

Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill

Cream Croquettes and
the Downfall of Heresy

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14



"Let's boil
this giant
crab!"

Sui

Mukohda

Dora-chan

Fel

Gon

"Work
together,
everyone!"



Ninrir

"What
matters
right now is
your next
tenant!
I want a
sweets
shop!"

"I need
an ice
cream
shop."



Rusalka



The Story Up Till Now



After being accidentally caught in a shady kingdom's Hero Summoning ritual, Tsuyoshi Mukouda (aka Mukohda), an office worker from modern Japan, was dragged into another world of swords and sorcery. Mukohda managed to escape the kingdom's clutches and go on a journey, but his ability to buy goods from his old world using his unique skill, "Online Supermarket," drew all sorts of unwanted attention to him. Soon he was beset by incredible beings like goddesses and legendary beasts, all eager to tempt him with blessings and familiar contracts in order to get at his food and otherworldly goods.

After a long trip, Mukohda's party returned to their home, bringing with them their newest companion, Old Man Gon the ancient dragon. However, before our hero even had time to settle in, thugs from the Church of Rubanov arrived to extort him for money! Incensed by their outrageous acts and willingness to resort to violence, Mukohda set out at the behest of Demiurge, the God of All Creation, to teach the Rubanovs a lesson once and for all...



Mukohda

Human

An office worker summoned from modern Japan. Has the unique skill "Online Supermarket." Good at cooking. A coward.

Unique Skill "Online Supermarket"

Mukohda's unique skill, which allows him to buy goods from modern Japan any time, any place. Food from the Online Supermarket buffs the stats of those who consume it.

Character Introduction

Mukohda's Party

**Old Man Gon**

Familiar (for 300 years)

An ancient dragon who once fought Fel to a draw. Became Mukohda's familiar for his cooking, like everyone else (though with a 300-year limited contract).

**Dora-chan**

Familiar

A rare pixie dragon. Small, but fully grown. Unsurprisingly, he became Mukohda's familiar to get at his cooking.

**Sui**

Familiar

A newly-born slime. Grew attached to Mukohda after he fed it, and became his familiar. Cute.

**Fel**

Familiar

A legendary magic beast called a Fenrir. Became Mukohda's familiar so that he could eat more of his otherworldly food. Hates vegetables.

The Divine Realm

**Rusalka**

God

The Goddess of Water. Gave Sui her blessing so that she could receive offerings from Mukohda. Loves otherworldly food.

**Kisharle**

God

The Goddess of Earth. Gave Mukohda her blessing so she could receive offerings from him. Obsessed with otherworldly beauty products.

**Agni**

God

The Goddess of Fire. Gave Mukohda her blessing so she could receive offerings from him. A fan of otherworldly alcohol, especially beer.

**Ninrir**

God

The Goddess of Wind. Gave Mukohda her blessing in order to extort offerings from him. Addicted to otherworldly sweets, especially dorayaki.

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Chapter 1: Demiurge Takes Center Stage

My familiars and I were on our way to the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov, and had set up camp for the night in the massive forest that stretched across the border between the Holy Kingdom and the nearby cluster of smaller nations. We'd set out from Karelina earlier that morning, and theoretically we *could've* made it all the way to the Holy Kingdom in a single day's travel, but that would have meant arriving at the Church's main temple after night had already fallen.

Wrecking the place that late at night would mean fewer witnesses, and that, I figured, would probably make our effort to send a message a lot less effective. The more people there were around to see the Rubanovs get taken down a peg, the greater the impact this would have! And so, after consulting with my familiars, we'd decided to bed down in the woods and finish our journey to the Rubanovs' main temple the following morning.

“And now that we have agreed on our plan, it is time for us to eat!”

“Yes, indeed! We'll have to be thoroughly prepared for tomorrow's venture, after all.”

«And by prepared, you mean stuffed! Nothing better before a fight than a full stomach!»

«Sui'll eat tons!»

“You guys are making it sound like you *don't* gorge yourselves even when we *don't* have an important mission to take care of,” I jabbed. *Not to mention...* “And besides, you're gonna be stuffing yourselves *again* tomorrow morning, aren't you?”

