elderly gentleman who was a veteran regular at Nekoya.

“Yes. They’re apparently arguing over what dish makes for a better sandwich.”

As always, the older gentleman was drinking a cold mug of otherworldly ale while nibbling at his order of pork loin cutlet. He explained that this all began when the pair each ordered their favorite dish in sandwich form to go.

A sandwich was a meal made of two slices of white bread with various ingredients placed in the middle. It was delicious when cold, and it was possible to order as takeout.

Or at least that was how sandwiches were described in the Eastern Continent’s language in Nekoya’s menu. When it said various ingredients, it meant just about anything that the master made outside of soup. He could turn most anything into a fairly delicious sandwich.

Generally speaking, there were three basic kinds of sandwiches on the

restaurant's menu. The first was Nekoya's specialty, two slices of white bread with thinly cut eggs, topped with mayo. The next was a sandwich containing some kind of pink, sliced meat topped with cheese and leafy vegetables. The last was a sandwich made with fish marinated in oil with mayo. However, most regulars tended to order their favorite dish in sandwich form. One could describe this as the restaurant's secret menu.

"Dear me, they're fighting over that?" Teriyaki let out a sigh. How absurd it was. What point was there in getting so heated over sandwiches?

"Indeed. How are we supposed to relax and enjoy our meals like this?" said Pork Loin Cutlet.

The two men stood up, clearly used to having to step in, and approached the youngsters embroiled in argument.

"Why don't you understand?! Minced meat cutlet sandwiches are the best! It's good even when it's cold! The thinly sliced pieces of meat are stuffed with delicious juices that just come pouring out when you bite into them! Plus the sweet and sour sauce goes perfectly with the vegetables. It's an amazing dish!"

Minced Meat Cutlet refused to step down. The first time she visited Nekoya, the master gave her a minced meat cutlet sandwich to go as a gift. She ended up leaving the dish to sit for quite some time, and it eventually grew cold. When she finally ended up eating it, it turned out to have a completely different flavor to it than before, yet it was still delicious. Since then, she made it a point to always order one on the way out. It was that good.

"Hmph! This is the problem with Kingdom girls such as yourself! Like I said earlier, the brilliance that is shripe and tartar sauce is just as strong when cold! By frying the fluffy shripe, you get a wonderfully crunchy texture from each and every bite! You can feel the sweetness of it spread throughout your mouth! Combine that with the sourness of the tartar sauce, and you're left with something simply divine! Did you know that the fried shrimp sandwiches here have a fruity red vegetable and leafy green vegetables in them as well? So after you take a bite, you get to see the delightful juxtaposition of the white shripe meat and the colorful vegetables! Not only is it delicious, but it's a work of art in and of itself! Minced meat cutlet, with its brown surface and insides, could

never hope to compare!”

On the other end, Fried Shrimp refused to back down as well.

On his second visit to Nekoya, he was made aware of the secret menu by the legendary swordsman who accompanied him. By putting the fried shripe between slices of bread and letting it sit, the dish transformed into something else entirely. While Fried Shrimp agreed that the minced meat cutlet was indeed one of the restaurant’s finer dishes, it stood no chance against the allure of fried shrimp.

Teriyaki and Pork Loin Cutlet cleared their throats in front of the pair that refused to back down.

“Now, now. There’s no need to fight, you two.”

“This is a place for enjoying the finest of foods. They say that conversation can spice up a meal, but if you go overboard, you’ll spoil the taste.”

The young pair went quiet and turned their gaze to the two older gentlemen. One of them was a great hero and the greatest sage in all the world. The other was a wandering foreign swordsman whose skills were renowned across both continents. Having two of the restaurant’s most famous regulars chide them was enough for the two newbies to quiet down.

“I’m sorry. I went overboard. Fried shrimp is certainly delicious in its own right,” Minced Meat Cutlet conceded.

“No, no. I’m also sorry. We all have our favorites, right?” Despite their reluctance, the two apologized to each other.

Teriyaki and Pork Loin Cutlet quietly reminisced about how they too used to squabble like that back during the days of the previous master.

This brings me back. We always used to fight over which dish was the most delicious, Teriyaki thought to himself.

The first Minced Meat Cutlet would always get into fights with Croquette about how his dish was the most delectable of them all, remembered Pork Loin Cutlet. *I suppose it runs in the blood.*

And so the pair of older men reflected on the past, all the while admonishing

the hot-blooded youngsters in front of them.

“Exactly. Minced meat cutlet and fried shrimp are both delicious. But if we’re talking about what makes for the best sandwich, pork loin cutlet is the clear winner.”

“No, no. Pork loin cutlet tastes best when served hot. If you’re going to make anything a sandwich, teriyaki chicken is the one true answer. It tastes great even when cold.”

The two veterans instinctively faced each other, looks of disbelief on their respective faces.

“Weren’t you supposed to be a rice man? And anyway, how’re you even supposed to put teriyaki chicken between slices of bread?” Pork Loin Cutlet stood up and shot his old friend a pointed question.

Teriyaki normally ordered rice with his dish of choice. Only on the rare occasion that he ordered a different meal would he request bread. That made his suggestion of a teriyaki chicken sandwich all the more puzzling. It certainly didn’t help that Pork Loin Cutlet couldn’t believe that the sweet and sour soy sauce of the teriyaki chicken went well with bread.

“Right back at you! You never eat bread! You always order your pork loin cutlet with a large beer, do you not? Why would you bring it up now?”

On the other hand, Teriyaki found himself puzzled. Pork Loin Cutlet always got to the restaurant earlier than he did and was always there for much longer as well. In all of his days as a regular of Nekoya, he only ever saw the man eating pork loin cutlet and drinking beer.

In the handful of instances that Teriyaki witnessed Pork Loin Cutlet order something else, he always made sure to have it with a beer, not bread. The swordsman was more than aware that bread and cutlet went together well, but he was shocked to hear that Pork Loin Cutlet ordered them together. Both men replied to each other in disbelief.

“That’s not true at all! Once a month I order a pork loin cutlet sandwich to go. No vegetables, just meat, sauce, and mustard. Put some butter on the bread and eat it when it’s cold! That’s the best way to enjoy the savory, greasy pork.

The bread even softens up from the overflowing meat juices and sauce. Add a dab of mustard for that extra zap of hotness and you have a masterpiece!”

Pork Loin Cutlet explained his once-a-month tradition to his friend. He would stay at the restaurant until just around the time the magic dragon showed up, go home, sleep, and then the next day he would indulge in the sandwich. Compared to the bread itself, the actual pork loin cutlet was thick, topped with plenty of sauce. It was more than enough to fill the legendary hero’s stomach, and it felt great. This was his special lunch that he had enjoyed since the days of the previous master.

“Now hang on there. You see, I only just found out recently, but teriyaki goes extremely well with bread. The thinly sliced teriyaki chicken and fresh cucumber drenched in that sweet and sour sauce, combined with oranie sandwiched between slices of bread with mustard spread on them... Somehow, it all mysteriously comes together! Not to mention, I hear that teriyaki chicken sandwiches are quite popular in this world!”

The samurai learned of teriyaki chicken sandwiches from the master on the same day that he brought Fried Shrimp to Nekoya and told him of the hidden menu. He’d never forget the first time he ate it. His preconceived notion that teriyaki chicken and bread didn’t match was blown away by the tremendous explosion of flavors in his mouth.

It didn’t take long for the two stubborn old men to exchange fierce glares and start arguing.

This of course led to the other customers getting into their own squabbles.

Around this time, both old regulars and new regulars alike were gathered together, and they all began to argue for their personal favorites.

“I personally like a good Neapolitan spaghetti dog on a roll. Did you know that the Neapolitan spaghetti served here has quite the strong flavor when put between slices of bread? The tangy flavor of the ketchup holds its own against the soft white bread. It’s really something else!” The heir to one of the Kingdom’s great merchant businesses suggested the rather fantastical option of combining noodles with bread. According to him, it was delightful.

“Oh, my. I see the young one there hasn’t quite figured out the way things

work. If you want to talk about noodles that go wonderfully with bread, speak of none other than yakisoba with its aromatic, thick sauce. With just cabbage, noodles, and that meat, the red ginger and greens stand out that much more elegantly. It's truly a sight for sore eyes," a new voice spoke up.

"I hate agreeing with you, but nonetheless, I must. While it's not quite as good as freshly cooked okonomiyaki, yakisoba in a roll is a true delicacy. The sweet yet sour flavor of the sauce combined with the pork, cabbage, and red ginger make for a savory, dare I say, heavenly, experience."

Both the diviner and the samurai from the Western Continent spoke of the majesty of yakisoba with its cabbage and sauce.

"Um, when it comes to sandwiches, I personally adore ones with sweet fruits and cream inside. The gentle sweetness of the latter and the tart flavor of ripe fruit seem like they should clash, but when combined, they're really quite delicious!"

The radiant princess from the Empire spoke of the joys of the fruit sandwich, a food that she recently began ordering on the way home every time she dropped by.

"If we're talking fruit sandwiches, I think custard is the way to go. Its rich sweetness blends beautifully with the fruits and bread. It also doesn't make the bread soggy."

Meanwhile, the Witch Princess from the Duchy who loved Nekoya's pudding spoke highly of the fruit sandwich as well. Only unlike the other princess, she recommended using custard cream, an ingredient that held a similar flavor to pudding.

And so the restaurant was enveloped in a fierce war of words for some time.

Which sandwich was the best?

It was a battle reserved only for customers who knew of the secret option known as takeout.

"How absurd." Fardania, a traveling elf who hadn't dropped by the restaurant in about half a year watched the fighting go on with exhausted eyes.

She ordered the same tofu steak she did on that unforgettable day when she first visited Nekoya and had her pride wounded, prompting her to set off on a journey around the world. Fardania watched the other customers bicker amongst themselves while she ate.

She wasn't a regular. She only just happened to hear from a halfling that there was a door nearby and swung in for a bite. The journey to the restaurant took her on a roundabout path that put her three days away from her next objective, the elven capital. However, given the lifespans of elves, this was an extremely minor delay.

"Phew."

The elf placed her fork down after finishing her tofu steak. It was just as delicious as the one she ate half a year ago.

"Thank you, Master. It was delicious." As much as it pained her to admit it, if she wasn't honest here, that in and of itself would mean admitting defeat.

"You're quite welcome." As usual, the master nodded his head without saying anything unnecessary to the elf girl.

"By the way, does this place have any rice dishes available for takeout?" Fardania had been wondering about this for some time. Unfortunately, the bread at Nekoya smelled ever-so-slightly of milk, making it impossible for her to eat. The rice on the other hand was tremendous.

"Yeah, we have something, I suppose." The master thought to himself for a moment before replying.

"Really?" Fardania was both surprised and not surprised by the answer that came back to her.

"Well, since we call ourselves Western Cuisine Nekoya, we don't really have it on the menu, but..." Nonetheless, the master went on.

"I think I could make some grilled rice balls for you as takeout."

As a result of Western Cuisine Nekoya's promise of free rice refills, the restaurant frequently had an abundance of leftover rice at the end of the day. Since the master couldn't just reuse rice the next day, he would often either

offer it to employees or eat it himself after work. He didn't like wasting food. It was during these times that the master would baste the rice with sweet sake and soy sauce, and make them into grilled rice balls.

It was a simple dish that involved rolling the leftover rice into balls and covering them with mirin and miso before grilling them. The smell of the crisp surface combined with the aroma of the mirin and miso made for an appealing scent. The dish was so popular with the master's employees that on days with lots of leftover rice, an entire plate's worth of rice balls would disappear into their stomachs in mere moments.

Of course, it went without saying that if he were to serve them to customers, he'd have to make them a bit fancier than the ones he served his employees or ate himself. As long as he made sure of that, he saw nothing wrong with accepting money for them.

"Then can I have whatever that is? The food in the human town I'm staying in isn't very good at all." Fardania wore a composed expression on her face as she placed her order. She knew full well that this restaurant would once again surprise her with something she never saw coming.

"Coming right up. It'll be right out." The master returned to the kitchen, pondering what to do about seasonings.

I suppose I'll just roll with the usual combo of seaweed soy sauce, mirin, and a dash of sesame seeds sprinkled on top. One of them can be onion and miso... Ah, and for the last one, maybe I can toss in some seaweed strips.

And so the master got to work grilling the rice balls while also preparing some bread. Having run this restaurant for over ten years now, he knew what was coming next. It always ended up like this on days when the customers started arguing amongst themselves.

"Ah, geez! Look, you'll understand once you try it, okay?! Master! Get this know-it-all a minced meat sandwich, please!"

"In that case, one fried shrimp sandwich for the girl, sir!"

"Hey, Master! I'd like one of those teriyaki chicken sandwich things! If you're going to be that stubborn about it, fine! I'll give it a try!"

“Then get me a pork loin cutlet sandwich! Though we all know it isn’t going to taste better than a teriyaki chicken sandwich!”

“Master, I’d like one of those yakisoba sandwich things. I’m rather curious about the combo of noodles and sauce.”

“Master, get me a Neapolitan on a bun! Let’s see what all the fuss is about!”

“Then I will have the same thing. I leave it in your hands, Master.”

“In that case, how about we compare them here and now? That way we can be sure,” said the Witch Princess.

“Bring it on! Excuse me, could we get two fruit sandwiches, one made with cream and one made with custard?” replied the imperial princess.

And just like that, the orders kept on coming. The master couldn’t help but chuckle at how predictable it all was.

“Aye, you got it!”

The master wore a grin on his face, his hands moving as fast as they could to prepare his customers’ orders.

Chapter 14:

Pancakes Deep in a certain forest, far away from human eyes, was a tiny, nameless village. With a population of around 100, each of the villagers wore matching grass-dyed clothes and lived off of the fruits and nuts from the trees near their home.

Those who lived here were not humans. No, they were tiny people named Lilliputians who could fit in the palm of a human hand. While fairies were also small, they had wings and could fly across vast distances and often had dealings with humans. Lilliputians, on the other hand, tended to build small villages and live their whole lives there, rarely dealing with other races. These Lilliputians were similar, hardly interacting with humans aside from the old witch living by herself in the forest. They traded medicinal ingredients like fruits and nuts with her, as well as various metals for forging work. Other than her, there was only one other human they had any kind of dealings with.

Most of the Lilliputians were born in the village, raised in the village, and would die there as well. They were a tiny people that lived much like humans did.

However, every seven days came the one day that they all looked forward to. The men who worked hard, the women who busied themselves with house chores, and even the children having fun outside all made their way to the same location.

Their destination? The Restaurant to Another World. For the Lilliputians, this day was much like a festival.

On the day of their excursion to the restaurant, all the Lilliputians gathered together in a small opening deep in the forest, just a short distance from the village.

“All right! We got it hooked!” A young man, the best tree climber in the village, used a rope made of vines to lock the golden protrusion coming from the door into place, facing down. He then called out to the other men waiting below him. Because the black door had no places to grip onto, climbing it was a

struggle. There were a handful of people who could make their way to the golden protrusion, but most of the time it tended to be the young man who did it.

“All right! Everyone, get ready to pull! Heave, hooo!!”

“HEAVE, HOOO!” “HEAVE, HOOO!” “HEAVE, HOOO!”

“You can do it, Daddy!”

“Just a little more!”

Showered in the encouraging words of the village chief, women, and children, the men pulled at the rope together.

Slowly but steadily, the black wall began to creak open. From afar, it was clear that it was actually a door with a picture of a cat on it. Unlike the other larger races, just the simple act of opening this door called for a great deal of concentrated effort on the part of the relatively weak Lilliputians. It required the men of the village to pull at the handle using the vine rope they made.

“There we go, we got it open! Everyone, hurry inside!”

After confirming that the door was open enough and the time was right, the elder gave the signal for the villagers to head inside. They followed his orders, one after the other, starting with the elderly and the women who were still breastfeeding their babies. After that came the children who could walk by themselves. The men were the last ones to enter. Once everyone was inside, the door shut behind them and disappeared. The forest returned to its natural, quiet form.

The room the Lilliputians found themselves inside of was lit by a different color of light than the forest. After moving to a corner of the room, they heard a voice rain down upon them from above.

—*Welcome.*

The loud voice came from the gigantic master of the restaurant. The huge man was well aware that when the door just barely opened, that was the sign that the little people had arrived.

The master went to the back and returned to them with a tray originally

meant for carrying food. On top of it was a folded moist towel. He brought it down close to the floor and spoke to his tiny customers.

—This way, please. I'll take you to your seats.

The Lilliputians were used to this process and immediately hopped onto the tray.

—Here we go!

Once about half of the villagers were onboard and the tray full, the master brought them to their seats.

“Whooooaaaa! This is awesome!”

“Ahh! We’re gonna fall!”

“Come now, make sure you wipe your hands and shoes. You can’t get off unless you clean yourselves.”

All of a sudden, the tiny people found themselves high in the air. The children grew excited seeing other races as large as the master enjoying their food. Meanwhile their mothers scolded them. Everyone cleaned their hands and feet on the giant wet cloth on the tray and eventually, they arrived at their destination. Those who had already cleaned themselves departed their makeshift vehicle and made their way down to the table below.

