

As one that sought to master every professional skill she could, Kuro rushed towards the new alchemist's workshop as soon as she learned that the new grandmaster had been created. She was already diligently studying both blacksmithing and enchanting, and had a better grasp of alchemy than most of the professional alchemists in the city.

When she arrived, she pushed open the door to see a white-haired boy with silver eyes wearing a red jacket, brown vest, white undershirt, and black pants. Up to this point, it was just as Kuro had heard from the other citizens. However... hadn't she heard that he was human?

Her eyes focused on the twitching, feline ears atop his head and the white tail swishing behind his back. "U-Uhm, excuse me?" Kuro called out, and the boy turned to face her with a bright smile.

"Yes, my dear? How may I help you?" the boy asked, standing on a stool to properly reach the tools atop the counter.

"Are you... Francois?" she asked, looking around to see if there were any other alchemists present. He matched the description so closely, yet the matter of race threw her off.

"Why yes, yes I am!" Francois confirmed with a deep, theatrical bow. "And, lest my thoughts mislead me, you should be the little genius Saintess, Kuro. Does this suffice for introductions?"

Kuro let out a little yip at that, her cheeks flushing at the title 'little genius'. "Y-Yes. But, I heard that you were a human."

"Hmm? Oh, but I am!" the cat-eared boy said. "This is just a bit of passive spellwork. You would be amazed at how much more readily people will trust their own kin above that of a different race. Even if they know my true nature, seeing the features familiar to their kin puts their minds at ease. Thus, I crafted this little spell, one such that any who gaze upon me will see me as their own."

*That's quite the impressive spell,* Teacher spoke up in Kuro's mind, and she nodded along. She knew enough about magic at this point to know that a spell that worked passively like this, targeting each individual that witnessed it at once, was not some low-ranking spell. At the very least, it would have been an A-ranked spell. To use such a spell strictly to put customers at ease was beyond what Kuro could understand.

Thus, she shelved that thought for the moment, mustering her courage to step forward.

"F-Francois, sir, would you be willing to teach me alchemy?" she asked, staring at the seemingly young alchemist before her. "I wish to learn as much as I can, but I'm not allowed to take more than two professional classes at the school. B-But, if you'll teach me, I can come here every day after classes to learn."

Francois maintained his bright smile as he listened to Kuro. Once she was done, he hopped off of the stool, landing atop it in a sitting position while holding his chin in one hand. "The lord did say that you would probably want to come and study under me, though I assumed you would arrive later. I hadn't even finished preparing for your test yet."

"My test, sir?" Kuro asked, her eyes going wide.

"That's right," Francois clapped his hands. "You see, I'm more demanding than Morgan and Brigid. I want a truly talented alchemist to serve as my apprentice. Thus, I have taken the liberty to arrange a simple test for you, but one you will no doubt find more challenging than any you have taken thus far."

Kuro clenched her fists, eyes blazing with determination. "I'll do it! Whatever test you have for me, I'll do it!"

"Excellent resolve!" Francois laughed, hopping up to his feet and performing a dramatic twirl. "In that case, I shall have you identify a simple, C-ranked potion and its corresponding ingredients."

Kuro paused at the description of the test, confusion clouding her features. "Sir? A C-ranked potion? That's... not nearly as hard as you made the test sound." Kuro was confident that she could identify any standard C-ranked potion put before her, and could likely deduce its ingredients through context clues.

"Ah, but there's a twist to this particular test," Francois began. "You must undergo this test without any supporting equipment. For the duration of the test, you must remove and unbind the ring upon your finger. Let us see whether that information has truly been absorbed within your mind, or if it is the ring's own power that fuels your genius."

Kuro's hand immediately went to cover the ring she was wearing, taking an instinctive step backwards. Color drained from her face at the thought of unbinding this ring. She had not removed it once since she first put it on, aside from when she needed to wash herself. Even then, she kept the ring bound and close at hand.

At the same time, the thought crept into her mind. Wasn't it really just Teacher's power that made everyone praise her? Would she really be able to do even a C-ranked test if she were on her own.