“I see no need to state the obvious.”

“Really, you have to ask?”

«Yeah, what we eat tomorrow's got nothing to do with what we eat now.»

«Sui'll eat lots now *and* tomorrow!»

You guys seriously have no sense of restraint. It might do you good to hold back at least a little every once in a while, you know? Though I'd guess that's too much to ask from the four great gluttons, I reflected with a chuckle as I started getting dinner ready. Not that there was much for me to do this time. I just had to take some premade meals I'd cooked in Karelina out from my Item

Box.

I figured there was no chance at all of anything bad happening to my familiars during our raid on the Church. But that said, we were trying to put on a pretty flashy show, so I wasn't taking the attack *too* lightly. Fel and Gon could speak the human tongue, so their efforts would be particularly essential! As such, I'd decided to prepare a dish that, according to a superstition back in my homeland, would ensure victory in any endeavor.

"Here you go, guys! It's katsudon night!"

I set down my familiars' extra-large personal bowls, each of which was filled with a heaping helping of katsudon. All four of them dug in so quickly, you'd think I'd kept them waiting for hours. *Yup*, I thought to myself with a nod. *Nothing beats katsudon when you have a big day coming up tomorrow!*

"You called this dish 'katsudon,' my liege? It's exquisite!" Gon said between ravenous mouthfuls.

Oh, right! I guess this would be his first time trying it. The dish consisted of fried pork cutlets—or, well, technically orc cutlets, in this case—briefly simmered in a delicious salty-sweet sauce made from soy sauce, mirin, and sugar. Then you pour a beaten egg on top and let it cook until it's *just* on the right side of half-done, and serve it over a heaping bowl of freshly-cooked rice.

Seriously, there's no way a dish like this wouldn't be delicious. I was starting to drool just looking at my familiars' meals and decided to get started myself, digging into my own bowl with a pair of chopsticks.

"Yup! That's delicious, all right!" I said, then I wolfed down the rest of the bowl at a breakneck pace.

.....

.....

...

"Phew! Your katsudon was truly delectable, my liege!"

"Yes, it was thoroughly acceptable. I, however, would have preferred the meat in isolation."

«You mean the cutlets, right? Yeah, those are some seriously good stuff!»

«Sui likes it both ways!»

We'd finished our dinner, and were now chatting together as we enjoyed some glasses of after-meal soda. Considering how much Fel had just eaten, I could only roll my eyes at his half-hearted protests. He'd eaten even more than usual, actually, as had the rest of my familiars. Maybe they'd been especially voracious in preparation for tomorrow? They'd been so hungry, I had actually

started to think I might run out of katsudon before they were satisfied, which had put me into a bit of a panic.

“Oh, don’t worry. I made plenty of plain cutlets too, so you can have those for breakfast tomorrow morning,” I said, much to everyone’s delight. *I’d* be opting for a significantly lighter breakfast menu myself, of course. In my four familiars’ eyes, gorging yourself on meat first thing in the morning was only natural, and so long as there was enough of it, they didn’t fuss too much over how it was prepared. Starting off their day with oily, fried meats was no problem at all for them.

Sometimes I wonder how their stomachs can take all the nonsense they throw at them. Oh, but I guess Sui doesn’t have a stomach to begin with, huh? I was feeling a little queasy just imagining the piles of cutlets I’d be serving tomorrow morning, and took a sip of the black coffee I was drinking from my favorite mug to soothe my stomach. That’s enough thinking about tomorrow’s breakfast, anyway. More importantly...

“Hey, Fel, Gon? About tomorrow, do you two still remember what you’re supposed to say to them?” I asked. I’d given them a telepathic rundown of exactly what I wanted them to say and do while we were en route. We were trying to put on a show of force, and the better we were at demonstrating the power we could bring to bear, the more convincing it would be. That was why Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui would be taking center stage, while *I’d* be hiding away on Gon’s back. Fel and Gon had particularly important roles in our skit, so I wanted to make sure they knew their parts.