—I'll be right back with the rest of your party.

The master took the tray back to the entrance and then returned with the rest of the villagers.

—Will you be having the usual? he asked.

Once the master confirmed that everyone was present and accounted for, he took their orders. The group of little people nodded in unison. It was then that the most beautiful girl in the village, the elder’s daughter, stepped forward in a lovely dress. In her hands was a large silver coin with the face of a person on it. The Lilliputians had acquired it by trading nuts and fruits with the witch of the woods. Normally, the metal workers in the village would use it to craft kitchenware and other useful objects. However, they made a deal with the previous master that twice a month, they would give him one of these coins.

—Many thanks. I'll be right back.

The master picked up the large coin with just his index finger and thumb, and left for the kitchen. He would then go on to cook their absolute favorite dish while they waited.

“Wooooow! We’re so high up!”

“It’s soooooo big!”

“Stop right there! It’s dangerous! What are you going to do if you fall?!”

“Huh, so you’re saying it was an even smaller village back in the day?”

“That’s right. Before the door started showing up, we had maybe half the population we do now.”

“You think the folks who moved over here are doing all right?”

“I bet they are. I caught a glimpse of them a little while back. They were wearing otherworldly clothes, but I’m sure it was them.”

The Lilliputians spent their time waiting for the food in all sorts of ways. The mothers kept watch of their children to make sure they didn’t fall off the table, while other adults chatted over the latest rumors. It didn’t usually take long for the food to be brought out, but just the thought of its sweet deliciousness left them more impatient than usual.

Finally, the master returned with their order in hand.

—Here you are, folks. Your order of pancakes.

With a thud, the master placed a large plate of pancakes down in the center of the table. Lined up nearby were three ceramic containers about the size of buckets, filled with three different types of sweet syrup. The small people shouted out with glee; after all, this feast was only available to them once every seven days. It was for this very plate of soft, fluffy dessert that every week they chose to abandon their jobs and daily work in order to come to the restaurant.

“Oh, Master! I’m sorry, but would you mind cutting it for us?”

The village elder shouted his request up to the master of the restaurant. If he didn’t, there’d be no way for his voice to reach the large man.

—Aye, you got it!

The master nodded his head, spread some of the butter atop the pancakes with his fork and then cut it into pieces more than large enough for the villagers with his knife. The sweet aroma of the butter and the pancakes made the Lilliputians' mouths water.

—Take your time and enjoy. I'll bring out seconds as soon as you need 'em.

And so the moment the master said his final words to them, the Lilliputians shouted out with joy and rushed to the front of the pancakes.

There was a system to all of this, of course. It made sure that everyone was able to eat a fair and equal amount of food. First, there were those in charge of handing out the pancakes. These little ones would get close to the plate and hand the villagers their pancakes. This prevented fights from breaking out over people trying to grab their share. If something like that happened, the small children would likely suffer the most. By having a multi-tiered system in place, they could avoid that kind of situation.

On occasion, the pancake handlers would lick their buttery hands or grab some pancake crumbs from the plate. This was considered one of the perks of the job.

Only a few Lilliputians ate their pancakes immediately upon receiving them. Most of the small people actually headed for the buckets filled with syrup.

"I want more! Put more on 'em! Don't be so cheap!"

"Now, now. If you take too much, there won't be any left! We also have some to take home, okay?"

*"Hey, what're you doing?! Putting brown *and* black syrup on it is super unfair!"*

"Ah! That's no fair! You're eating the red fruit!"

"Oh, c'mon. It's not that big a deal."

The little people each lined up in front of the syrup bucket of their choosing, managed by the women of the village. These syrup handlers were extremely used to this task, using special brushes they brought from home to spread the

syrup over the pancakes. There were three different kinds available to the villagers: the brown and super sweet one was called “maple,” the black, slightly bitter one was called “chocolate,” and the sweet and tart one made by boiling red berries with sugar was “jam.”

Normally, a customer was allowed to request one type of syrup to go with their pancakes, but due to the villagers being split on who preferred what, the Lilliputians asked the master if he could give them a little bit of each instead. Only then did they finally have enough pancakes and syrup to satisfy everyone.

“Perfect! Everyone’s got some, right?”

After confirming that all the villagers had their share, the housewives began to fill the pots that they brought from home with maple syrup. This was one of the benefits of being a syrup handler. They were allowed to fill the pots and containers they brought from the village with all of the remaining syrup so that they could bring them home. Of course, there would be trouble if they skimmed on giving out syrup just so that they could take home more.

“Heehee, this is more than enough to use on our bread. We’re gonna be eating the good stuff for a while!” One of the Lilliputian wives wore a big smile on her face as she caressed the pot full of maple syrup.

The master’s syrup was as delicious as his pancakes, so just spreading a little bit onto regular bread made it that much more appetizing. While their small village had no name and didn’t stand out, it did have its own perks.

“Now that everyone has their share...”

The village elder checked once more to make sure that everyone had some warm, fluffy pancakes and syrup, then spoke to his people.

“Let us offer our thanks to the God of Earth for this bountiful feast. Dig in!”

And so the elder bit into his pancakes. An explosion of warm sweetness spread throughout his mouth. For his syrup, he chose the relatively simple, sweet maple. It had its own unique flavor and was significantly sweeter than the other syrups. Its flavor oozed out from the fluffy pancake with each bite.

“Mmm...”

The elder swallowed with a satisfied moan and quickly took a sip of the tea he brought from the village. The unsweetened, still-warm tea washed down the pancakes quite nicely.

“Phew...”

The sweet aftertaste was something else! Even though he'd just taken a bite, he found himself wanting more and immediately went for another. No matter how many years he ate this stuff, he never grew tired of how sweet and fluffy the pancakes were. It was easy to see how their population had doubled. People passing through would just happen to be around to experience the pancakes, and they too would become addicted to its flavor, choosing to move to the village.

“Father, would you mind sharing a piece with me? I would like to try some of the maple syrup.” The village elder's only daughter was careful not to dirty her beautiful clothes while she ate her pancakes coated in jam.

She grew slightly jealous of her father after seeing him scarf down his portion. While her favorite type of syrup was the sweet and sour jam, just like her late mother, she couldn't help herself after watching her father.

“Yes, yes. I understand,” her father said. “Here, take some.”

The elder chuckled and unsheathed the dagger at his waist, cutting off a chunk of his pancakes for her but also taking some of hers as well.

“Mm, this is quite good.”

He was actually quite used to this flavor. After all, jam was a favorite of his wife who passed away some ten years ago. It was sweet and sour, and just a little bit salty.

The village elder took a moment to look around and found that the rest of the Lilliputians were doing something similar. They were each sharing their own differently flavored pancakes with their families, lovers, and friends. Even the rugged blacksmith, who was almost twice as tall as the other Lilliputians, blushed after his small wife wiped the chocolate from his mouth.

Meanwhile, there was the one family known for its many kids. The little boys were mixing all of their syrups together to find out what they tasted like, which

of course left their mother in a tizzy.

The young man and woman who were always fighting were instead eating their jam and chocolate pancakes together, even trading with one another. This was the one thing which the two could see eye to eye on.

Elsewhere, the wives who were on syrup duty were happily discussing their respective bounties.

Three years ago, a single older sorcerer moved into the village. This same man, seemingly incapable of holding himself back, was digging into his pancakes so fiercely that his beard was turning brown. Similarly, the village had a single priest of the Lord of Earth who could wield healing magic. This old woman smiled brightly, surrounded by her grandchildren.

This was all a familiar sight to any Lilliputian who lived in the village.

—Sorry to keep you all waiting. Here are your seconds.

By the time the large set of pancakes found their way to the bottom of the villagers' stomachs, the master returned with a fresh plate.

The children who still had room in their stomachs, the youngsters who hadn't eaten enough yet, and the more gluttonous adults all gathered by the plate once more. While the Lilliputians courteously followed the rules the first time, the second plate was a completely different story. Because the elderly and smaller children were already full, this meant that the second wave was a battle of speed.

I'm starting to feel my age...

The village elder happily patted his own full stomach while warmly watching the youngsters battle over pancakes. Seeing the villagers this lively made all he had done to protect his home worth it. It felt like he was looking upon his young daughter again.

"Master, thank you very much!"

After getting their fill of pancakes and clearing the plates entirely, the village elder gave his words of gratitude to the master.

—You're most welcome. All right, all aboard!

As usual, the master quietly whipped out his tray and had the Lilliputians ride atop it. He went back and forth twice to carry them all to the entrance this time, their stomachs filled with two plates worth of pancakes.

—*We'll be looking forward to your next visit*, the master said, opening the door lightly.

"All right! Everyone's here, yes?"

"Yup!"

With that, the Lilliputians exited the restaurant as one, leaving none behind as the door closed.

"Man, there are always so many of those little guys," the master whispered to himself after watching them leave.

Back in the day, when they first started showing up, there was only about half as many. Actually, it was probably closer to a third. When was it that he became unable to carry them all in one go? The master returned to the kitchen while thinking about this.

"Haha, imagine if we started getting little people with wings one of these days?" he laughed to himself.

The master had seen winged races from the other world, and he had small guests like the ones from earlier. But he'd yet to see any tiny winged people.

"Yeah, probably not."

Anyway, it took multiple little people to open the door, given their strength. It was unlikely he'd be getting little visitors other than the ones from that village. The master returned to work.

He had no way of knowing that in a few days, a group of winged fairies would soon become regulars at his restaurant.

Chapter 15:

Ginger Pork *Thud*.

The young hunter, Yuuto, wiped the sweat from his brow as he looked down at the fallen horned boar from up in the tree. Directly below him, Taro growled at the fallen beast.

The wild boar moved not an inch. The arrow that Yuuto had shot into the bottom of the beast's neck was laced with a poison that caused a horrible paralysis once it entered the bloodstream. Fortunately, it also passed through the body fairly quickly, leaving the meat of the animal perfectly edible. These thick, poisonous arrows were an essential tool to the hunters of the Mountain Nation.

I can't let my guard down just yet, Yuuto thought to himself and remembered the adage: *Beasts at death's door are prone to killing hunters.*

The words belonged to his teacher, a middle-aged hunter who had once killed a bear with only a single bow. Yuuto cautiously approached the fallen animal in front of him. Horned boars were dangerous creatures. They were on a whole different level from the rabbits, deer, wild birds, foxes, or weasels that nobles and rookies hunted. The short, deadly weapon on their foreheads made them truly fierce creatures. Their skin, thick as armor, was capable of deflecting even a samurai's spear head-on. The horned boar could bring down an entire horse by itself.

There were as many fallen hunters and samurai who met their ends trying to take down a horned boar as there were stars in the sky. In fact, the tree that Yuuto was perched in had been on the receiving end of one of its attacks earlier and actually began to break.

To let his guard down now would be a death sentence.

And so after waiting patiently, Yuuto finally leapt down from the tree. He kept his bow at the ready, arrow drawn, and slowly approached the boar. After finally confirming that the beast was no longer of this world...

"I did it!" he exclaimed. "I actually took it down! I can't believe it! Taro, I'm

finally a full-fledged hunter!”

Yuuto shouted out with glee. One would only be recognized as a true hunter once they took down a fierce beast such as the horned boar. Full-fledged hunters would go into the mountains or woods to take down fierce beasts, sometimes even monsters, whenever they appeared, bringing fortune to towns and villages. They were treated differently from the average rookie who hunted birds and rabbits, and sold them for money.

Being a true hunter meant that the kinds of jobs he could take on increased tenfold. No longer would Yuuto have to settle for simply selling his prey. He could now take on requests from lords to lead samurai through the forest, serve as a bodyguard for merchants traveling through the woods, accept requests to take down fierce beasts for cash, and all manner of other jobs. If he performed well, he could even go on to buy a house of his own in town, take a wife, and live happily ever after.

That said, the horned boar that Yuuto defeated was weak compared to the other fierce beasts. Bears required multiple arrows to take down, while tigers were hunters in their own right. There were the giant snakes that snuck up on hunters quietly and crushed them to death, and even large beetles that soared through the sky and struck with their sharp horns. The latter even had armor capable of deflecting arrows. These were all much more difficult to defeat compared to Yuuto’s current prey. While the horned boar was fast, because it was incapable of climbing trees, one could simply climb to a high vantage point and shower it with arrows.

Of course, actually executing that strategy properly was no easy task. It was one thing to successfully escape from a horned boar, but it was another thing entirely to lure it to the base of a tree. All manner of things could go wrong. The hunting dog meant to lure the beast close could be killed, the hunter could be knocked from their tree of choice and gored by the creature, or they could simply run out of arrows and have no means of attacking further. And then of course there were the hunters who assumed they felled the boar, only to get close and meet their end via its dying strike.

It was fairly common to hear stories in the hunting world of rookies who either failed to take down a horned boar or were in turn murdered by one.

“This thing’s pretty dang big. I bet I can get 120, no, 150 silver coins for this.”

Yuuto examined the teeth marks that Taro had left on the back right leg of the beast and calculated its worth. If he sold what he could from this boar, he might be able to finally buy one of those magic bows that his teacher used. In the world of hunters, losing to one’s prey often meant death. However, should one prove victorious, there were large gains to be had. This was the way hunters lived.

Risk and reward.

It wasn’t particularly rare for true hunters to make upwards of two hundred or more silver coins for felling a single beast, but Yuuto was new to this. He had only ever hunted and sold small prey for a handful of silver coins at a time. This was his first experience defeating a creature worth over a hundred silver coins, and he couldn’t have been more excited about it.

Yuuto was still young. He’d only just become a true hunter. The young man was born the son of a local farmer, but as the fifth boy in the family, there was little hope of him taking over the business. This was why he decided to become a hunter’s apprentice. Yuuto began to get used to walking through the forests and mountains, following his teacher around and remembering the layout of the woods. He learned the skills to train a pup into a hunting dog and eventually was taught how to use a bow. It was at that point that Yuuto became an apprentice hunter.

The young man’s hunting dog, Taro, was the offspring of his teacher’s and another hunter’s dog. It took a full two years after the pup’s birth to be trained into a hunting dog. The apprentice hunter and his partner took down dozens of small creatures before finally deciding to go after the horned boar. They spent a full month preparing for the hunt and pulled it off perfectly.

“Taro, we’re gonna be feasting tonight!”

Yuuto pet his companion on the head. While horned boar meat could smell a bit gamey compared to your average pork, it had a thick, fatty flavor that was quite delicious. To celebrate their success, Yuuto was planning on eating the very best part of the creature’s body. Taro, seemingly reading the mind of his master, wagged his tail in anticipation.

The hunter immediately took to cutting up the boar, starting with bleeding out the beast. The huge animal must've weighed at least five times as much as Yuuto did. The young man intended to bring home the meat and its fur, as well as its horn and fangs. Unfortunately, its internal organs would spoil before he got back, and the bones didn't sell for very much to begin with, so he'd leave those here.

After bleeding out and skinning the beast, Yuuto tucked away the fresh meat and fur into one part of his bag, and the horn and fangs into another.

"That about does it! Let's get a move on, Taro."

Yuuto made sure to place the fatty chunks of meat into the clean bag at his waist and called out to Taro, who was wagging his tail while chewing on one of the boar's bones. The dog barked in response and followed his master, bone still in mouth.

"Now, we gotta get this stuff back before nightfall."

While it was true that the remains of the horned boar were much easier to carry now that its bones were gone and it had been bled out, there was still lots of meat to carry. Adult boars were large animals, after all. If they stayed in place for too long, eventually the scent of blood would attract other beasts. It was for this reason that Yuuto took half the meat and carried it to a small cabin nearby. The building had been designed to keep beasts away.

"Geez, even half of this thing is heavy," he muttered.

Despite his complaints, Yuuto was light on his feet and wore a smile on his face. This was the first time in his life that he was transporting a large creature that he defeated by himself. The simple process of moving it from one place to another was incredibly satisfying.

"Phew, we're finally done."

The small cabin had a storehouse with a strong door capable of withstanding the average beast. It was there that Yuuto brought the meat and fur, just as the sun was finally beginning to set. He let out a sigh. Even after getting rid of the unnecessary bits of the animal, the pieces he kept from it were still significantly heavier than he was. The young man wasn't actually all that far from where he

slayed the beast, which went to show how difficult it was to transport its remains.

“Man, it took this long just to come this far?” he wondered. “I might have to hire Sahe for this...”

At this point, the prospect of carrying this thing all the way to town seemed unlikely. Yuuto decided to head to the foot of the mountain in the morning and hire his acquaintance for help. The man had arms and legs several times larger than Yuuto’s and often took jobs from his teacher.

To think the day would come when I’d be the sort of hunter who hired others for help.

The thought made Yuuto happy.

“Well, whatever. C’mon, Taro. Let’s eat.”

Just after Yuuto happily called out to his partner, it happened. Taro began to bark at his master after noticing something.

“What’s wrong, boy? Is something the matter?” the hunter asked Taro. The dog barked once more before dashing.

“What’s with him? Did he find something?”