*I see... so that is what he wants, Teacher's voice spoke into Kuro's mind. I won't force you to take this test, but I would strongly suggest it. It could help you with your future growth considerably.*

"B-But, Teacher." Kuro looked down at the ring, her gaze trembling. Was Teacher trying to get rid of her? Would he really come back to her after she unbound the ring?

Teacher's chuckle rang through her mind. *You worry too much. Have some faith in this old man, will you?*

Kuro swallowed thickly, moving to grab the ring with three fingers to remove it. However, Francois's voice cut through the tension to stop her. "Ahem. I did say that your test was not complete. I understand that this is quite the decision for you to make. Thus, I ask that you come back in one hour if your resolve stands firm. By then, the potion should be completed."

Kuro froze, the ring halfway off her finger as she processed Francois's words. Slowly, she returned it to its original place, gripping her fist tightly. "I-I will, sir. Thank you," she said, before turning and leaving the workshop with flushed cheeks. This incident had taught her that she was truly still just the same, scared girl that had once found the silver ring within the slums. Everything she had now, it was thanks to the ring on her finger, not her own hard work...

As those thoughts flooded her mind, she felt a sudden shift within herself, one that halted her steps. She had barely left the workshop, her gaze becoming unfocused. The next second, she broke into a sprint, running down the road and taking a sharp turn to charge towards the church.

In just a couple of minutes, she had crossed the kilometer of road to reach the door of the church, throwing it open and running inside. "Prim!" she called out, drawing the attention of the saintess sweeping the floor, as well as those that had arrived to pray.

Prim walked over, a curious look in her eyes. "Yes, Kuro? Is there anything wrong?"

"Your book, it's ready again!" That was what Kuro had sensed as she left the workshop. Something within her well of divinity had shifted, prompting her to investigate. Within her divine library, she found Prim's book. Where it had once felt locked, unable to budge despite her best efforts, it now seemed to be waiting for Kuro to call on it.

"Is that so?" Prim asked in surprise. "What of the others?"

Kuro focused her thoughts, but soon shook her head. "Only yours." All of the other books, aside from the one that she had only just created of Francois, as well as Flourette's, remained tightly closed. Since she didn't know how long the cooldown would be for these books, she had never tested the one she received from Flourette.

"Give it a few more minutes," Prim said in a thoughtful tone. "The fact that mine is unlocked now could mean several different things. First, it could be based on your connection to the target, and I am simply the one you have the closest bond with. Secondly, there might be a one-week cooldown, regardless of the level of the book used. By my count, it should be roughly one week since your first experiment."

"By recollection, we had you copy Morgan's book ten minutes after you copied my own. If her book unlocks according to this schedule, it will be all but confirmed that you can access each

book with a cooldown of one week. However, you maintained Morgan's book for five minutes while you tested various enchantment practices under its influence, as opposed to the scant few seconds you used mine. Marking the time you closed the book, it should be ready fifteen minutes after mine."

"If it does not, that means that prolonged usage entails a long cooldown," Prim explained, patiently returning to cleaning the church to pass the time. Kuro hastened to join her, picking up a spare broom. Sure enough, just over a dozen minutes passed before Kuro felt another tome unlock.

As they waited, more and more books unlocked, proving their theory. Regardless of how powerful the book was, or how long she kept it open, the book would stay locked for exactly seven days after closing. This meant that she had to be careful about how she used these powers, or else she might find herself deprived of one she desperately needed if an emergency struck.

Due to the excitement of discovering more about her divine blessing, Kuro forgot to bring up the subject of the upcoming test. It was only when Teacher quietly reminded her of the time that Kuro's body stiffened. Her nerves came back in full force, ears flattening against her skull. She bid farewell to Prim, and began to walk her way back to the alchemy workshop.

Once she was at the workshop, she found Francois sitting behind a table, a cloth-covered potion placed in front of himself as he watched her with his usual smile. "I see that you made up your mind?" he asked, and Kuro swallowed thickly.

"T-Teacher said that I should do this. Even if I don't want to, I... I trust Teacher." As she said this, she slowly removed the ring from her finger, her eyes squeezed shut. With a shudder, she severed the attunement between herself and this ring.

Immediately, a fog seemed to have fallen over the world. She still retained her heightened senses from being a beastfolk, but the extra enhancement provided by the ring, the insight into everything she looked at, was gone. It made her feel as if she had suddenly lost everything she knew, her shoulders trembling.