“Hmph! Of course I do,” Fel said with an air of absolute confidence. **“I am a follower of Ninrir, Goddess of Wind, who in turn serves Demiurge, God of all Creation. I would not think to sully my goddess’s name before a divine being who stands above her. I shall not fail.”**

“I don’t intend to cause any issues either. This will be child’s play!” declared Gon, also confident as could be.

“Well, that’s good, I guess... Counting on you two tomorrow as well, Dora-chan, Sui.”

«You gotcha!»

«Sui’ll do Sui’s best!»

Strangely enough, I found myself more worried about the ever-self-assured Gon and Fel than I was about the other two.



After my gluttonous quartet ate *way* too many cutlets the following morning to prepare themselves for the day ahead, we crossed the border into the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov. Before I knew it, we'd arrived at our destination: the Church of Rubanov's main temple.

I hadn't actually had any clue where the temple was, honestly, but Old Man Gon had known exactly where we were headed. According to him, "It stands out like a sore thumb, which makes it a useful landmark."

As we set down in the plaza in front of the temple, I could already see what he meant. Gon had returned to his full size, and yet the plaza was big enough that he was still able to comfortably land with room to spare. The temple itself, meanwhile, seemed to have been deliberately built to loom over the area, and was enormous in its own right. *I know he said it stood out, but this is just absurd...*

"Is that seriously a church?" I asked in disbelief from Gon's back, where I would be staying the whole time if things went according to plan. The temple was just *too* huge—so huge that at a glance, I would've assumed it was a castle if I hadn't known otherwise. It was even bigger than Gon at his full size! It was intricately decorated too, to such an extent that you could *instantly* tell how tremendously expensive it must have been to build. Even the window frames were lavishly wrought. It was a monument to excess, through and through.

I took a moment to gape at the sheer opulence of the temple, but was soon snapped out of my daze when screams and shouts began to ring out. At just about the same moment, a troop of knights clad in glimmering silver armor came pouring out of the temple.

"H-Hear ye, foul beasts! We, the Paladins of Rubanov, shall smite thee down with the might of holy judgment!" cried out a knight at the center of the formation, who was wearing even flashier armor than the rest of his crew.

"Foul, you say?" Fel scoffed with an enraged grimace. **"You would call a Fenrir foul? Then know, insolent humans, that when I rend your flesh and shatter your bones, it was you who brought that fate upon yourselves."**

"Oh, is *that* all you would do to them?" asked Gon, who seemed just as angry. "To call an ancient dragon like *me* a beast is to beg for immolation, to be burned away by my dragon breath until not even ashes remain!"

The two of them seemed ready to lay into the knights at any second, so I sent them a frantic message. «F-Fel, hold off on the violence! You swore you weren't going to screw this up last night, didn't you?!»

«Mnhhh! B-But, these insects!»

«And you too, Gon! What happened to this being child's play?!»

«Well, you see...»

«Please, guys! You're throwing off the whole script! And you still have to give Demiurge his moment in the spotlight!» Demiurge was the cornerstone of this whole operation, and if those two lost their tempers and went on the warpath, it would ruin *everything!* «Just stick to the plan, okay?! I'm begging you!»

«Yeah, seriously,» Dora-chan chimed in. «We spent *all* that time running through the whole plan, and you're freestyling already? You two suck at this!»

«Fel and Old Man Gon suck at this!» Sui parroted.

«**Grrr...**»

«Ugh...»

After all the bravado they'd shown the night before, they'd really earned this moment of ridicule. *Come on, Dora-chan! Come on, Sui! Let 'em know what you really think!*

«Anyway,» I transmitted, «just stick to the script! No more improv! If the two of you mess this up, then you can kiss dinner tonight goodbye!»

«**Y-You need not remind me!**»

«V-Very well!»

Holding their meal hostage had finally gotten through to them, it seemed. Fel and Gon paused to collect themselves, then began reciting the lines I'd planned out for them.

“I am a Fenrir, servant of Ninrir, the Goddess of Wind!” said Fel. **“I have come at the behest of Demiurge, God of All Creation and lord of all deities!”**

“And I am an ancient dragon, a member of the eldest and most powerful race that has watched over this world since times primeval!” said Gon. “I, too, have come to fulfill the God of All Creation’s divine mission!”