Yuuto followed Taro, who had stopped running to bark again. In front of him was a black door with the mark of a cat on it. It was as if it’d just sprouted there like a plant.

“I don’t remember there being a door here... No, there definitely wasn’t one here yesterday.” Yuuto remembered this place clearly. When he came through the day prior, this black thing was nowhere to be found.

An important part of being a true hunter is being able to recognize and remember when things in the forest had changed. Yuuto always did his best to stay aware. He’d never overlook a change as big as this. That being said, this black door was in fact real.

“Don’t tell me this is some kind of magic?” he said.

Magic was a concept that Yuuto knew little about, considering his upbringing in a small middle-of-nowhere town. Still, his town was home to multiple

diviners, and the priest would often cast prayer magic of the Lord of Wind on hunters.

Yuuto was fairly certain that the appearance of this door was caused by magic.

“The fact that Taro brought me here means it shouldn’t be dangerous. But still...”

Yuuto found it hard to believe that his well-trained hunting dog would make a mistake like that. Steadying his resolve, he placed his hand on the black door’s golden handle and turned it. It wasn’t locked. He heard the sound of a bell ringing as he pushed it open.

“Whoa!”

Having grown used to the darkness on the mountain, Yuuto was briefly blinded by the light coming from the other side of the door. He held his hands up to try and block it out.

“Welcome!”

Somebody spoke to Yuuto from inside. It was the voice of a middle-aged man. The hunter finally brought his hands down and took a look at his surroundings. He was in a strange place. There were multiple tables and chairs lined up, and people sat at them eating and drinking. It was like he was in...

“A pub?”

“Not quite. We’re a western...er, a restaurant. Though we do serve alcohol.” The master responded to Yuuto, clapped his hands once and welcomed his new guest. “Let’s try this again. Welcome! Is the little guy there with you?”

The boy in front of the master was still young. He couldn’t have been older than a high schooler. Next to him was a single dog sitting patiently. The master usually didn’t allow pets in Nekoya, but he had no problem with having them around if they were going to be as well behaved as this.

“Oh, uh, yeah. This is Taro. He’s my hunting dog. I assure you, he’s well trained,” Yuuto responded to the master while lost in thought.

Regardless of the reasons why it was in the middle of the mountains, he could

be sure it was in fact a restaurant. Judging by the atmosphere, it wasn't just a cheap pub like the one in his town but a classy joint like the ones the samurai would visit in the city.

Crap, Yuuto thought. I don't have any money.

From his surroundings he could smell all manner of delicious, unknown foods that the other customers were eating. Yuuto hadn't yet eaten dinner, so this was especially torturous for him. The aroma made him want to grab a bite.

Yet the truth remained that he had no money. Being a relatively new hunter meant his wallet was mostly empty to begin with. He also didn't think there to be any point in bringing money out into the wilderness where at most, he'd bump into fellow hunters.

Something other than money that I can use. Let's see... Ah!

Yuuto immediately realized he did have something of value on him. It was wrapped up in the bag at his waist.

"Um, Master? I would love to eat here, but the truth is that I don't have any money on me. So..."

He took the bag off his waist and handed it to the middle-aged man.

"I have the best cuts of a horned boar in here. If you could cook this for me, I'd happily give you whatever is left over."

The best meat from a horned boar. Normally, one would salt it, and a merchant would sell it to some high-class noble for them to eat. Folks far and wide sought the rare meat. Unless one was a hunter like Yuuto, it was the type of food that a commoner would never have the opportunity to eat themselves. Even this small amount of the fatty meat would fetch up to five silver coins. The hunter realized that this was quite a lot for a single meal, but at the end of the day, he and Taro were planning on eating it all to begin with. He might as well have it cooked by someone who knew what they were doing.

"Boar meat, eh?"

The master wore a complicated expression on his face. Nekoya normally didn't serve meals made from ingredients of the other world. The master

procured all of his meats and vegetables from stores in the shopping arcade and served what he thought was good. It was his own personal rule to only serve the customers what he would eat himself.

He normally didn't offer this kind of service to customers, but there was something about the boy in front of him. His eyes were sparkling. They had a zeal to them that the master had lost over twenty years earlier. He had the face of an innocent, reckless, young man, not entirely unlike all the local high school goofs who occasionally dropped in after class.

"You got it. I'll be cooking this up my own way. Is that okay with you?"

There was no way he could betray the expectations of someone like that, the master decided.

"Of course! Thank you so much!"

"Woof!"

Yuuto and Taro energetically answered the master's question.

"Alrighty then. Hold on just a moment. You can take a seat right here."

The master disappeared to the back for a brief moment before returning with a tightly wrapped cloth of some kind and a glass cup filled with water.

"Here you are. A warm towel and some water. I'm gonna get to cooking this meat up, so hang on for just a bit."

The middle-aged man once more disappeared into the back, this time to cook.

Since we're talking about fresh meat, I'm gonna have to soften it up a bit. Also, boar tends to be a bit gamey, so I should...

Having eaten boar meat before, the master began to think about what sort of dish best went with the slightly gamey ingredient.

Meanwhile, Yuuto examined the inside of the restaurant.

"What a strange little place."

Now that he had the chance to really take a closer look, Yuuto realized just how odd a collection of customers there were. There was a swordsman wearing a beautiful kimono not unlike those in the city, and even a diviner. Meanwhile,

there was a samurai with an overwhelming aura. Yuuto wouldn't have been surprised if the man ended up being some kind of master warrior. Perhaps the most fascinating thing about these men was that they were fairly normal compared to the other customers.

There were people present who clearly had different facial features than Yuuto. They were more than likely from the Eastern Continent. Their clothing quality and even hair styles were all over the place, as if they shared almost nothing in common. More surprising were the other races present: elves and dwarfs. There were even races Yuuto had never seen before.

The more I look, the crazier it gets! What a bizarre restaurant!

Fascinated, Yuuto watched them all happily eat their strange meals until the master returned.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Without making much noise at all, the master placed down a dish of food in front of Yuuto, along with a bowl filled with white rice and some kind of brown soup.

On the plate were thinly sliced fresh oranie and the horned boar meat that Yuuto brought with him into the restaurant. The grilled meat was garnished with chopped vegetables and some sort of brown sauce.

“This is grilled meat...?”

Yuuto was certain that the master would bring out some sort of soup. Boiling the meat to soften it seemed like the obvious direction to head in.

“Indeed it is! It's called ginger pork.” The master then turned his attention to his other guest.

“Here you go, buddy. No onions or ginger in this one. Be careful though, it's still hot.” The middle-aged man placed a takeout box full of food down in front of Taro. The dog fiercely wagged his tail after sniffing the food and confirming its entrancing aroma. His meal consisted of a healthy serving of rice topped with grilled meat and sauce. Dogs normally weren't supposed to eat foods with such heavy flavoring, but as long as this wasn't a recurring thing, once in a blue moon was fine.

“Please enjoy,” said the master. “Refills on rice and miso soup are free, so just let me know if you want more.”

With that, the master left the hunter and his partner, seeing another set of customers flag him down. It was the usual pair of goofs asking for seconds on okonomiyaki.

“This is the kind of food they make here...?” Yuuto found himself gulping as the rich scent of the sweet sauce and grilled meat reached his nose. He picked up a pair of chopsticks and then looked down at his dog.

“Taro, you can start eating, buddy.”

As soon as he was given permission, the drooling hunting dog immediately began to dig in. He ate loudly, his tail wagging back and forth endlessly. Taro was never this excited when he ate the usual spoils of the day.

Is it really that good?

Seeing his partner so excited raised Yuuto’s own expectations. He reached for the food with his chopsticks and grabbed one of the many thin pieces of meat on the plate.

Whoa, it’s so soft.

The meat was so tender that it felt like it might crumble under the pressure of the chopsticks. What kind of magic did the master use to make the hard boar meat so soft? Yuuto brought the piece of meat, covered in sauce and vegetables, toward his mouth. The light in the restaurant reflected off its shiny surface as the young hunter swallowed his own drool.

Yuuto took a bite.

“This is amazing!” The young man voiced his impressions immediately.

This was more delicious than anything Yuuto had ever eaten in his entire life. The sauce was sweet yet salty and even had a dash of spiciness to it. The flavor was totally unique. Just that alone was amazing enough. He imagined that topping a bowl of rice with the sauce would be a meal all its own.

But it wasn’t just that. The sauce went perfectly with the fatty boar meat. The surface was sprinkled with a grain of sorts that soaked up the sauce. It then

fused together with the meat juice and grease. It was positively delicious when eaten together with the vegetables.

How could there be anything in this world tastier than the meal in front of him? It would be only a few moments before he had that question answered for him.

“Whoaaaaaaa!”

It was delicious enough for Yuuto to roar into the air. Just when he thought the ginger pork was the pinnacle of cuisine, there was something even more incredible sitting in front of him: the rice. It was white as snow, with no millet of any kind. The fresh, plump rice existed in perfect harmony with the ginger pork.

The combination of heavy meat and light, plain rice left Yuuto feeling both satisfied and hungry for more. He took a bite of the pork, and then the rice, and then some more pork, repeating the cycle of bliss over and over again. On occasion, he munched on the oranie, some of the pickled vegetables, and sipped from the bowl of soup.

It went without saying that the bowl of rice emptied almost immediately.

“Excuse me! Can I get another serving of rice?! Make it a large, and fast, please!” Yuuto was almost panicked as he made his order.

“Aye, you got it.” The master had kept a close eye on the boy, so he was ready to provide seconds the moment he asked for them. The master packed a bowl filled with white rice and brought it out to his young customer just as Taro barked, signaling that he too desired more.

The dog and its master were quite alike. The master smiled to himself at the thought and prepared some more meat and rice for Taro.

Thus did the hunter and his partner’s joyous meal continue until the two of them could eat no more.

“Oof, I can’t take another bite,” Yuuto groaned.

Yuuto ended up getting three extra bowls of rice and one extra serving of ginger pork. He held his painfully full stomach and stepped out of the restaurant. Taro was no different, his own walking speed slower than usual due

to the extra weight he was packing.

“Taro, that sure was great! We gotta come again.”

The hunting dog still had enough energy in him to happily wag his tail in response to his master’s words.

Before leaving, Yuuto managed to learn about the secret of the restaurant. It was an eatery that could only be visited once every seven days. Even better, the cost of eating a meal there was significantly lower than Yuuto expected. It was cheap *and* delicious.

In fact, Yuuto’s own teacher, who made this his area of operations, often visited the restaurant and ordered the same thing as his disciple.

“I gotta give my thanks to Master, too.”

Come to think of it, his teacher was the one who had recommended hunting for horned boars in this area. This must have been his way of sharing his discovery with Yuuto. This was his way of showing his disciple the path to the Restaurant to Another World.

“All right, Taro! Let’s get some shut-eye. Tomorrow we’re gonna hire some help to carry this meat, so it’s gonna be a long day!” Yuuto said happily to Taro, who responded in kind with a bark.

Chapter 16:

Curry Rice

The vicious storm that attacked the island only a few days prior was gone, leaving behind yet another sunny day. Alphonse, preparing to leave his house, thought it was the perfect weather to go outside.

Beneath the sun, Alphonse looked down into the crude wooden barrel he had made himself. The water inside reflected his face. Twenty years ago, the king had gifted him a mithril sword breaker that he'd received from an elf. Now, using that dagger, Alphonse carefully shaved his beard away. He slid off the old sandals he'd made with straw, based on a design he'd seen on the Western Continent. He then slipped on a frayed suit that had clearly seen better days and a pair of holey boots. Alphonse next sheathed his mithril rapier at his waist. Though it was excellent for slaying monsters, it was relatively useless against wild animals. The sword was more of a prop to be hung on a wall at this point. While he usually made it a point to cut his white hair, it had grown out again. He tied it up with some dry grass.

Despite his current appearance, Alphonse was once an admiral in the great Duchy, the nation with the longest history on the Eastern Continent. This meant that even if it wasn't perfect, he had to dress suitably if he was going to go out. This was especially the case considering he was going somewhere incredibly special: a place he had a twenty-year-long relationship with. This place was simultaneously his singular hope and his savior. Today would likely be his final time visiting.

Holding those thoughts deep in his heart, Alphonse made sure to clean himself up more than usual.

"That oughta do it."

With his preparations complete, Alphonse made a mark on the wall with his sword. The wall in question was lined with sets of six vertical lines and one horizontal line across each group. These signified how much time Alphonse spent on this island and also told him when it was the "special day." He could no longer count how many times he'd waited for this day to come.

“Time to go.”

His mind filled with many thoughts, Alphonse said his usual words and exited his house. A quietness settled upon the cave where he lived alone, its walls covered in marks.

Alphonse walked down the well-traveled path, arriving at his destination before the sun could settle overhead. It was a small hill overlooking the area. At the very top were patches of thinly scattered grass and a mysterious black door. Alphonse continued to walk toward his destination, now in sight. He quietly gulped. There wasn't an ounce of hesitation in his step.

“Seven long days...”

Alphonse had been alone for so long that it'd become a habit of his to talk to himself, but he couldn't help it. His chest was full of expectation. After yesterday's party, he hadn't had a single thing to eat. Every ounce of his body was crying for what was beyond the door. Once he arrived at the black object, he immediately opened it and stepped inside. The familiar bell rang out once again.

“Welcome!”

“Yo, Master! Get me some curry rice, please! A large order at that!” Alphonse could barely contain himself, almost interrupting the other man to call out the name of his beloved meal.

He was offered all manner of dishes at the party yesterday, but curry rice was not among them. Of course it wasn't; the meal didn't exist in the Duchy's capital. And so Alphonse's excitement reached a boiling point and finally exploded.

“Aye, you got it. Hold on just a minute.” As usual, the master chuckled at Alphonse's impatience and went to the kitchen in the back. The former admiral made his way to one of the seats in the restaurant.

“Curses. Is it ready yet? How much longer must I wait?!”

Incapable of waiting out his empty stomach and expectations, he grew

impatient after only a few minutes. Curry rice was food for the soul. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he stayed alive just so that he could eat it again. That was how special it was to him. Nobody else felt as strongly about the meal as he did.

Alphonse cared not about any of the sounds around him. The only thing that mattered right now was the curry rice.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Here's your order of curry rice."

And so after the longest five minutes of Alphonse's life, the master set down a large plate of curry rice in front of him.

The huge helping of white rice was topped with brown curry sauce that had large chunks in it. Beside the plate was the small pot filled with bright red fukujinzuke, finely chopped pickled vegetables. Nearby was a glass cup filled with lemon water along with a silver pitcher. Alphonse's silver spoon reflected the illumination dropping down from the ceiling lights.

Mm, I knew it. Curry rice truly is bliss itself.

The dining table was set. It would be a feast the likes of which he only had once every seven days. The spicy, stunning aroma wafting up into his nostrils from the plate in front of him landed a direct attack on his stomach. In preparation for this meal, Alphonse had avoided eating anything since early in the morning.

"Yes, yes. That's what I'm talking about," he muttered.

Alphonse took the glistening spoon in hand and smiled with glee. He immediately dipped it into the mountain of curry and scooped out a spoonful. The curry sauce sitting atop the white rice was filled with meat and vegetables. The visual contrast of the white rice and brown curry sauce was like a work of art. The spoon had effectively become a miniature replica of the larger plate in front of him. Alphonse brought it to his mouth and chewed in silence.

Mm, it's so spicy!

The first thing Alphonse felt was heat. In the Duchy, spices were extremely valuable and hard to come by. And yet, this dish used them plentifully, allowing it to reach the perfect level of spiciness. It was this heat that assaulted Alphonse

from all sides. The first time he ate it, he was unprepared for the kickback. Now that he was more intimately familiar with curry, Alphonse took his time chewing and experiencing all the flavors it had to offer.

Each bite of white rice revealed a unique sweetness. The greasy squares of stewed pork were tender, almost as if they might melt in his mouth. And then there were the two types of oranie incorporated into the dish. One of them had been melted into the curry sauce itself, adding a savory quality to the overall flavor profile. The other was oranie added after the fact, allowed to maintain its original form. This one ended up soaking up the flavor of the curry while also keeping its own sweetness by being cooked over fire.

Those weren't the only flavors he experienced, either. There were the cobbler's tubers, a vegetable Alphonse was not familiar with from his time in the Duchy. According to some of the other customers, it was a well-known food in the Empire. These tubers and the orange karoots soaked up the spicy flavor of the curry. They also had a soft texture. All these different tastes melted into one in his mouth.

"Mm, truly delicious." Alphonse was overwhelmed with emotion as he spoke aloud.

Now that he thought about it, the restaurant had changed quite a bit since he first discovered it. The master that used to run the place was no longer present, and various other little things had changed as well. But one of the few things that stayed the same was the amazing taste of the curry. He would take one bite, then the next, and each taste would only make him hungrier still. By the end, he would grab a bit of fukujinzuke and lemon water, dumping it all into his stomach. As he felt the curry warm him up from the inside, beads of sweat ran down his chin. Yet his hands never stopped moving. They couldn't stop moving. His spoon would scoop up more curry and deliver it on an express trip to his mouth over and over again.