"Come here, then, little genius," Francois's voice called out, snapping Kuro's attention forward. She could still feel the wellspring of divinity within herself, the faint connection to Teacher. However, whether it was her mental space or anything else provided by the ring, it had disappeared.

Nervously, she took her seat across from Francois, her hands fidgeting in her lap. She desperately considered putting the ring back on and running out the door right then and there. She might fail to learn alchemy from Francois, but she valued her Teacher far more.

Ironically, it was her faith in Teacher that stopped her, trusting his words that this would be good for her growth. She looked at Francois with misty eyes. "B-Begin... please."

Francois's smile turned softer, and he pulled the cloth off of the simple glass vial. Within it was a yellow liquid that constantly bubbled despite the cork tightly sealing it. "As I said, your test is to identify this potion and its ingredients."

Kuro reached out with shaking hands, carefully taking the vial. Her memory, which had always seemed so clear, was suddenly murky. Before, she could instantly recall every page of every tome that she had read, and knew that she would have been able to identify the potion with a single glance.

Now, she slowly uncorked the potion, sniffing at it and diving through her memories. She placed her finger on the opening, upturning the vial to wet the tip of her finger. "This is... an Agility Draught, right?" she asked, feeling the familiar tingling sensation on her finger. "But the smell is off. You used Brightleaf Tarragon and some common mint to enhance the flavor? As for the potion itself..." Kuro focused, trying to dive into her memories.

The knowledge was still there, she just had to find it. Go back to those countless hours of reading and personal experimentation. She had brewed this potion herself dozens of times. "Wind Thyme, Lantern Rosemary, Blueflute Herb, Ironroot Dill, and Pepperleaf?" She brought her finger to her lips, lightly licking it. "This sweetness... you added in some Honeyleaf to make it less bitter. My Agility Draughts always tasted really bitter, making them hard to drink."

Francois's smile only grew wider and wider as Kuro identified the ingredients one by one. He had intentionally chosen a potion that he knew Kuro was familiar with as the test, though added his own modifications to it. If she had truly been diligent in her studies and practice, focusing on every detail, then the memories would naturally remain in her mind. However, if she relied purely on the ring for everything, without bothering to commit it to memory herself, the information would have vanished from her mind like a conversation she heard in distant passing.

"Excellent!" Francois's sudden shout nearly made Kuro drop the potion, her eyes going wide. "Even without that ring supporting you, you have proven to be a diligent student. With such a talent, it would please me greatly to accept you as my apprentice."

Kuro stared at Francois, her eyes going misty again. She had succeeded? Even without Teacher, she had managed to get the answers right on her own? That single thought was enough to make her shoulders tremble again, her hand clutching the ring close to her chest. For the first time, she felt like all of her hard work had been validated. The hours spent every day in the library or doing her experiments, the constant questions she asked whenever she spotted something that didn't make sense to her.

She always thought of herself as just an extension of her Teacher, absorbing the knowledge on his behalf. Everything she learned, she always attributed it to him. Every experiment was just a

way to confirm that she had learned it correctly. Teacher had never held back his praises for her, and it made her giddy every time. So why did this feel so different? Why did it feel like she was being truly *seen* for the first time...?

She looked at the ring she was holding, and knew the answer without even asking. No matter how much Teacher had praised her, she never really felt like he was praising *her*. Because of how she saw herself as nothing but an extension of him, it always felt to her as if the one being praised was Teacher. And honestly, to her, that was fine. Teacher was her everything. To hear him praised brought her joy.

It was only now that the memories of those moments came crashing back to her. Teacher was never the type to praise himself. He had *a/ways* been praising her, and she had simply not allowed herself to see that. "T-Thank you, sir," she forced the words out, slowly sliding the ring back onto her finger and attuning to it.

Right away, the world seemed to clear again, the murky veil lifted. Her mind raced, going over every detail of what had happened. She flushed, realizing how emotional she had gotten, but she didn't shy away from it. She allowed her tears to fall freely, silently conveying her thanks to her Teacher for all the times he had cared for her, for all the little moments that she had overlooked due to her own self-loathing.