“Hear ye, humans,” Fel and Gon continued in unison. “Listen well to the voice of Demiurge himself!”

«Okay, Demiurge, that's your cue!» I sent out in a telepathic message that I knew for a fact Demiurge the habitual mind-reader would hear. The ball was in his court now.



<Ahem, ahem! Yes, well, I am Demiurge, this world's God of All Creation

and the highest-ranking among its divine entities. I've chosen to speak with you today on account of a number of doubts I've come to harbor, and to start, I would like to have a few questions answered to clear those doubts away. You there! Yes, you, the Pope! Stop that quivering, stand up, and come outside! >

Demiurge's now-familiar voice echoed in my mind once more, but this time, I knew I wasn't alone. I'd relayed our plan to him in advance, and he had agreed to speak with all of the followers of the Church of Rubanov—in other words, everyone in the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov—plus all the high-ranking individuals in other religions that didn't worship one of the four goddesses or their divine associates, as well as the royalty of the multitude of nations that were around. Demiurge had informed me that he'd be perfectly capable of sending his message to literally everyone on the continent, but we'd eventually decided that doing so would be overkill and had chosen to limit our scope.

Even with his message only being delivered to that limited group of people, of course, I still suspected that we might have been overdoing it a little. In fact, we'd only just begun and I was *already* seeing signs of how effective his message would be. The people around us looked absolutely astonished. Some were gulping with apprehension, and others had fallen to their knees and started praying on the spot. *I guess that's fair, honestly. It's not every day that most people hear a god's voice in their head.*

< Well? I'm waiting, > said Demiurge.

That must have done the trick, as a moment later, a group of men wearing white priest's robes with gaudy golden embroidery rushed out of the temple. One of them—the Pope, I assumed—was dressed even more extravagantly than the rest, with precious gems sewn into his ostentatious outfit.

< That certainly took you long enough! So, you're the representatives of the Church of Rubanov. Would you care to tell me who Rubanov is? >

Pff! D-Demiurge, you're really asking that now? Wait...huh? Is it just me, or are the pope and his cronies looking a little pale? Actually, they look like they might pass out on the spot! Don't tell me they know that Rubanov's not real?

< Well? Does anyone feel like answering me? > Demiurge asked.

After a very lengthy moment of hesitation, the Pope finally spoke up. The square was packed, but it had fallen so deathly silent that I could hear him clearly, even though he wasn't exactly shouting. "R-R-Rubanov is the omniscient and almighty G-God of Humanity! M-Mankind is blessed by his benevolent glory!" he said.

< The omniscient and almighty God of Humanity, is he? Hmm, hmm. Well,

as I just informed you, I happen to be the God of All Creation, who reigns over all other divinities. It goes without saying that there isn't a god in this realm I am unaware of, and so I can say with the utmost certainty that there is no such god as Rubanov. Moreover, the gods do not discriminate by race under any circumstance! > Demiurge declared definitively, sending a stir throughout the entire plaza.

"Th-That cannot be—" the Pope began in an attempt to mount an objection, but Demiurge wasn't about to let him get away with *that*.

< To lie to the gods is futile! You of the Church of Rubanov's upper echelons know the truths I speak perfectly well. You were taught them when you assumed your positions! You know that the Church of Rubanov is a false faith, founded solely to amass gold for its leaders' benefit. You know this, and yet you remain in your positions in spite of it! In other words, you are all nothing more than miserly money-grubbers! >

As Demiurge revealed the truth behind their religion's founding, the leaders of the Church went from pallid to white as a sheet. They were tottering around so unsteadily, I really thought they'd collapse at any moment.

< But that, in and of itself, is hardly a cause for divine intervention. In this modern era you live in, money is an essential need. I would not stick my nose into your business over a scam, no matter how much it allowed you to line your pockets. However... >

Is it just me, Demiurge, or are you really, really mad right now? I'm kinda getting goose bumps over here!