That was what curry rice was. It was the ultimate fusion of spiciness and a multitude of other savory flavors combined into one, filling his stomach like no other. It was that feeling that led Alphonse to fall in love with this particular dish.

Long ago, the previous master of the restaurant told Alphonse that curry rice was one of the most popular dishes in the other world. He could see how that was the case given how good it was. Whether it be the fruits from trees or the salted meats and fish he normally ate, none of it could compare to this.

Come to think of it, I've probably eaten here some thousand times, and yet I still can't get enough of this curry.

Perhaps because he knew this was his final time visiting the Restaurant to Another World, Alphonse began to grow nostalgic. In retrospect, he wasn't sure whether it was good luck or bad that he had washed ashore this island as the lone survivor of a shipwreck. Alphonse had fought against the terrifying monsters of the island, all the while exploring its every nook and cranny. It was by pure luck that he had stumbled across the strange black door and first visited the restaurant. Due to his ongoing struggles with the creatures of the island, he had only eaten a handful of fruit over the three days leading up to this discovery. The moment he found out he was in an eatery, he immediately told the master he had money and asked him to serve whatever he had. Since Alphonse had no need of his money, he simply tossed it at the man running the restaurant, who responded to him as such.

"Hm... Well, I guess I can whip you up some curry pretty quickly. That okay with you?"

And so the master presented the former admiral with a plate of curry and rice. Alphonse was thirty-five years old when he came face to face with the strange food. He was tired and running on an empty stomach, and so the spiciness of the dish served as a shock to his appetite, causing him to wolf down the food. He remembered it as if it were just yesterday.

Alphonse ate so much curry that day that he was on the verge of bursting.

After that fateful day, he had visited the restaurant over a thousand times. Alphonse would spend six days surviving the harsh conditions of the island in anticipation of the seventh. Being able to eat curry rice on the Day of Saturday became his singular objective.

"As I thought, curry rice is true happiness. Teriyaki, Omelet Rice, and Pork Cutlet Rice Bowl know not of what they speak."

As he let out a satisfied sigh, Alphonse recalled an old memory from years ago.

He once got into an argument with three fellow regulars. There was Teriyaki, a swordsman from the Western Continent with skills equal to his own. Then there was the terrifying monster, the lizardman hero named Omelet Rice. Last but not least was Pork Cutlet Rice Bowl, a powerful demon warrior with a dignified body and the head of a lion. The argument they engaged in was so fierce that all of them were nearly banned from the restaurant permanently. The four regulars apologized profusely to the master. While it was a happy memory for him now, Alphonse hadn't changed his opinion since then.

No matter what the other customers said, the best way to eat rice was with curry. That was the simple, unmoving truth of the matter.

"Whew..."

Alphonse cleared his enormous plate in a paltry ten minutes and let out a satisfied sigh laced with the scent of curry.

"Hah, fast as ever, I see." One of Alphonse's acquaintances, Pork Loin Cutlet, had been watching him.

"Hmph. I was simply hungry is all," Alphonse answered. "Master, seconds, please. Make it a large."

He gave the master his usual serious look and wiped the curry sauce from his mouth with his moist towel.

"You never change. You're obsessed with curry rice. How do you not grow bored of it?"

"As if that were possible! Curry rice is filled with limitless potential. And you're one to talk. Why not give a plate of pork loin cutlet curry a try? It's quite delicious, my friend. Much better than eating it by itself."

With his stomach full, Alphonse turned his attention to joking with Pork Loin Cutlet.

As far as the former admiral was concerned, the restaurant's food could be divided into two categories. Things that went well with curry and things that did

not. Any kind of fried food or cutlet typically went well with curry. Pork loin cutlet, in particular, went splendidly with the spicy food. He knew this for a fact.

“I refuse. Pork cutlets go best with cutlet sauce and beer. This is an unbending truth of the universe.” The old diviner shook his head like the most stubborn person on the planet.

“Hmph, I see you’re as hardheaded as ever. Anyway, has anything interesting happened recently?” Alphonse asked Pork Loin Cutlet without digging too deeply.

And so the two men shared words as always. This was the only place in the world where people of different nations could peacefully converse like this. Truth be told, this too was one of the reasons that Alphonse fell in love with Nekoya.

Given where he normally lived, even just three days ago he would never be able to experience the second plate of curry rice he was currently devouring.

“Master, you have my gratitude. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

With his second plate of curry rice resting soundly at the bottom of his stomach, Alphonse stood from his seat and gave his final thanks to the master. These words came from deep within his heart. If this restaurant hadn’t been there when he needed it, he most certainly would have died many moons ago. His words were fueled by this truth.

“Oh? Yeah, of course. You’re very much welcome. We’ll be looking forward to your next visit.”

The master seemed somewhat surprised by Alphonse’s words but nonetheless returned them in kind. He knew that the man had been a regular since his grandfather ran the restaurant, but as far as he could recall, this might have been the first time he’d ever been thanked face to face. Since Alphonse had paid for all his meals years in advance, he normally just stood up and left without saying anything once he finished.

“One day, I’ll be back.”

Thoughts of the future ran through Alphonse’s mind as he felt a tinge of

sadness hit him. He left the restaurant behind, wondering when he'd next be able to visit, if ever.

A brief period of time had passed since the former admiral's final visit to Nekoya. He watched the island he lived on for many years grow more and more distant, letting out a sigh.

"Admiral Flugel, is everything all right, sir?"

The noble officer nearby checked in on Alphonse. The man standing nervously before him was none other than Alphonse Flugel, once said to be the strongest admiral in all of the Duchy. Some twenty years ago, on his way to the Western Continent while serving as a bodyguard for a merchant ship, the admiral was forced into battle against the lord of the ocean, the kraken. In exchange for saving the merchant ship, the legendary admiral went down with his own and had never been seen again. The deserted island he washed ashore was far away from any ship routes, forcing him to survive on his own for all these years. The noble was incredibly surprised to find him all the way out here.

An average person would have long since succumbed to despair and either ended things on their own or fallen to any number of illnesses and injuries. But this man had survived. He defeated the vicious beasts of the island, abiding by the laws of the wild, and survived for twenty years all on his own.

Damaged in a rough storm out on the ocean, the noble officer's military ship had been pushed off course. Looking to repair the ship, he and the rest of his crew decided to set anchor at an island nearby. It was three days later that they ran into Alphonse, who at the time looked like some kind of wild man. The repairs finished an additional three days later, and after letting the former admiral take one last stroll around his home of twenty years, they boarded their ship and went on their way. They were now headed for the Duchy, their beloved homeland.

"Now that I think about it, waiting for seven thousand days in a row is completely different than waiting for seven days a thousand times, huh?" Alphonse whispered as he watched the island grow distant.

"Excuse me? What do you mean, sir?" the officer asked.

“It’s nothing. Just an old man’s musings is all.” Alphonse chuckled at the officer who clearly had no idea what he was talking about.

I wonder if there’s a black door somewhere in the Duchy.

Alphonse heard from the other customers that the black doors appeared all over the world in different places. Given that so many of them were from completely different continents, this made sense. That meant it was entirely possible that his beloved Duchy might be home to a door or two as well.

I’ll have to do some digging around.

Either way, Alphonse was now over fifty years old. His role as admiral had long since passed, and he heard that his position as head of the Flugel family now belonged to his son. This meant that after returning home, he’d have all the time in the world. He decided to dedicate some of it to trying to reunite with his beloved curry rice.

If I remember correctly, one of the new regulars was a knight of the Duchy.

Recently, Teriyaki had brought a knight dressed in what seemed to be a Duchy uniform to the restaurant. The man was in love with the kind of fried shripe one would put atop curry. Alphonse now had the confirmation he needed. There was a door in the Duchy. He simply had to find it.

Time to do some searching once I get home.

The military ship continued to rock back and forth on its way to the Duchy, carrying a newly determined Alphonse.

Three months later, Alphonse arrived at his destination. It was a little cabin out in the wildlands, outside of the capital of the Duchy. He traveled there by horse.

“I knew it. There it is.”

Despite being free of the island, Alphonse still often spoke to himself. He stared at the incongruous black door set into the cabin.

The former admiral was dressed completely differently than he was on his last visit. While his rapier and sword breaker were still present, his clothes were

fresh and clean, and his brand new shoes shone in the light. Alphonse's beard had been trimmed by the finest barber in the Duchy, and his hair was cut short.

He looked as a noble and former admiral of the Duchy should. The reason he had no bodyguards accompanying him was because he had long since retired to a quiet life.

"To think it was this close," he murmured.

It had taken Alphonse about a month to reach the capital of the Duchy. From there, it took an additional two months of talking to traveling halflings and following the trail of fellow regulars before finally getting the info he needed. Alphonse excitedly opened the door, the sound of a familiar bell ringing in his ears.

"Welcome... Oh? Long time no see, Alphonse!" the master said.

"Indeed, it has been quite some time! But first, get me some curry rice! Right this instant! I haven't had any for three whole months, dammit!"

And thus, Alphonse shouted out his order once again.

Chapter 17:

Pudding à la Mode The Duchy was one of the most powerful nations on the Eastern Continent. Its history was long and vast, stretching back to a kingdom of old that was destroyed in ancient times.

In that powerful nation lived a princess named Victoria. She was thirty-six years old and the older sister of the duke. Victoria was unmarried, and those around her said she would likely remain that way for the rest of her days.

The reason for this was tied to Victoria's birth; she was a changeling.

Changelings were children who, despite being born of two humans, entered the world with half-elven traits. Under normal circumstances, one of the parents would have to be an elf for this to be possible, making this one of the world's many strange phenomena. One theory brought forth by scholars was that elf or half-elf blood that had found its way into a bloodline some thousand years prior randomly emerged, but the truth of the matter was still unknown to all.

Those who were born as half-elves or changelings could not hope to live normal lives. The reasons for this were simple. Half-elves possessed the same strong magical power that elves had, as well as the life energy that humans had. They were also capable of living for hundreds of years at a time. So while it did vary from individual to individual, most half-elves looked like they were in their early teens until they were a century old. They were beings that defied human knowledge.

Never mind elven society, half-elves were often treated as aliens in the human world. It didn't matter who they were born to; they were outcasts.

As such, their options in life were inherently limited by their birth. They could choose to cut themselves off from the world and serve a god or perhaps utilize their long life spans and inhuman magical power to become sorcerers. Other options included becoming mercenaries or adventurers, for whom ability was everything, or moving to one of the handful of small half-elf villages across the land. Either way, they were incapable of simply walking a normal path through life.

Victoria chose the sorcerer's path.

By the time she turned twenty-five years of age, it had become clear that despite being a princess of the Duchy, she was not human. In the ten years that passed since she was 15, her appearance had not changed at all. And so the princess, wanting to make use of her immense magical powers, went to the then-duke, her father, and appealed to him. She wanted to pursue the path of a sorcerer.

This was when she discovered that she was a genius.

It took not but three months before her own skills surpassed those of her teacher. She then went on to surpass the best sorcerer in all the Duchy, the court's head sorcerer, in only a year. This was an incredible feat on its own but even more amazing considering that the Duchy was considered the greatest of magical nations on the Eastern Continent.

It was then that Victoria's magical prowess was recognized. Ten years ago, she became the pupil of the greatest sorcerer in the Kingdom, Sage Altorius, one of the heroes who helped to slay the demon god. After spending only eight years dedicated to her studies, Victoria unlocked the greatest secrets of magic.

And so two years ago, Victoria told her master, the Sage Altorius, that she wished to walk her own path. She departed from the Kingdom and returned home to the Duchy, where she was given limitless research funds in exchange for promising to remain in the shadows. That was how she gained the nickname, "The Witch Princess of the Duchy." She spent her days in her room researching magic.

However, even the Witch Princess took breaks every now and then... Specifically, once every seven days.

Victoria's personal room, also known as the "lab," was sealed off so that nobody but her could enter. It was nothing like one might expect of a princess's room. Instead, it was filled with all sorts of suspicious-looking vials and magical items. Quite frankly, it resembled a fairy tale witch's house, if anything. It was in this room that Victoria had holed up, reading a magic book the ancient elves had left behind. The elves of old were said to have had magic far beyond that of

her time.

It's still too early, she thought.

Rather than wear a decorative gown befitting the princess of a great nation, Victoria instead wore a simple dress that prioritized ease of movement. She lightly rubbed her stomach over the fabric and waited for the time to come.

Victoria continued to glance at the complicated magic circle on the floor. To be more precise, it was a summoning circle for doors to another world, one of the most complicated of its kind. Creating one required precise knowledge, incredible magical skills, and control.

Mastering it was a difficult feat for even a pure elf. In fact, only two magic circles of its kind existed in all the world. One of them was right in front of Victoria, and the other was the one her master and the world's greatest sage, Altorius, had made. The magic circle designed to call forth a very specific object was currently activated and doing its job.

The black door with the cat picture appeared over it.

Normally at just past noon, Victoria would have already gone out. However, her stomach was still rather full. Earlier in the day, her younger brother had invited her to join his family for a meal, likely because he knew that Victoria wasn't particularly fond of putting herself out in front of people. Since this particular meal was a personal affair, he was clearly thinking of his older sister. She appreciated the gesture.

The problem was that it was a special day. Victoria had been looking forward to swinging by her special place since early in the morning, so she couldn't help but feel like her chance had been ripped out from under her. Of course, her little brother knew nothing of the door's existence, which made feeling that way silly to begin with. Victoria was more than aware that none of this was his fault.

After a brief period of reading her book, the Witch Princess finally stood up, convinced that she could probably do with something light. She stepped into the magic circle and placed her hand on the door. The ringing of the bell, an old elf relic, announced her arrival at the restaurant.

“Welcome!” the master called.

“Hello,” she answered.

Victoria exchanged brief words with the master of the restaurant, someone she had now known for eight years, ever since Altorius first brought her here. She took a seat.

“Here you are. Ice water and a menu.”

Victoria thanked him and immediately turned to the dessert page.

Maybe I'll just get a dessert today...

Meals here were to be eaten in silence and with respect. Victoria couldn't help but feel this way as a citizen of the Duchy. People in her homeland often said that “changelings were not to speak of government matters.” This carried over to how she handled herself in day-to-day matters. She looked at the menu and made sure not to interact with the other customers. Victoria paid them no mind.

That's right. She paid them no mind. For example, she paid no mind to the imperial princess eating a parfait who was supposed to have started treatment for her illness three months ago. She paid no mind to the Monastery of Light followers, one of them even a half-elf like herself, who happily chatted amongst themselves while eating sweets. She paid no mind to her own master, who would appear at lunchtime, digging into a pork loin cutlet and some beer. She paid no mind to the former admiral of the Duchy eating curry rice, a man who supposedly died twenty years ago in a vicious battle with a kraken.

Victoria visited the Restaurant to Another World with only one objective: to eat delicious food.

She made her decision.

“Pudding à la mode, please.”

She ordered only her most favorite of desserts.

The master nodded. “Aye, you got it. Hang on just a minute.”

Victoria watched the master retreat to the kitchen in the back and cast her gaze down at the menu in front of her.

This is definitely my handwriting, she thought.

The dessert menu was in a beautifully written Eastern Continent script. Everything about the characters, including the little quirks, were exactly the same as Victoria's handwriting.

But I only gave him one...

The Witch Princess also looked at the characters on the normal menu that her master wrote long, long ago.

She collected her thoughts.

The other world was fairly technologically advanced. Just one glance at this small space said as much. The first time she came here, she was met with surprise after surprise.

Exactly eight years prior, Victoria became Altorius's pupil and went on to master all manner of difficult magic. Two years after she began studying under him, she became aware of the Restaurant to Another World. Altorius summoned the door with his magic and brought her with him inside.

"Welcome! So you're going to be writing the menu for me, young lady?"

At the time, Victoria looked quite a bit younger. The irony of course was that the master was actually about the same age as her, not that he was aware of that. The Witch Princess nodded her head at the man. She'd heard the details from her master.

"Much appreciated," he said. "I'm not much for sweets."

This of course begged the question as to why the master would even think to add a dessert section to his restaurant's menu; something about his friend being a patissier or something. The main problem was that the master was a resident of the other world, meaning he couldn't read or write in Victoria's world's language. This inspired Altorius to go to his new pupil Victoria, an incredibly talented sorcerer who loved sweets more than anybody he knew. He ordered her to try each new confection and write the names and descriptions for them in the language of the Eastern Continent.

"Again, thanks a bunch. Here's a pen and some paper. And..."

Apparently, Sage Altorius and the master had already settled things between themselves. The middle-aged human man handed her a useful otherworldly pen that didn't require an ink jar and some white, thin but durable paper. He retreated to the back but quickly came out again holding something in his hands.

"Try this one, first. I heard from the old man that you're big on egg-based sweets, right?"

This was the first thing she ever ate at the Restaurant to Another World...

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Here you are, custard à la mode."

It was the same hypnotizing confection that she'd eaten eight years ago. The food was presented to her in a glass cup with a thin stem and a wide top. In the center was the soft yellow pudding drenched in brown sauce. Victoria licked her pink lips and grabbed the spoon off of the table.

Gotta save the best for last, she decided.

Victoria started by waging a full-fledged assault on the surrounding areas of the cup. She attacked the white cream decorating the edges of the pudding with her spoon. It was the very same soft and sweet white cream used in the parfaits and cakes served at the restaurant. She scooped it up with her spoon, enjoying how fragile it was to the touch.

She then switched to the small fork on the table and reached for the fruits next to the pudding. According to the master, the half-peeled apple was meant to look like a rabbit. It was as crunchy as expected, refreshingly sweet and tart. Meanwhile, the neighboring orange sauce added a whole new level of sweetness to the apple.

The sweet fruit was very similar to a southern one she'd eaten many times on the Western Continent with her master when they traveled there via magic circle. Since it was quick to rot, one didn't see it very often in the Duchy. She quietly enjoyed the different flavors of fruit blending together in her mouth.

Before getting to her main objective, Victoria next targeted the ice cream. She enjoyed the crisp, cold sweetness sitting on the side of the cup. Each scoop had a sweetness to her liking, and they were all delicious in their own ways, but they

didn't stand a chance against the main draw in the center of the cup.

The time had come.

Victoria licked her lips multiple times, took a sip of cold water, and only after washing away the sweetness of the foods she'd just eaten did she begin her final attack on the fortress of deliciousness in front of her. It went without saying, but custard was the true star of pudding à la mode. It was the first dessert that Victoria had tried at the restaurant, and it was the one otherworldly confection that refused to move from its number one spot.

The Witch Princess pressed her shining silver spoon into the egg-colored pudding covered in brown sauce. In response, it jiggled ever so slightly, allowing the spoon into its gentle domain of tastiness. She then raised it back up again, observing the tiny, brown and egg-colored hill sitting atop her silver spoon.



Into her mouth it went, rolling about on top of her tongue.

The rich and sweet flavors of egg and milk spread across her tongue, accompanied by its unique mouthfeel and the sweet but slightly bitter flavor of the brown sauce. They complemented each other beautifully, with the former gently accepting the other into its soft arms and the latter bringing out the flavor of the pudding even further. It was the perfect marriage of elements.

Victoria found herself utterly charmed by the flavors melting away in her mouth.

This truly is the most perfect of combinations.

It was during this time, and this time only, that Victoria felt grateful for being a half-elf. If she had been born a human, she never would have thought to become a sorcerer, which meant she likely never would have stumbled her way into this restaurant. On the flip side, if she were born an elf, she'd never have been able to eat custard à la mode even if she did reach the restaurant. After all, elves hated all foods made from animals.

Victoria was a half-elf sorcerer. It was for that very reason that she was able to be where she was, enjoying custard to her heart's content. The Witch Princess didn't intend on letting this chance meeting go to waste, and she would do whatever it took to make sure she could continue to eat this delectable treat. The magic circle in her lab that summoned the door to the Restaurant to Another World was testament to her determination.

Spoonful by spoonful, Victoria continued to enjoy her dessert. She was as careful as could be so that she might stretch out the experience as long as possible. Sadly, all good things eventually came to an end. The spoon made but a light tapping noise as Victoria set it down on the table. The cup in front of her was empty but her stomach was full. She let out a satisfied sigh. After consulting with her stomach, she decided that she only needed one for today.

"Master, the check, please. Also..."

"Aye. The usual, right?"

Victoria nodded. "Yes, exactly."

The master knew her quite well by this point, so he nodded and grabbed something out of the fridge.

“Here you go. Make sure you eat it today, all right?”

With that, the master handed her a small box with an illustration of a winged puppy on it. Inside were four glass jars of pudding, along with a strangely cold object that didn’t melt like ice. The special pudding was made by the patissier upstairs, and she always ordered it to go.

“Understood.”

The master told her the same thing every time, and she always nodded her head in response. That said, she was lying. She was incapable of eating all of this in one sitting, especially if it meant living out the next six days without pudding. She was well aware that because of the way the custard was made, it spoiled fast. Victoria took steps to ensure that would not happen.

“I’ll be back.”

“Yup! Thanks as always!”

Victoria opened the door as she listened to the master’s words and exited into her room.

“...Now then,” she said.

The Witch Princess knew exactly what needed to be done upon her return. She immediately exited her lab and made a beeline for her bedroom, a wonderfully ornate space fitting for the princess of a great nation. Victoria then grabbed the box sitting next to her pillow. At first glance, it looked like a jewelry box, but once she opened it, the truth became clear. There was nothing inside of it except for cold air. She carefully placed each of the four jars into the box. This jewelry box combined two different spells: one designed to prevent rotting and another that continuously blasted cold, wintry air. Victoria specifically developed this contraption so that she could enjoy her pudding for as long as possible.

Victoria giggled to herself as she closed the cold container. Now she’d be able to enjoy her beloved pudding once every couple of days.

The Witch Princess of the Duchy was known for being aloof and inexpressive, much like a doll. This smile of hers was as important as it was rare. She only let it show when she was truly filled with joy, to express the fact that she never felt pity for herself due to her birth.

It was a smile that expressed that, if anything, she was incredibly grateful for being born as she was.

Chapter 18:

Hamburger On the outskirts of a middle-of-nowhere town in a small nation, Jack ran along gleefully, his ears filled with the sounds of the coins rattling in his pouch.

“Heh heh, I finally got my hands on nine copper coins!”

He had earned this money bit by bit, helping out around the house, using a machete to take out the giant rats terrorizing the cattle and plants, and even guiding visitors to the local inn. It took him seven days to save up enough coins so that he could go out to eat *that* particular thing.

It was just before noon. Jack always made it a point to head out before lunch. As always, the usual pair were already there to meet him.

“Yo, Jack. Glad you made it,” said one of them.

Greeting him was Kento, the son of a sorcerer who lived in town.

The other added, “Thank goodness. If you were any later, we were gonna have to go without you!”

The second person to greet him was Terry, the third son of the mayor. He was one year older than the two boys. In this town in the middle of nowhere, these three troublemakers were the only ones who knew about “that place.”

Jack comically shrugged in response to Terry’s words. “Whoops! That would’ve sucked. Well then, let’s get goin’!”

“Yup.”

“All right.”

And so the three youngsters headed to their destination. It was an old well just outside of town that had long been out of use. When they were much younger, the three boys explored the well and stumbled upon that certain something.

“Kento, be careful,” Terry cautioned. “You know you can be an oaf sometimes.”

“I know, I know! Look, I only fell that one time. You don’t gotta keep bugging me about it every single time we go!”

The boys bantered back and forth while climbing down the rope and deep into the well. At the very bottom of it, they found...

“All right, I’m opening it!” Terry said.

“Got it.”

“Okay.”

Once every seven days, a door to another world appeared at the bottom of the well. Terry stepped ahead of his friends and turned the golden knob, opening the entrance to the world beyond.

“Welcome!” said the master. “Sit wherever you’d like.”

The master was already in the process of bringing some other regulars to their table: a tray full of small people that he carried by hand.

“Thank you!”

“All right.”

“Okay!”

The three boys were already used to the way things worked, so after quickly responding to the master, they found their way to one of the open tables and sat down.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. What’ll it be?” The master quickly returned to take their order, and the boys responded in tandem.

“The hamburger set with a cola!” the boys said in unison.

“Aye, coming right up.” The master did his best to try not to laugh at the synchronized boys and left for the kitchen.

“I can’t wait!” said Kento.

“Totally,” said Jack. “The food we normally eat ain’t got nothing on this.”

Terry nodded. “Yeah, even the food at my place doesn’t come close.”

The boys wiped their hands with the hot towels and looked around the

restaurant after briefly discussing the deliciousness of the hamburger.

“You know what, there sure are a lot of other races that come here.”

“I mean, I get that they all come from that door, but from where?”

“It’s super weird. Does that mean our world is full of other kinds of people like the ones we see in here?”

This topic came up whenever they visited the restaurant. The boys couldn’t help but be astounded by how small the town they lived in was compared to the vast world, of which they knew little. The magic door to the Restaurant to Another World supposedly appeared all across Jack’s world. The people who used said door weren’t just humans. Nekoya was visited by all manner of beings.

There was an elf quietly but deliciously enjoying a plate of noodles topped with fermented bean sauce. They’d never seen anyone but that elf order it before.

Then there was the beautiful, silver-haired, half-elf sorcerer who was always eating a yellow food topped with beautifully arranged fruits and some kind of white stuff.

There was even a red-faced dwarf drowning himself in alcohol and all sorts of fish. He wore a giant axe on his back, much bigger than any of the ones the lumberjacks from the village used.

While they didn’t appear to be regulars, every now and then the boys saw barefooted halflings in the restaurant. The childlike people would always make a ruckus, excitedly filling their stomachs with all manner of foods.

These races weren’t all that surprising to Jack and the others. They’d heard of them before, and other than the elves that never left the forest, they’d even seen a few in person as adventures or travelers visiting their village. However, the Restaurant to Another World had plenty of stranger customers.

There was an expressionless lizard man digging his spoon into a plate of yellow omelet rice, topped with the same red sauce that hamburgers used.

Meanwhile, the legion of little people from before were digging into an

absurdly large bread-like food topped with an array of sauces.

Next to them was another group of little people, though these were winged. They appeared to be obeying the orders of their haughty queen, taking bits and pieces off of some kind of sweet, creamy food.

Sitting close by was a beautiful woman with brown, tanned skin, hungrily eating a meat dish with boiled eggs in it. While this by itself wasn't strange, one glance at everything below her waist was enough to understand. Where her legs would normally be was instead the bottom half of a red snake. The woman was a monster called a lamia.

These were the kinds of races that Jack and his friends had only ever heard about in fairy tales.

"Do you think the rumor about there being a dragon who comes here at night is true?" Jack asked.

"Oh, you mean the story that old diviner told us? Nah, he's gotta be bluffing."

"I wonder. I heard that sometimes even vampires show up here," Terry said.

The three boys continued their casual chatter over the restaurant's customers. Because the three were born in the same town and were around the same age, they acted much like siblings with one another. As they continued their light conversation, the master returned holding a tray with white plates on it.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Here are your hamburger sets."

The master was carrying the one meal that the boys just couldn't get enough of.

"Heck yeah!" Kento cheered.

"It looks sooo good."

"Well, we can't eat it anywhere else, after all!"

The boys excitedly took the plates and placed them down on the table.

The first thing that drew their attention were the pale yellow french fries made from fried cobbler's tubers. The seasoning on them was kept simple; just

a dash of salt. They were hot to the touch and tasted great as is but were also delicious if topped with some of the red sauce from the corner of the plate.

Placed inconspicuously next to the plate was a glass cup filled with a black juice called cola. Sticking out of it was a mysterious tube made from neither wood nor metal. The iced cola drink initially had a layer of brown foam sitting above it, but much like ale, this eventually dissipated.

Finally came the main dish, seated neatly right next to the cobbler's tubers; the hamburger. Sandwiching the meat, vegetables, and various sauces were two slices of lightly toasted white bread with some kind of delightfully scented seeds scattered over them. As far as the three boys were concerned, this was the best food at Nekoya.

"Whoaaaa! This looks so dang good!"

"All right! Then let's get to grubbin'!"

"Terry, you're drooling," Jack pointed out.

The aroma coming from the french fries and freshly cooked hamburgers was enough to send the boys into a tizzy. The handy thing about hamburgers was that they didn't require utensils to eat, so the boys simply grabbed them with their hands and took a bite.

"DELICIOUS!" cried the boys, their voices overlapping.

The aroma of the lightly toasted surface of the white bread was incredibly appetizing, and its seeds gave it a tantalizing mix of textures. The red vegetable cut into round slices had a mellow sweetness and sourness. The sweetness of the similarly sliced, fried oranie melted away in their mouths.

The thin, green vegetable beneath the meat was crunchy and felt great to bite into. Meanwhile, on top of the meat was some kind of pickled vegetable that really accented the whole dish. As for the colorful sauces, Jack and his friends tried out all three and found that the yellow sauce was spicy, the red sauce sour, and the white sauce a more gentle kind of sour. These three sauces combined with the melted cheese on top of the burger to bring out the flavor of the meat.

Indeed, hamburgers were simply a vessel by which to eat meat. Despite the

use of multiple ingredients, the flavor of the meat was still the strongest of all. It was this overwhelming flavor that washed over the three boys. The finely minced meat was fried into something more solid, somehow remaining tender to the touch. One bite into it was enough to make it overflow with flavor.

All that had been used to flavor it was salt and some light seasoning so as to not hurt the taste of the tender, juicy meat. That was enough to bring out the inherent flavor of the burger. The bread, vegetables, and cheese were all there to help better draw out its amazing taste.

After initially yelling out in tandem, the other boys gave Jack a sidelong glance as he dug into his hamburger. They then reached for their set menus.

“Mm, this is super good. I wonder how he makes it?” Kento took a sip of his cola and tilted his head to one side. The black drink was foamy like ale, but it tasted nothing like alcohol. Apparently, it was filled with all kinds of ingredients, which eventually led it to its sweet and refreshing flavor.

According to Kento’s master, near a volcano somewhere was a lake by some hot springs that produced foamy water. Was that what the restaurant was using? While Kento was younger than the other two boys, his status as the son of a sorcerer meant he had the gift of knowledge. The foamy cola in front of him piqued his curiosity.

“Man, the fried stuff here must use some real good oil.”

Terry took a bite of one of his french fries after dipping it into the red sauce. The piping hot sticks melted away in his mouth. Terry had heard from his tutor that a long, long time ago, cobbler’s tubers were considered peasant food in the great Empire of the Eastern Continent. He had to believe that the reason these were so delicious was because the master used high-quality, clean oil.

As the third son of a noble family from the sticks, even he could tell that all manner of nobles in fine clothes frequented the restaurant. These were people who lived incredible lives. It only made sense that the master would use ingredients that outclassed even the finest of goods the capital city had to offer. This made it all the more puzzling that the prices were so affordable. Even commoner children like Kento and Jack could afford the food.

It wasn’t long until the three boys wiped their plates clean and quietly

enjoyed their colas. After finishing their meals, they always made sure to order something else.

“I think I’m gonna get some more fries.” Terry announced his intentions while wiping some red sauce from his mouth.

“Then I’m gonna get another cola. I still want more.” Kento held up his now empty cup.

“I want another hamburger!” Jack licked the sauce off of his index finger.

“Aye, you got it.”

The master couldn’t help but chuckle at the three boys. They reminded him of a young couple, about the same age, who came to Nekoya to eat hot dogs.

I haven’t seen those two in years, he thought to himself. I hope they’re doing well.

The middle-aged man reminisced while he went into the kitchen to whip up the boys’ orders.

Jack moaned, “Phew, I’m full as all heck.”

“It was sooo good!”

“Yup. There isn’t anything like the food here.”

With their plates now completely empty, the boys stood up from their chairs, satisfied.

“Old man, we’re leaving the money right here!” They placed down enough copper coins to pay for everything, opened the front door, and exited out into the well.

“All right! Now that we’re nice and full, let’s head back!” said Terry.

“Mmhm. Special training waits for nobody!”

Jack nodded. “That’s right. The day’s almost here.”

The three boys had made a promise to one another. Once they all turned fifteen and were recognized as young men, they would leave town to become

adventurers. After having spent so much time going to the tiny Restaurant to Another World, they found their curiosities piqued by the greater world outside of their village. They were resolute about doing this.

“Ah, but it kinda sucks we won’t be able to eat hamburgers anymore,” said Kento.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” Jack said. “But hey, the world is big and stuff, right? There might be even more delicious foods out there!”

“I guess you’re right...” Kento brightened. “Plus, we could always come back to town on occasion. We’ll be traveling together, after all!”

The boys climbed out of the well while chatting about their futures. Even if it didn’t seem like anything special, the time they spent together like this was irreplaceable. Eventually, that time would come to an end, the boys would become men, and the day of their journey would arrive.

Chapter 19:

Coffee Float In the southern region of the Western Continent resided the Sand Nation, a country in which magic flourished.

Approximately half of the Sand Nation's territory was a vast desert that could bear no vegetation or support human life. In terms of area, the Sand Nation was larger than any country across both continents, though its actual population was about equal to that of some of the other nations on the Western Continent. For citizens of the Sand Nation, their only option was to build their towns and cities next to the ocean, close to rivers, or by the occasional oasis.

Magic use was widespread out of necessity. It was a special technique used by the elves, who some thousand years ago were removed as the rulers of the world by a fast-moving plague. Magic was one of the few ways that the frail humans could fight against the great Mother Nature.

In the case of the Sand Nation, much harsher living conditions compared to the other countries of the world made magic all the more important. There were no trees in the desert that could be used for fires and no landmarks one could use to travel through across the desert accurately. The likelihood of locating water while in the desert, the difference between life and death, was thin. The ability to use magic made many of these problems easier to contend with, if not obsolete. Magic also gave people the ability to deal with the dangerous monsters in the area, as well as the undead born of fallen travelers. (In the other world, those who passed on and were not properly buried became undead beings who brought death to those around them.) In the Sand Nation, sorcerers were both in high demand and high in quantity, quality notwithstanding. Caravans crossing the desert always hired multiple magic-users to accompany them, and all nobles were assumed to have magical knowledge. As such, it didn't take long for "that" to spread throughout the nation.