< What else have you done? > Demiurge continued. *< You have treated the beastfolk, the elves, and the dwarves as your playthings. You have even forced your fellow men to surrender their sons and daughters to you when they suited your fancy, toying with them until they ceased to amuse you, then selling them off as slaves. Such misdeeds are as natural as drawing breath for those in your church's employ, and none are more guilty than those who stand at the top of your ranks! You sold your own people to the Geisler Empire, knowing full well they would be used as living targets for their armies to whet their blades upon! And you also knew of the even grizzlier fate, too terrible to even be spoken, that would await them after their deaths! >*

A fate too terrible to be spoken that would await them after they died? What's this all about? And Demiurge is the one describing it like that?! That's beyond terrifying!

< This seems an apt moment to say a word to the empire's leaders, as well. I

know you can hear me, O Emperor! Your imperial way is to view those outside of your lands as subhuman. That viewpoint is what has led you to begin your sickening practices, and you must cease them at once! Should you partake in your dark ways ever again from now on, I will not turn a blind eye—and lest you think your actions will go unobserved, know that I am always watching. >

Oof, yikes! I didn't realize he had it out for the empire too! All that I knew about the Geisler Empire was that their borders had been locked down for decades and that they were militaristic to an outrageous degree. Oh, and also that the countries that bordered the empire apparently had frequent skirmishes with imperial expeditionary forces. Those tidbits alone were enough to convince me that I never wanted to have anything to do with the place, and if Demiurge had his eye on them, I wanted even less to do with them than ever.

< But let us return to the Church of Rubanov. As I believe I've made clear, the Church's misdeeds are as numerous as the stars in the sky. You have assumed the mantle of a false god to commit wrongdoing of the highest order, and I can no longer turn a blind eye to your villainy. >

The highest order? And again, this is Demiurge saying that? Those Rubanovs must really be genuinely irredeemable.

< That being the case, it's time for your punishment. Ahem! Fenrir, ancient dragon, clean up this mess for me, > Demiurge ordered. *< ...Ho ho ho, oh, I've always wanted to say that! >*

Demiurge... I'm guessing you didn't mean for us to hear that last part, did you? And wait, were you quoting Mito Komon just now? You watched that show?

“V-Very well!” Fel and Gon said together, doing their best to keep a straight face in spite of Demiurge’s playacting.



“Hey!” Fel barked. **“If you do not wish to be caught in the devastation, you would do well to move away from that building at once!”**

“Take this warning as a sign of the great Demiurge’s compassion,” Gon added. “We, however, are not so merciful, and will do our duty whether you get out of the way or not!”

The self-proclaimed paladins and gaudily clad priests broke ranks and fled as fast as their legs could carry them—which was, I had to admit, actually pretty fast.

“Now then, let us begin.”

“Indeed!”

«I’m in!»

«Sui too!»

Fel and Gon were a given, but it seemed that Dora-chan and Sui were on standby as well. All of my familiars were ready and waiting to blow the temple away, but that was when a shout suddenly rang out.

“Enoooooooooh! No more of your lies! The word of Rubanov is law, and with His blessed blade I shall smite the foul beasts who besmirch His naaame!” bellowed one of the “paladins”—the one wearing the fanciest suit of armor—as he burst through the doors of the temple, holding a sword in his hands.

“A-A magic sword?!” I gasped. It was only then that I remembered how Elrand had once told me that the Church of Rubanov had a magic sword called Joyeuse sealed away in its main temple. *Oh, crap! He might actually be able to beat everyone with that thing!*

I had sprung into motion before I even knew what I was doing, sliding off Gon’s back, jumping to the ground, and pulling the magic sword I’d used the most so far, Gram, out of my Item Box. Then I leapt forward, raising the blade high...

“Hraaahhhhhh!”

Clang!

...and intercepted the paladin’s strike, blocking his magic sword with my own!

“Hmph! You believed an attack such as *that* could injure us?”

“Really, my liege. Moreover, the magical power within that sword is nowhere even close to enough for it to be considered a true magic sword. It’s a fake. Though I suppose you don’t need me to tell you that, considering...”

“Huh?” I grunted as I looked up, just in time to see the paladin’s “magic sword” snap like a twig, its blade falling cleanly away from its hilt.