The sun in the sky blazed down with intense heat upon those who walked beneath it. Hoods were raised. A young sorcerer quietly prepared his goods in his shaded stall. Cafa was the Sand Nation's most common drink, but he was

making something altogether different. The young man took the cafa beans and ground them into powder, put it into a bag, and dropped it into a copper pot filled with boiling water. The cafa essence released from the powder dissolved into the hot water, darkening its color. He then mixed sugar into the pot, stirring it all together. Sugar was quite cheap for citizens of the Sand Nation compared to elsewhere in the world, thanks to local trade with nearby island and desert nations.

Up until this point, the young man had made one of the traditional forms of cafa.

It was from here on out that sorcerer did something entirely different. After finishing the process, sorcerers would then begin to cast a spell. This particular type of magic was considered one of the most fundamental arts that a sorcerer in the Sand Nation could learn, on par with fire-starting. It was the ability to control cold air. While the spell wasn't nearly strong enough to freeze an enemy in battle, it was perfect for cooling objects.

The young sorcerer cast his spell on the copper pot, watching as it and the cafa inside began to chill. After making sure that both were sufficiently cold, he took a sip of the cafa to confirm it was finished. The cool fluid ran down his throat smoothly, completely unlike the hot version of the drink. Its refreshing, sweet, and bitter taste spread throughout his mouth. After checking his product, the young man licked the remaining cafa off of his lips and raised his voice.

"Come one, come all! I got ice-cold, sweet cafa here! It's nice and refreshing!"

Passersby began to gather around the young man's stall in droves.

"Let me get a cup!"

"Me, too!"

"Lemme get one!"

The orders came one after the other, none of the customers paying any mind to the hot cafa they normally drank. It made sense to drink something warm after the sun had set and the desert grew cool. But under the ever-watchful burning eye of the sun, a sweet cup of cold cafa felt like the nectar of the gods.

“Ahh!”

The man started to pour cold cafa into ceramic cups, and his customers took their time enjoying its refreshing taste.

“Whew!”

He could hear his customers making satisfied sounds. There was nothing like a cold cup of cafa during a hot day. Its flavor was on a whole different level.

Traditionally, cafa was drunk while hot because once it cooled down, its taste soured. That was common sense. This, however, was magically cooled cafa. It possessed a completely different, delicious flavor from naturally cooled cafa. When the citizens of the magically-inclined Sand Nation discovered this, cold cafa became just another one of their regular drinks.

Now multiple stalls sold cold cafa made in copper pots that wouldn't shatter even when cooled. They helped keep the citizens of the Sand Nation cool and refreshed.

Hmm, ice coffee sure got big... a passerby thought to himself, walking by the stall on his way out of the city.

The man rode a desert lizard, common to this region, and had a refined face, with beautiful bronze skin and deep, black hair. He was extremely well built, wearing clothes embroidered with fine silk from the Ocean Nation. The young man looked beautiful, as if he should have been adorned with golden accessories and jewels.

The man's destination was close to the empty desert next to the capital city. There he would find a black door with the mark of a cat on it, sitting out in the open.

His name was Shareef, and he was a regular of the Restaurant to Another World who lived in the Sand Nation.

Shareef was also incredibly nervous.

I wonder if she's in today... he thought.

The sun had just passed its southern zenith and was slowly making its way west; the hottest time of day. This was usually when *she* came to the

restaurant. That was the only reason why Shareef dared to brave the scorching sun to visit the black door.

I suppose there's no point in fussing over it, is there? Shareef made peace with himself and opened the door. As usual, he was met with the sound of a bell ringing. He quickly surveyed the interior.

...Hmph, I guess she's not here today.

There were customers sitting inside, but the girl he was looking for was nowhere to be found. Shareef found himself simultaneously disappointed and relieved. He sat down in the back where he wouldn't stand out too much.

"Here's your menu."

As usual, the master brought the quiet young man a menu and a glass of water.

"Many thanks."

Shareef nodded in gratitude and looked down at the menu. It was open to the "drinks" section. After taking a look at his options, he placed his order.

"I'll have a coffee float with ice cream. Please make the cafa nice and sweet."

"Aye, you got it."

Shareef handed the master his menu and began to relax as he always did.

This restaurant remains as mysterious as ever.

It was five years ago, just after Shareef had come of age, that he discovered this place. He had treated himself to a night stroll through the castle town, and just happened to come upon the black door. His curiosity got the best of him, and he opened it up only to find an otherworldly restaurant just beyond.

The Restaurant to Another World. It was a place where citizens of Shareef's world all came together to enjoy strange, new cuisine. The young man dropped by every so often to enjoy the master's cooking. At most, he came by once a month, typically after the vicious sun had set. Or at least, that used to be the case.

Some months prior, Shareef visited the restaurant during the day on a whim,

when the sun was at its hottest. That trip would fundamentally change the way he interacted with Nekoya. From that point on, he visited once every seven days without fail, coming only when the sun was blazing down upon the citizens of the desert.

Shareef had found a reason to do so.

The ringing of the bell signified the arrival of yet another customer. Each time the sound found its way into Shareef's ears, he instinctively turned to look at the entrance.

That's not her...

Entering the restaurant was a familiar sorcerer. The half-elf was royalty from the Eastern Continent, and she once visited Shareef's father with her master before he came of age. He let out a sigh. While she was undoubtedly beautiful, she wasn't quite his type. Not to mention, despite her good looks, she was as old as his parents. That alone was enough to put him off.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Here's your coffee float."

As if noticing Shareef's expression darken, the master returned and placed the young man's glass cup down in front of him with a shining silver spoon.

Oh, well. It's not a complete loss, he thought. Not with this delicious treat, anyway.

Shareef collected himself and cast his gaze downward. Sitting before him was a glass cup filled with cold cafa and hard, transparent ice. Water droplets slid their way down the outsides of the cup. Sitting atop the ice at the top of the cup was a white mound...

Ice cream.

A bent tube stuck out of the cup, not unlike a snake of some kind, allowing for Shareef to drink without having to tilt the glass.

As a citizen of the Sand Nation and a lover of cafa, this was the one item on the menu of the Restaurant to Another World that truly called to him. First, Shareef put his lips on the tube and sucked ever so slightly.

Delicious.

The cold, sweet bitterness of the cafa flooded into his mouth. This variation on the popular drink had only just been discovered in Shareef's world. Initially, he had his servants use cooling magic to make the drink, and as time passed, it became fairly commonplace at the palace. Eventually, its popularity spread to the nobles, ultimately reaching even the commoners.

The hot coffee of the other world had a strong aroma and was undoubtedly delicious. That being said, cold cafa, with its perfect balance of sweetness and bitterness, was a blessing to those who called the hot desert nations their home. It was no wonder the citizens took to it so quickly. In fact, it was so popular that people had taken to describing unrelated things by saying they were "as different as cafa that's gone cold and cooled cafa."

Now then. Next is...

After taking multiple sips of his drink to make sure it wouldn't spill, Shareef finally turned his attention to the ice cream. He took his spoon and drove it into the white clump, its bright color contrasting sharply with the dark coffee. Shareef then brought the spoonful of frozen goodness to his mouth. Its sweet flavor and aroma immediately spread across his tongue and through his body. The frozen treat left behind a cold, sweet aftertaste of rich milk, eggs, and vanilla as it melted atop his tongue.

The ice cream here is just something else... Shareef thought to himself as he continued to indulge in the coffee float in front of him. The milky treat known as ice cream was slightly different from the icy confectionaries he normally ate. As the prince of the Sand Nation, Shareef was used to eating snacks of all kinds made from frozen fruit juices and sugar water. But they were neither as richly sweet nor soft as ice cream.

The prince was also aware that there was more to the coffee float than just the strong taste of vanilla; there were all sorts of other available flavors. During the summer months at the Restaurant to Another World, the master offered a wider variety of ice cream types than usual. There was the standard vanilla, brown chocolate with its unique sweetness, a variety of different fruit juices, and even a sweet flavor with alcohol in it. All of these were cheap and tasted

different, yet each and every one of them were delicious in their own ways. Shareef thoroughly enjoyed sampling them. As much as it pained him to admit it, even the Sand Nation, with its incredible magic and technology above and beyond that of the Kingdom of the Eastern Continent, could not recreate the tremendous flavor of ice cream.

On a whim, he once ordered some to go, as a gift for his little sister. It came in a some kind of box packed with magic ice, trapping the cold air inside and protecting it against the fierce heat capable of even evaporating water. After his sister tried some for herself, she too was of the same opinion as him. Ever since then, she continued to ask her older brother to bring her back ice cream every time he went to the restaurant. Shareef had clearly made a mistake.

The ice cream in the prince's float had soaked in the unique flavor of the cafa and slightly hardened due to the ice in the glass. It was just as he was enjoying this unique fusion that the bell on the door rang once more.

"Hm?"

Shareef looked toward the door and immediately froze in place.

"Good day, Master."

There stood the most beautiful of princesses. Unlike Shareef with his bronze skin, hers was a pure white, her cheeks red like roses, and her hair golden. Her eyes were as blue as the ocean itself, and her lips were a pale pink. She wore a rather plain dress, but its actual construction was clearly top class.

It was her.

"Welcome!" said the master. "Will you be having the usual?"

She considered it. "No, not today. Could I see your menu, please? I think I'd like to try one of your other parfaits today."

She was the reason Shareef became a regular here. He immediately sipped up the last of his cafa.

"Okay. Master, might I trouble you for a coffee jelly parfait?"

"You got it!"

The beautiful princess sat down at a table separate from Shareef. The young

prince couldn't help but follow her beautiful figure with his eyes. For some reason, he got the feeling that the last bit of cafa tasted sweeter than usual.

Hrm, it's gotten late.

It was just around the time that the sun was setting. Holding a box with the three different types of ice cream that his little sister requested, Shareef left the Restaurant to Another World behind him and returned to the Sand Nation.

She truly is the very definition of beautiful. What a wonderful day it has been!

Only recently had Shareef managed to discover the identity of the woman he so fondly thought of. She was a princess of the Empire, one of the few countries on the Eastern Continent that stood toe to toe with the Kingdom. She was the first princess, Adelheid, and she was more beautiful than any woman in the Sand Nation. The look of pure joy on her face as she enjoyed her parfait was nothing if not radiant.

Every time he saw her, he noticed that her once-pale face was regaining its color. She was overflowing with the liveliness of a girl her age. It was that which utterly charmed Shareef, lighting a fierce fire in his chest.

I really should talk to Father about this, he thought. Which means I need to win Renner over to my side.

Shareef, young but wise beyond his years, decided to enlist the help of his little sister. Renner was the apple of her father's eyes and could be a huge help in this situation. At the end of the day, Shareef was dealing with a princess of the Empire. While he was royalty in his own right, it certainly couldn't hurt to have more allies when talking about matters that would affect an entire continent.

Shareef sighed. *Oh, beautiful princess. Will you feel for me the way I feel for you?*

Shareef returned to the palace, his mind racing. The Sand Nation was located in the southern region of the Western Continent. It wouldn't be long before the prince would request the imperial princess's hand in marriage.

Chapter 20:

Breakfast Special Sunday mornings after a special business day always started with cleaning.

Normally, after the master handed the last guest her giant pot of beef stew, he made sure to clean up the kitchen to make sure it didn't get infested by bugs. This meant he usually ended up tidying the actual restaurant space the following day.

Truth be told, the reason he did this was to conserve his own energy. Ten years had passed since he inherited the restaurant from his grandfather. The life of a chef wasn't an easy one. Over the years, while he'd gotten much better at cooking, his stamina had dropped significantly.

Only recently had he started to feel his age, especially on Sundays following a solo Saturday shift.

Ain't got much choice, though. If I don't clean up now, I'm gonna be in trouble come Monday.

The master sucked it up and changed into his casual wear. He then used the elevator to go from his living space on the third floor to the kitchen on the first floor of the basement. Monday was the beginning of a new work week. The kitchen staff and waitresses he employed would be coming in. If he didn't finish cleaning up by then, he'd be late opening the restaurant. The special business day didn't really come to a close until he finished cleaning everything.

And so the master woke up at his usual time, by force of habit, and walked through the kitchen so that he could begin cleaning...

Only this time he stepped on something.

"Whoa!"

Whatever it was, it was soft to the touch. The master shouted out in surprise and immediately looked down at his feet.

"...Who the heck are you?"

There, directly below him, was a young girl he'd never seen before. As far as

the master could tell, she ended up falling asleep on the floor of his kitchen. After being stepped on, the girl slowly opened her eyes, lifting her upper body with a sleepy expression on her face. Next to her on the floor was an empty pot of leftover corn porridge that the master saved for breakfast.

“Mmm...?”

The young girl sat up on the floor, apparently still dazed and confused. She wore an old and battered long skirt along with a large hat that clearly didn't fit her. Poking out from beneath the hat was reddish, curly blonde hair. She didn't appear to be Japanese.

Oh, boy, the master thought. She's definitely from the other side.

Not only did she not look Japanese, she was wearing clothes no youngster on his side would ever wear. Perhaps more conclusive was the fact that he found her in his kitchen on a Sunday morning. It was clear as day she wasn't from his world. The master had heard from his precursor that the doors in the other world disappeared at the same time the date changed. He generally closed up shop and started cleaning at around ten at night, which meant she had two hours to wander in by accident. This kind of incident typically happened once or twice a year at most.

“Um... Where am I...?”

Meanwhile, the young girl shook her head a few times, causing her overly large hat to gently fall to the ground. Poking out from her curly hair were two small black horns.

The young girl remained dazed for some time, rubbing her reddish brown eyes with her hand before reaching up to her head, perhaps out of habit. After noticing her hat was gone, she immediately panicked and grabbed it off the ground, plopping it back on her head. After taking a moment to feel relieved, she looked up, saw the master, and immediately froze in place.

“Oh! I-I'm so sorry!”

The young girl seemingly remembered what she had done and proceeded to bow her head and apologize, once again resulting in her hat falling to the floor.

The master watched the young girl continue to panic.

“Now, now,” he said, having regained his own composure. “Calm down. Young lady, what’s your name? And why are you on my floor?”

“Oh, u-um... My name is Aletta,” she said, still clearly frazzled.

This is the story of how these two unlikely people came to meet for the very first time.

It was the middle of the night of the previous day.

“Ugh, I can’t sleep,” Aletta groaned.

Aletta had kept her eyes tightly closed in an attempt to fall asleep but finally gave up. She opened her eyes. Despite being tired from walking around the city looking for work all day, she just couldn’t get to sleep.

“I’m hungry...”

Just as she spoke, her stomach let out a sad growl. All she ate before lying down was a single cobbler’s tuber. For a young woman like Aletta, that wasn’t nearly enough food.

This was the gorgeous capital city of the Kingdom, a place said to be the most prosperous of cities in the world. Just outside of it were a series of abandoned ruins. About a hundred years prior, when the humans and demons were still at war, the demon king found his way in, and using the power of the dark lord he worshipped, changed the citizens into monsters loyal to him. This would prove to be a damaging strike against the capital city, and these ruins were the long-lasting scars of that event.

It was rumored that the humans who had turned into monsters still lived in the ruins, occasionally attacking and eating humans who found their way into the area. The only sorts of people brave or stupid enough to go there were outsiders who didn’t know its history or terrible criminals who were escaping their horrific fate. It was the worst place in the capital.

After Aletta lost both of her parents to disease, she left the village of her “people” to come to the capital. She didn’t see the point in living in a village surrounded by sterile land, especially as a young woman. Unfortunately for her,

life in the capital wasn't much better.

Part of this was certainly because she was just a young woman with no connections or anything to offer. The other, perhaps stronger element, was her face. Aletta was a demon.

Demons worshipped the dark lord, who sought to descend upon the planet and make it his own. They were his servants. While technically they were once a race similar to that of the humans, dwarves, and half-elves, worshipping the dark lord caused them to develop grotesque traits, resulting in their current physical forms. Their physical strength was far greater than any of the other races, and some even possessed magical powers exceeding that of the elves.

One of the abilities that believers of the dark lord received was the ability to control monsters.

For years upon years, the demon race brought terror upon the other races of the world, waging war after war.... up until about fifty years before Aletta was born, anyway.

It was around that time that the demon race decided to use their final trump card: the resurrection of the dark lord. But before he could regain his full powers, he was defeated by three courageous humans and one brave half-elf. The ambitions of the demon race had ended in failure.

The demon king, the mightiest of warriors and possessor of great strength and divine protection, gave his own life in order to summon the dark lord. When the human heroes defeated the lord of darkness, the demon race lost his powerful divine protection. While it hadn't vanished completely, what the demons were left with was weak in comparison. New demons born into the world possessed divine protections as weak as any human's.

And so the demon race, their strength and magical power greatly reduced, no longer could go to war with the other races. Some demons chose to live in places well off the beaten path, far from the eyes of others, while others cast away their divine protection, choosing to live undercover as humans in their towns and cities.

While Aletta was a demon, she was a weak one, closer in many ways to the humans. The only thing that really proved she was of the demon race were the

two small goat-like horns on her head. Otherwise, she was just an average young woman. This was precisely why she wore such a massive hat and decided to try and live in the capital.

Unfortunately, things didn't go her way.

Some seventy years had passed since the war against the dark lord. Most of the people who were present for the climactic battle of the demon war had long since moved on to the next world. People weren't nearly as hard on the remaining demons as they once were. If nothing else, being discovered didn't immediately result in a death sentence.

That said, demons were still heavily discriminated against. If one's identity were discovered at their place of work, they'd be fired without question. As for shelter, places like the aforementioned abandoned ruins were the only available room and board. When Aletta was discovered to be a demon, she was let go of her job and kicked out of her inn, leaving her homeless on the streets.

"Ugh," Aletta groaned again. "I'm so hungry..."

The nearly full moon was already high above in the sky, but Aletta still couldn't sleep, her stomach empty. She didn't have a single copper coin left to her name.

Up until that day, she had gotten along by doing all manner of difficult day-to-day jobs so she could eat, but she'd reached her limit. Aletta briefly considered her last resort for making money but quickly shook her head and reconsidered. She once again tried to get some sleep.

That's when it happened.

"Something smells good..." she said, catching a scent in the air.

Aletta instinctively raised her body. Even the trees and grass were fast asleep at this time. There was no way that this sweet aroma could really be food. Aletta began to check her surroundings, her drowsiness a thing of the past.

She turned, thinking she heard the sound of a cat, and saw something.

What?

That was when Aletta realized she was looking at a black door in the middle of

the ruins.

I don't remember there being a door there. Am I losing my mind?

The demon girl tilted her head in confusion. This was her fifth night sleeping in the ruins. Though she went out searching for work during the day, she always came back to sleep. She would have noticed a door like this days ago.

That smell is definitely coming from the door...

The void in Aletta's stomach made her sense of smell that much stronger. There was an aroma both sweet and unfamiliar coming from the opposite side of the door, and it was enough to make her mouth water. The cobbler's tuber she'd eaten earlier was already long gone from her stomach, prompting Aletta to unconsciously draw closer to the door.

"What is this? Some kind of cat?" she said.

The black door was lit by the moon up above. Aletta took a closer look at it. The handle was gold, and the door itself was made of black wood. On the front of it was an illustration of what appeared to be a cat.

The closer the demon girl looked, the clearer it became that the door was quite old. Be that as it may, it was in extremely good condition. Pressured by her empty stomach, she slowly turned the golden knob.

Ring, ring.

"Aaah!"

The sound of a bell ringing caught Aletta off guard, drawing a scream out of her.

"Th-that scared me..." she whispered.

The door had a bell attached to it. Beyond it was a dark room, nearly pitch black.

Ah, I smell something good.

The dark space in front of her was more than enough to make Aletta stop in her tracks. Yet still, the smell of food coming from within was too much, and she found herself stepping forward, closing the door behind her.

Aletta's sense of logic tried to stop her. She knew what she was doing was against the law. She knew it, but she couldn't help herself.

"It smells so good," she said.

The young demon girl hadn't had anything to eat besides cobbler's tubers and water. There was simply no way she could resist the warm, sweet smell of food. Aletta proceeded deeper into the room, dodging tables and chairs on the way.

What is this place?

Fortunately for Aletta, her eyes had long since become used to the dark, so she could just barely make out the layout of the room. There wasn't anybody present, but there were a number of mysterious silver doors all over.

What a weird place.

The first room was filled with tables and chairs, which wasn't altogether that strange. It was probably some kind of dining hall. This room of silver doors, however, was far beyond her comprehension. Aletta was left with one conclusion.

This was all just a dream.

Clearly, this was a dream brought about by hunger. Lots of things about it didn't quite make sense, but she was sure it was a dream.

The more Aletta thought about it, the more the pieces fit together. There was no way a pretty black door would just appear out of nowhere, and it was even more unlikely that there'd be a room of silver doors beyond it. This wasn't reality.

...If this is just a dream, then I should be okay, right?

Once Aletta convinced herself she was dreaming, she moved quickly. With her own conclusion as her shield, she started to act rashly. The demon girl made her way to a small copper pot sitting on a counter in the room. This was the origin of the delicious aroma she'd smelled earlier. Aletta immediately took the lid off.

"Wha...!"

The moment the lid was lifted, the delicious aroma rising from the pot engulfed Aletta. The metal container was filled with a sweet-smelling soup of

some kind. The moment she caught a whiff of it, her stomach let out a roar, like a beast stalking its prey.

...But isn't this a dream? Or maybe it's because it's a dream.

The aroma only further convinced Aletta that she was asleep. This smelled much like the famous “knight sauce” the capital was known for. On occasion, Aletta had the good fortune of smelling the soup from afar. It was an incredibly high-class food that couldn't be found in poor villages like the one she came from. Aletta had seen the soup in town before, but after seeing its cost, long since gave up on eating it. There was no doubt that it appeared in her dream as a result of her hunger.

Then it should be okay for me to try some, right? she reasoned.

Aletta swallowed the saliva building in her mouth and grabbed the ladle sitting in the pot. She scooped up some of the soup, noticed that it was filled with tiny grains of some kind, and took a sip of the sweet liquid.

“What is this?! I-It's so sweet!”

The demon girl gulped down the soup. The still-warm liquid not only had a dash of saltiness to it but also the flavor of milk. Above all else, however, it was sweet.

“Mm!” Aletta noisily smacked her lips and slurped down more soup.

This was the first time in Aletta's life that she had ever tasted something like this. Despite nearly choking multiple times, the girl continued to drink down the soup. She was completely smitten with its taste, being careful not to spill any of the priceless sustenance as she frantically devoured more of it.

The soup was smooth to the touch and sweet. The tiny grains mixed into the liquid produced their own delicious sweet juice when chewed on. All of this traveled down Aletta's throat and into her once empty stomach, warming her body up. She continued to use the large ladle to pour more soup into her mouth without stopping. There wasn't much of it to begin with, but it still disappeared in mere moments.

While it was unfortunate that the pot was now empty, Aletta let out a sigh of relief at having finally eaten her fill for the first time in ages. When was the last

time she'd felt this way? It was like she was in some wonderful dream... And then she remembered that she was dreaming and let out a laugh.

"Phew..."

A wave of drowsiness finally started to set in now that she had filled her stomach.

"Mm..." Aletta sighed wearily.

Sure that this was all a dream, Aletta let her sleepiness take hold of her as she laid down on the floor. It was hard but smooth, and the fact that it kept the cold air out meant this was comfortable enough for her to sleep on. The quiet sounds of Aletta's breathing echoed throughout the dark kitchen.

That is, until the master woke her up and she realized everything that had happened was real.

"...I see," said the master. "So you thought it was all a dream, then."

"Y-yes! I'm so sorry."

After hearing her tale, the master looked at the young girl. It was a gentle gaze, but she nonetheless recoiled in fear.

What should I do? she thought frantically. *I had no idea this was a sorcerer's mansion!*

Aletta trembled with fear, having realized what she had done. At this rate, she'd be passed over to the authorities and either locked in a cell forever or hanged.

Of course this was a magic user's home! The capital city of the Kingdom was known for being a city of great sorcerers. It made sense considering one of the legendary heroes who helped defeat the dark lord, Sage Altorius, made it his home. Why wouldn't there would be other talented sorcerers in the city?

Aletta had seen the middle-aged man before her use magic just moments earlier. The moment he pressed his hand against the wall, there was a clicking noise of some kind, and suddenly the room was filled with white light. Before he cast his spell, the room was as dark as the night itself, but now it was bright like the middle of the day. After seeing his skills in action, Aletta was forced to

confront reality: there was no way out for her. All she could do was tremble in fear and await her punishment.

“Well, I guess the corn porridge doesn’t really matter all that much...” the master mused.

It’d be one thing if she’d eaten something the master made for his customers, but this was just the leftovers he saved for himself. If he didn’t eat it, it was just going to go to waste. In that sense, he was relieved that it went to a good place.

“I’m actually pretty hungry myself,” he said.

Now that the master thought about it, after watching one of his regulars, the self-proclaimed Queen, take her giant pot of beef stew home, he spent the next two days working on the braised pork. He was so exhausted that all he had for dinner was something light. Any food he put in his stomach was long since gone.

The master was planning on making breakfast, so...

“Little lady, er, Aletta, right? Would you like something to eat?”

There was no way the master could make something for himself without feeding the young woman in front of him, so he asked her directly.

“Wh-wh-wh-what?! N-no way! I couldn’t! I-I don’t have any money on me, plus I’ve already caused so much trouble for you!”

The master attempted to calm the still frightened girl. “Hey, if you really feel that way, I’d actually prefer if you grabbed a bite. You don’t have to pay a thing. If anything, it’d feel awkward for me to eat alone. Food’s more delicious when you have someone to share the experience with, right?”

“...Okay. I-I’ll have some, then!”

Aletta instinctively nodded her head in response to the man’s kind words.

“Excellent. Let’s see... You just hang on for a bit.”

And so the master began to cook. He placed some soft bread into the oven and then went to the refrigerator and took out a few eggs and slices of bacon. He placed his pitch-black frying pan onto the stove and started the burner. First, he quickly cut the bacon pieces into thin strips and laid them on the frying pan,

causing them to release oils he would use for further cooking.

Salt, pepper, and a dash of milk and cheese... There we go.

Even though she wasn't technically a "customer," the master decided to treat her that way nonetheless. He paid close attention to getting the egg wash just right before pouring it into the frying pan. The middle-aged man then quickly mixed it all together before turning the flame off and trapping the air and half-cooked food underneath the lid of the pan. The master then turned his attention to loading a small bowl with chopped cabbage, cherry tomatoes, and dressing.

The master took the hot bread out of the oven and placed it on a dish with a clump of butter, and finally placed the soft eggs and bacon onto a separate plate, completing the meal.

"Here you go," he said. "This is our 'breakfast special.' We don't normally serve this to customers."

Aletta's eyes widened after looking down at the different plates of food in front of her. The master made it all look easy.

He's really good at cooking, she thought to herself.

The meal in front of her was better prepared than any she had seen before. Even the cooking of the master and mistress from her previous job couldn't compare. The way he put everything together felt like some sort of magic trick. Each step rolled into the next with impossible smoothness.

In front of her was a plate of eggs and smoked meat, as well as a bowl of finely cut green vegetables with some sort of red fruit on top. And that was to say nothing of the toasted bread and butter off to the side.

"Unfortunately," said the master, "this is all I can really offer you right now. I hope you like it."

He quickly grabbed a chair and took a seat.

"Itadakimasu," he said.

Aletta, on the other hand, put her hands together and offered prayer to her god.

“Thank you, oh Lord of Darkness, for this, my daily bread... Ah! F-forget I said anything!”

Seeing the master say what had to be a prayer had led Aletta to do so as well. She panicked. Aletta knew all too well that the dark lord she worshipped was feared by humans far and wide.

However, the master simply gave her a puzzled look. “Hm? What’s wrong? Not a fan of the food?”

He knew little of what went on beyond the door. All he knew for sure was that Aletta described herself as part of the demon race when she told him her story. The master didn’t know much about religion and the like, so all he really assumed was that demons probably had a dark lord they prayed to.

“O-oh, no, it’s nothing,” Aletta said.

Apparently the man in front of her didn’t fear the demon god. After realizing she’d said too much, she stuffed some bread in her mouth in an attempt to change the conversation.

She was stunned. “What is this?!” she said.

It was too soft, warm, and faintly sweet to be the bread that Aletta was familiar with. The wheat’s fragrant aroma traveled across the inside of her mouth. This was truly a feast in and of itself.

No way! This, and this, too?!

Her initial attempt to change the subject ended up being the trigger that made her excitedly devour her breakfast special. Everything in front of her was unbelievably delicious.

The fresh vegetables had none of the bitterness usually associated with them, and the liquid covering them was sour and salty. The tiny red fruit next to the greens wasn’t the least bit sweet; its perfect level of sourness bounced around the walls of her mouth. The quality of the vegetables overall was exceedingly high, considering it was autumn. The crunchy texture also made for a delightfully satisfying sound as she chewed. It was magnificent.

The smoked meat, likely the main dish, was also delightful. At first glance, it

looked like it had just been cooked over flames, but that was unlikely. Much of the oil had been drained from it, leaving behind only the savory quality of the meat. As a bonus, the salty flavor went extremely well with the bread.

And then there were the eggs. Never mind someone of Aletta's lower status, even regular citizens would rarely get to taste something as delicious as these. The master used up high-quality eggs like they were a dime a dozen. When he was cooking everything in the iron pan earlier, the eggs must have soaked up the juices from the meat he put in first in order to drain the grease. Just the eggs alone were enough to call this a feast of feasts, but then there was the salt, pepper, milk, and cheese that were added as additional flavoring. All of these elements came together to create a deliciousness that Aletta could barely describe in words.

The bread that Aletta first bit into was both soft and sweet, going together with every other food in the meal. Like so many other individual items in front of her, the bread by itself was delightful, but when combined with the other foods, its deliciousness was multiplied to an explosive degree. It didn't take long before both pieces of bread on Aletta's plate traveled to the bottom of her stomach.

"Do you want seconds?"

Aletta nodded her head so quickly that her hat almost fell off again.

"Ha ha ha, as a cook, seeing someone like you enjoy my cooking so much is what makes it all worth it."

The master wore a warm smile on his face as he watched Aletta ravenously devour her food. He handed her another piece of bread.

And so the two continued their meal until all the food atop their plates had vanished into thin air.

"That was amazing," Aletta said. She placed her metal fork on the plate and let out a sigh of satisfaction. The meal was so incredible that even the small traces of egg remaining on her plate seemed enticing. She wondered to herself if it was really okay to have such an extravagant meal so early in the morning.

"Aye, glad you enjoyed it."

Surprisingly, the master rarely had the opportunity to watch one of his customers enjoy his cooking up close and personal. As such, this rare occasion put him in an especially good mood. He hummed to himself while warming some soup in a small pot before pouring it into a slightly deeper-than-usual plate.

“Here, some hot soup. I had an extra can left over for staff meals, so.”

Aletta took the soup and was immediately entranced by its sweet flavor. The master then shot a question at her.

“Hey, Aletta. You said something about looking for work, right?”



“...Yeah.”

The master’s question was enough to pull Aletta back to the struggles of reality. Her time with the master had let her momentarily forget that the only reason she was able to have this feast was because of the kind sorcerer sitting in front of her. It was nothing but good luck on her part. When this was all over, she would once more have to continue her hunt for work.

What am I going to do?

It was just as Aletta began to come down from her momentary happiness that the master raised his voice again.

“If I remember correctly, you said you worked as a waitress before, right?”

“Huh? U-um, yes,” she answered, somewhat puzzled.

That was correct. When she was telling the master her story, she remembered mentioning that she’d been fired from her job working as a waitress at an inn.

“Well, if you’d like, would you want to work here once a week, er, every seven days?”

Aletta immediately raised her head.

The master continued. “You’d be working from dawn till dusk. As for what you’d be doing, you’d handle bringing the orders out to customers and taking care of dishes and the like. Oh, but you wouldn’t be handwashing anything. I have a dishwashing machine here, so you don’t gotta worry about that. Let’s see, in terms of wages, we can treat this like you’re a student part-timer, so... One day’d be like 10,000 yen. Over there, that’d be just around ten silver coins.”

“Th-that much?! Just for doing that sort of work?!”

Aletta was shocked at how much he was willing to pay her for the kind of work he expected. Normally, someone with no education or strength, never mind a demon like her, would grind themselves into dust for a day and receive ten copper coins at best.

Ten copper coins were equal to a single silver coin. And he was going to pay

her 10 of those? A young woman like herself could potentially live a whole month off of that much.

“Yup,” he said. “Including break time, you’d be working a pretty long fourteen-hour shift, so. If you’re not used to that kind of work, it might be a little rough on you. Oh, and you’ll get three staff meals every time you’re here.”

“I-I’ll do it! Please let me work here! Please!”

Aletta nodded her head not once, not twice, but multiple times. This must’ve been good fortune granted to her by the god of demons who watched over her. If she let this chance go, all that waited for her was death. She nodded with all her might.

The master smiled. “Great! Then it’s a deal. For today, let’s just have you watch. I’ll teach you everything you need to know, so make sure to keep it memorized. This is work, so I want you to take it seriously. Also, we have a uniform here, so whenever you come in, you gotta wear it, all right? I’ll be counting on you starting next week.”

“Yes, of course!”

This was how a new worker was welcomed into the Restaurant to Another World’s staff. She was a demon girl with tiny goat horns who wore otherworldly attire.

The waitress of the Restaurant to Another World.

The following Saturday, the young woman would find herself terribly surprised by the restaurant’s customers on her first work day.

Her story had only just begun.