“This can’t beeeeeeee!!!” the paladin wailed.

< Oh! Yes, indeed, that’s no magic sword. It must have been...a century ago? Maybe two? The details escape me, but in any case, the Church of Rubanov’s officials at the time decided to pawn the real sword for some quick cash. >

Demiurge...you really know how to kick a guy when he’s down. Just look at him! He’s literally fallen to his knees from the shock of it all! Thankfully, the rest of the self-proclaimed paladin squad quickly arrived to drag their crestfallen companion away.

“I must say, your movements were rather sharp for someone as timid as you.”

You know, Fel, you don’t have to hedge every single compliment you give me with an insult!

“Now then, with that out of the way, let us begin!”

Kra-kooow! Kshhhkshhkshk, booom!

Craaaaaaaaash!

Pshoo, pshoo, pshoo, pshoo!

Pew, pew, pew!

A veritable lightning storm conjured by Fel, an enormous boulder brought forth by Gon, a series of jagged ice spears manifested by Dora-chan, and a stream of Acid Bullets spat by Sui all slammed into the castle-like temple at once. When the flashes of light and cloud of dust finally dissipated, all that remained of the structure were pebble-sized fragments of stone.



While everyone around us was busy freaking out about the Church of Rubanov’s main temple being turned into gravel, we made ourselves scarce. We’d be heading to Ronkainen next, but at my Familiars’ request, we once again made a stop in the woods between the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov and the border nations to have a meal.

I let out a sigh of relief as I climbed off Gon’s back. “I’m not so sure I can say that ended well, but one way or another, I’m glad it’s over,” I said.

“That was hardly enough of a challenge to satisfy me,” Fel grumbled, apparently upset that it had all ended in a single attack.

“True, true,” Gon agreed. “I couldn’t agree more, especially seeing as you prohibited me from using my dragon breath, my liege.”

“Of course I did, because if you *had* used it, you’d have turned the whole

square into scorched earth,” I retorted. “And anyway, what were you expecting? If you two had gone all-out, you probably would’ve blown the whole *country* away!”

“Which would have been all the better, in my view. I see no need to keep such a rotten nation around.”

“Oh, come on, Fel! Demiurge said this was supposed to be a punishment, not an execution. Holding back was just the right call.”

«Okay, but did you really need all of us to get in on the action if all we were gonna do was blow the hell outta that one building?» Dora-chan asked.

“I mean, probably not, when you put it that way,” I admitted. “I just thought it’d be better to have everyone work together, you know?” *Especially considering that if I picked out one of you to handle it, the rest of you would never let me hear the end of it.*

«Sui wanted to pew-pew more...»

Ugh! Even Sui’s on their side these days...

“Regardless, it is over and done with. Once we have finished our business in Ronkainen, we shall depart for a destination that will prove far more entertaining,” Fel said.

“Hmm? Was that part of the plan?” Gon asked.

«Whaddya mean, entertaining?» Dora-chan added.

«Really, Uncle Fel? Sui’s excited now!» Sui exclaimed.

“Whoa, wait a second! Where are you planning on taking us, Fel?”

“Heh heh heh! You will see soon enough.”

Excuse me, Fel? Why’re you making this sound so ominous?! Oh, I’ve got a really bad feeling about this one! This anxiety’s gonna kill me one of these days...

I tried to question Fel further, but my familiars were too hungry to put up with any delays and I ended up being pressured into preparing our meal instead. I brought out some dungeon pork and spring onion bowls I’d made in advance to serve as a late lunch, but then they started saying that they wanted to go out for a hunt to get some post-meal exercise. It seemed they weren’t about to pass up the opportunity to go hunting, seeing as we were already in the middle of a forest. In the end, they set off into the woods for their hunt before I could stop them, and I never got the chance to press Fel for the details of whatever he’d been implying.



“For crying out loud! I don’t care if it helps with their digestion, they still shouldn’t just run off to hunt like that,” I grumbled to myself.