Special Chapter:

Braised Pork It was five minutes until lunchtime. Yamada, an office worker now in his fifth year, looked at the clock on the wall of his office and then unlocked his smartphone and pulled up one of his favorite sites. He scrolled down the well-designed page and clicked on “Daily Special Report.”

Let's see... Chikurinan has a tsukimi soba and gomoku inari zushi set. The Laughing Dragon's A-set is sweet and sour pork, and the B-Set is Chinese gomoku chow mein... Kazama Lunches has a fried chicken lunch that's fifty yen off...

Yamada had accessed an official homepage run by the neighborhood's shopping district. It featured a map of the area, explanations of all the different shops, and even had staff blogs that were admittedly pretty boring. There was one specific page on the site that was updated daily, and it was the one with the most traffic.

The page's name was “Daily Special Report.” It displayed the lunch special of every eatery in the shopping district for that day.

On the plus side, the list of “today's lunch specials” was clear and to the point. On the negative side, it was overly simple. For your average office worker, lunchtime on a weekday was one of the few exciting parts of the day. It was important.

The restaurants in the area were tasked with feeding the mouths of nearly every office worker who worked nearby, and there were a lot of them. About half of the shops in the district were eateries of some kind, with the remainder being grocery stores and the like.

The office district in the area was home to some one hundred employees, and they all made their way to the shopping district on the weekdays, lining up to grab a bite. Despite how many customers there were to feed, there were barely any first-timers at the various restaurants. At some point or another, every worker had tried out every eatery lining the district. With so much competition,

it was an endless scramble for business. As a result, any places that “survived” were considered to be of an extremely high level of quality. That’s why Yamada could rest easy looking at the Daily Special Report in order to choose his lunch.

Hm... which one should I get? ...Oh?

Yamada stopped his finger on the screen.

Western Cuisine Nekoya. Today’s daily special is “braised pork.”

What a bizarre choice for a restaurant that described itself as serving western cuisine.

Braised pork, eh?

Nekoya’s daily special list was distinctly more whimsical than the others, often offering dishes that weren’t even on their main menu. Sometimes they were sets that complemented the season or plates that couldn’t be served daily because of the time they took to prepare. There were all sorts of reasons for the seemingly random choices, but the one thing Yamada knew was that you couldn’t go wrong with this kind of “rare menu item.”

But seriously, a western cuisine joint? Hm? Actually, wait a second.

Yamada suddenly remembered one of the senior employees at his company that retired some five years ago. After graduating from his local high school and finding work, the man spent forty years of his life at the same company. Even around the time he joined up, he was already a big Nekoya fan. Yamada remembered what he said to him way back when.

“The braised pork the former master served was one of a kind. When I was younger, I’d have a slice of that good stuff over rice, but it went great with booze, too.”

Yamada could feel his mouth watering. He joined the company after the current master took over and hadn’t yet gotten the opportunity to eat the supposedly sublime braised pork. That said, he went to Nekoya quite often, so he was more than aware of how good the food there was. But he often found himself puzzled by its menu. Despite its name, it served anything and everything. Maybe it was for that exact reason that it was famous in the district for serving “delicious food.”

If the master felt comfortable putting something on the menu as a daily special, Yamada was confident that it probably tasted amazing. The incredible braised pork that the senior office worker told him about was the rarest of rare dishes. Yamada couldn't let this chance pass him by. The moment the lunch bell rang, he immediately stood up from his chair.

...Almost simultaneously, the section chief, ten years Yamada's senior at the company, stood up as well. Their eyes met, and the younger employee could feel it.

Nekoya's gonna be damn crowded today...

Yamada was right about two things. Nekoya was, in fact, super crowded that day. He was also right about the braised pork.

In order to understand the full depths of this tale, one must travel back ten days in time to the very beginning of the story.

"A pork dish so tender that it couldn't possibly be from our world, you say?"

Mashira was both Yuuto's master and the most famous boar hunter in the area. The middle-aged hunter looked at the older samurai in front of him, puzzled.

"Indeed. It all happened some twenty years ago. When I was in the middle of a mission, I found myself a visitor to this land. It was then that I met an older hunter who lived in these parts: your master. He treated me to quite the feast. It was a pork dish that was as tender as it was sweet."

Denemon, the older samurai who was once a general in the capital city, sagely nodded his head. The folds of wrinkles on his face were proof of his age, just as his once-black head of hair and beard were now ash gray. Despite his age, however, his arms were as thick as tree trunks. He gave off the air that his skills hadn't degraded in the least.

The old samurai had passed his own position down to his son and retired from active duty. The other day, he visited this town holding the head of an ogre that he killed himself, trading it in for some money. On the Eastern Continent, if one brought proof of having slayed a man-killing ogre, hunters could receive a

cash reward. The fact that this older man was able to do so meant that his skill as a swordsman had not yet dwindled. He was a true samurai.

The samurai class ruled the Mountain Nation. In the neighboring Ocean Nation, generals who had never held a sword in their entire life ran the country. The king standing at the top of the government had never once gone to the battlefield himself in order to lead his men. The Mountain Nation, however, was different. The samurai protected and ran the country, just as they stood on the front lines leading their men. If one was incapable of taking down an ogre on their own, they were not fit to stand above others.

The older samurai was born and raised in the Mountain Nation and towered above the other strong warriors of his nation. He had the skills to prove it, too.

“I have achieved glory and passed down my house,” he said. “My grandchild has even come of age. At this point, I can die with no regrets to my name. Perhaps this is precisely why I want to eat that one dish I ate so long ago. It’s why I’m here on this very day. Might you know where I can find this dish of dishes?”

Mashira thought quietly to himself after lending an ear to Denemon’s tale. *Let me see, I don’t recall Master ever telling me about a dish like that in this... Wait, actually...*

Something came to mind, and the hunter shot a question at the samurai. “Excuse me, Lord Denemon. I have but one question. Did you perchance happen to eat that pork dish after crossing through an eastern-style black door in the mountains?”

It was less of a question and more of a confirmation. In this small village far from the city, there was only one place he could imagine that would serve something that could not be found in the city.

Mashira realized that Denemon was likely being careful with his words. The samurai slyly smiled and nodded his head.

“Correct! That I did! Now that I think about it, it was indeed a place like that!”

“I see. In that case, is it possible for you to wait three days?”

“Three, you say?”

Denemon seemed puzzled. He apparently didn't know the details of how the door worked.

"Yes. That restaurant is only open once every seven days on the Day of Satur. That's but three days from now. If you wait until then, you'll be able to go."

Indeed. If one wanted to eat food that wasn't of this world, it only made sense to go to a restaurant from another world. However, in three days time, Denemon would be met with the painful sting of disappointment.

"Say what?! You no longer make it?!" Denemon's loud voice echoed throughout the small restaurant.

"I'm very sorry. The braised pork was actually the previous master's specialty."

One of the master's regulars brought with him a man who requested a menu item that hadn't been made in years. He had scrubbed it from the menu after he took over the restaurant. There were a few reasons as to why this happened. One of them was that it didn't really match the image of a western cuisine restaurant, and the other was that it took a great deal of time to make. Also...

"To be honest, I just never felt like I was able to replicate the same flavor my precursor's braised pork had. That's why I don't serve it," the master explained.

When he had inherited the restaurant, the current master's cooking skills were nowhere near his precursor's. The one thing he had confidence in was western cuisine, mostly thanks to how hard he trained so that he could come in to run the restaurant at any given time.

The reality was that the previous master had lived off of his cooking abilities for some sixty years after the war ended. His culinary knowledge was as vast as it was deep. The current master wasn't confident that he could serve something other than western cuisine to customers who knew what his precursor's cooking tasted like. He wasn't convinced that they'd like it.

That's why he'd quietly erased braised pork from the menu. He wasn't confident enough in his own abilities.

"Is that so? That's unfortunate, but I understand your reasoning. One cannot win against the passage of time, I suppose," said Denemon. The samurai's

shoulders dropped in disappointment. Now that he thought about it, the last time he had the braised pork was nearly twenty years ago. Back then, the previous master was already as old as Denemon was now. It made sense that he was no longer of this world.

Denemon sighed, full of emotion. Someone he once knew was no longer of this world, and something he once had was no longer within reach. It was a sigh that came from a deep sense of loneliness.

After seeing the samurai's expression darken, the master couldn't help but raise his voice.

"...Do you think you could wait a week, er, seven days?"

"Hm? Seven days, you say? But why? I suppose since I'm retired, I have naught but time on my hands."

The master steeled his resolve and replied to the puzzled Denemon. "Braised pork takes a great deal of time and effort to prepare, so there's no way I could serve it to you today. But if you give me seven days, I can have it ready for you by next Saturday."

"Say what? Are you serious?! I am most grateful! Of course, I'd be happy to wait!" Denemon's eyes widened at the master's words. He nodded his head, unable to conceal his joy.

"All right."

The master's expression was somewhat stiff. In seven days, he'd be able to prepare braised pork. By saying these words out loud, he was forcing himself to stay the course. There would be no turning back.

I'm pretty sure the recipe's in Gramps's book, he thought. Which means the question is whether or not I can match his flavor or even surpass it.

The master would revive braised pork in seven days. No matter what.

"Now then, I am most happy that I get to eat that amazing dish once more in my life. Sir Mashira, what other dishes would you recommend?"

"Heh, in that case, I'd recommend 'ginger pork.' I reckon it'd be right up your alley."

Denemon was in extremely high spirits as he listened to his hunter companion's recommendation. *I can't believe it. I get to eat it once more.*

The samurai munched away on the ginger pork he ordered, recommended to him by the hunter who was a regular of the restaurant. The cooked meat was indeed tender, and it went magnificently with the delicious pure white rice served on the side. And yet still he thought of that one magical dish. Twenty years ago, he was stunned that something so incredible existed in this world. He was overcome with the joy of knowing he would once more be able to eat braised pork.

And so, seven days later, the familiar sound of bells ringing echoed throughout the restaurant.

"Master, I've arrived!"

Denemon, with Mashira in tow, announced his arrival. He never knew that seven days could feel so long. That's why he was so excited.

"Aye, welcome!"

The master, his eyes red from a lack of sleep, showed the pair to their table. "That'll be two orders of braised pork, right?"

"Indeed! Thank you!"

The master confirmed the order, and Denemon nodded in response. He was going to be able to eat that magical dish again. When he started thinking about it, his mouth began to water.

"Curses, must we still wait?! Is this not taking too long?!"

"Now, now. We only just placed our orders."

Denemon had begun to grow impatient due to the size of his own expectations, but Mashira chuckled and kept him grounded. After a brief period of time, the master came out of the kitchen holding their meals on a tray.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Your order of braised pork."

The plate the master placed down in front of Denemon was deeper than usual. On top of it lay a light brown boiled egg and radish that had soaked up the brown juices. Next to those was a serving of bright green, boiled spinach,

and large slices of pork meat.

“Oooh! Oooh! This is it! This is the meal I’ve waited years for!”

The sweet fragrance wafting up from the meat was enough to remind the samurai of his initial shock back when he first ate the dish. He immediately grabbed a pair of chopsticks. Even ignoring the main focus of the meal, this was quite the feast. The radish had soaked in the savory flavor of the pork, and the egg overflowed with golden yellow yolk after being split open. Yet still, the true star here was the pork meat. Denemon reached for it with his chopsticks, zero hesitation in his movements.

Usually, this kind of thick meat was difficult for even the tough-jawed citizens of the Mountain Nation to comfortably chew through. Instead, Denemon’s chopsticks cut through the meat as if it were made of water.

“Huh, well isn’t this a surprise! I didn’t think pork meat could get this tender,” Mashira said, surprised by the meat’s lack of toughness. Ginger pork was another meat dish that came in slices, and while that too was tender and easy to cut into with chopsticks, it wasn’t nearly as thick as the meat on Denemon’s plate. Mashira didn’t think something like that could be so tender.

Denemon inspected the large piece of pork meat. The dark brown juices colored the meat and the transparent fat and skin above it. *Mm, the color and fragrance leave no room for doubt*, he thought.

The meat gave off a slight, sweet aroma. This was indeed the same color and scent as the feast he once enjoyed. They were enough to remind him of the flavor he experienced so many moons ago, causing his mouth to water. The samurai quickly brought the meat to his mouth.

It melted.

The moment Denemon put the meat into his mouth, it immediately melted. The layer of fat dissolved before he could even bite into it, and the skin that should have been hard left behind nothing but savoriness as it disappeared from existence. The pork meat that absorbed the flavor of the sweet and sour sauce came undone in his mouth, leaving behind a savory aftertaste.

Mm? This is on a whole different level!

As the flavor of the sweet and sour pork weaved its way throughout his mouth, Denemon was stunned by the memories of when he first ate it years ago. He was moved to action. The samurai reached for the bowl of pure white rice off to the side and began to shovel the fluffy grains into his mouth. The savory flavor of the braised pork mixed with the sweetness of the rice, increasing the deliciousness of both tenfold. This fusion of flavors convinced Denemon that there wasn't anything in the world as delicious as what he was eating at that very moment.

Yes, yes! This was what I longed to eat all these many years! True deliciousness!



Twenty years ago, the hunter who invited him to the restaurant told him that the braised pork and white rice went incredibly well with the other world's strong seishu alcohol. He was right. The combination of sweet rice, surprisingly spicy alcohol, and braised pork made for a taste that one could only experience in another world. Denemon glanced over at his friend Mashira. He was completely silent.

The hunter was quietly moving his chopsticks back and forth, devouring the braised pork one moment, a radish the next, followed by the egg and rice. He occasionally took bites of the boiled spinach and the sauce that smelled ever-so-slightly of the ocean, also clearing his palate with the salty and spicy radish on one of the other plates. Mashira stopped for nothing.

"Master, another plate, please!"

The hunter asked for seconds, almost as if he forgot that Denemon was sitting right in front of him.

Mm, I won't lose to him.

Denemon sped up his own eating. He feasted on the high-quality pork meat, the boiled egg that spilled forth its golden insides once cut, and the radish that soaked in the juices.

With each bite of the meal, more rice vanished into his stomach. It didn't take long for Denemon's bowl to empty out.

"Master, I too would like seconds on the rice! And drink as well! Bring me one bottle of chilled seishu!" If he remembered correctly, the hunter from back then left behind a little mountain shack near the black door so that he could sleep should he drink too much. Old memories were coming back to life inside Denemon.

What the master brought out wasn't the sort of cloudy alcohol the samurai was used to drinking; it was clear. The transparent alcohol had the scent of rice and went down smoothly but was also incredibly hot and strong.

The strong booze melded well with the sweet and sour pork.

Ah, this is no good.

He took a sip of booze, a bite of braised pork, a sip of booze, a bite of braised pork, a mouthful of rice, and then more braised pork. Denemon continued this loop until he was drunk and his stomach pleasantly satisfied. Yet somehow, his chopsticks didn't stop moving, at least not until his stomach could handle no more.

And so the master was able to revive one of Nekoya's greatest menu items, and Denemon was reunited with the meal of his dreams after twenty long years. He ate and drank his fill, and by the evening, he proclaimed that he would spend the night in the shack so that he could sober up. His face was bright red as he hung over his hunter friend's shoulders and returned home.

After watching the two drunk men leave the restaurant, the master handed over the giant pot of beef stew to the Red Queen, as per the usual.

"Geez, I can't believe I made it in time."

With the restaurant closed and the customers gone, silence settled over Nekoya as the master stretched his arms out wide.

"Man, I should not be pulling all-nighters at this age."

He sighed to himself while rolling his stiff shoulders. The fact that he ended up having to make even more braised pork than he initially planned for left him an exhausted mess. His original plan was to offer the meal as a daily special on Friday and then serve the leftovers on Saturday. What he didn't expect was that he would sell out of the stuff on Friday.

"I guess Gramps's braised pork really was that popular..."

All of this just served as yet another reminder that his grandfather truly was an amazing man. When he was forced to inherit the restaurant after his grandfather's sudden death, braised pork was one of the handful of dishes he took off the menu because he didn't think he could replicate the flavor. At the time, people were disappointed over the change, but he never thought that all these years later there would still be fans of the dish on both sides of the door.

"I suppose I'll serve it as a daily special on another Friday," the master whispered to himself.

The customers who came on Friday really seemed to enjoy the braised pork.

There were even some who complained that they couldn't drink with it because it was the middle of the day, so they came back that night to eat it again.

Of course, part of this was because it was a dish that had been gone from the menu for some ten years, but the fact that it was popular with the young folks who were only familiar with the current version of Nekoya made the master genuinely happy.

"But whew, I'm beat. I don't even have an appetite."

The master let out a satisfied sigh. Preparing more braised pork after closing shop on Friday and then running Saturday's business took its toll on the man in his late thirties. He glanced over at the corn porridge he saved for dinner.

I'm more sleepy than hungry.

He decided to grab a fast shower and hop into bed. He would have plenty of time to eat in the morning. The master turned the lights off and headed to the elevator that would take him to his home on the third floor.

Ring, ring.

The sound of the bell filled the dark room, announcing the arrival of a new customer.

TO BE CONTINUED IN

Restaurant to Another World Vol. 2



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