I’d tried to make an argument that if we were going somewhere that Fel considered entertaining anyway then we didn’t really *need* to go hunting now, but my familiars had told me that what we did now and what we would do then were totally unrelated, and had left before I could get another word in. I was left in the woods with nothing but the eerie cries of unknown animals somewhere in the distance to keep me company, and had to keep reminding myself that Fel had put up a barrier, so I’d be fine, no matter what happened.

“This sure is boring, though. I’m just gonna get more and more negative about everything if I don’t find something to do,” I mused. “Hmm... I’ll have to use portable burners since my magic stove’s busted, but I guess I might as well get started on making dinner.”

What to make, though...? “Oh, I have an idea! I’ll close my eyes, stick my hand into my Item Box, and...”

I rifled around in my Item Box at random for a moment, until my hand touched a lump of some sort of meat.

“All right! I’ll make something out of this!” I said as I pulled it out to find that I’d selected a chunk of gigant minotaur meat, which I’d obtained a truckload of back in the Brixton dungeon.

“Gigant minotaur, eh? Hmm...” I muttered as I pondered my options. “I know! I’ll stir-fry it with some garlic chives!”

Gigant minotaur meat could be used to make an incredible rice bowl if you paired it with a sweet and salty seasoning. I had a feeling that my quartet of gluttons would be coming back with their stomachs grumbling, and I knew they’d be happy with the choice as well.

“With that decided, let’s stock up on ingredients,” I said. Opening up my Online Supermarket to buy whatever I was missing had become a matter of course for me at that point. I brought up the menu, tossed some garlic chives into my shopping cart, checked out, and opened up the cardboard box that appeared a moment later. “Okay, that’s everything I need! Now then, first things first...”

I started by cutting the gigant minotaur meat into bite-size slices. I wasn’t aiming for any precise dimensions this time around. Something somewhat close to the size and thickness of the presliced barbecue meat they sell in stores was what I usually went for, on account of the fact that this was the dish I always made when I needed to use up leftover meat of that exact type after a solo barbecue session.

Anyway, once the meat was ready, I sliced the garlic chives into four- or five-centimeter-long strips. Then I lightly seasoned the meat with salt and pepper, coated it in a thin layer of potato starch, and put together a seasoning mixture of soy sauce, sake, mirin, and sugar, plus ground garlic and ginger, fresh out of the tube.

“Okay! That takes care of all the prep work!”

I heated some sesame oil in a frying pan and threw the giant minotaur meat in first. Once the meat was brown and reasonably cooked through, I stirred in the seasoning mixture, then added the chives last, stir-frying them for just a moment before I pulled the pan off the burner.

I sampled a bite of the stir-fry. “Yup, that’s the stuff! I’m craving a bowl of rice already!”

I brought out an earthenware pot full of freshly cooked, piping hot rice that I’d made back in Karelina, which I piled up in our bowls and then topped with ample helpings of the giant minotaur and chive stir-fry. With that, our meal was complete! I also made additional extra-large helpings for the chowhound crowd and stashed them in my Item Box, of course.

“That recipe came together so quickly, I think I still have some time on my hands,” I said to myself, then decided that I might as well whip up another dish while I was at it. This one would be kept in reserve for another meal, though.

I decided to use some leftover ground cockatrice meat to make cockatrice soboro—a ground meat dish often served on top of rice. I’d had Sui help me make soboro out of dungeon pork and beef back at home, but I didn’t have any of the poultry variants in stock at the moment. Some soboro recipes called for meat alone, and that was perfectly tasty too, but I decided to make a version with a bunch of vegetables in it as well, for variety’s sake. I knew very well that I was the only one with that particular preference, but I also knew how tasty it would be when I was finished, so I figured no one would mind too much.

If I was going to make soboro packed full of goodies, I’d have to get all those goodies prepared first! I bought a pre-blanchered mixture of onions, carrots, peppers, shiitake mushrooms, and bamboo shoots from my Online Supermarket, and diced all of them up into very fine pieces. And with that, I was already done with everything I needed to take care of before starting to cook!

I oiled and heated a frying pan, dropped in the ground cockatrice meat, and got to stir-frying once more. Once the meat had browned, I added the vegetables and kept stir-frying until they were cooked through as well, at which point I added some soy sauce, mirin, sake, sugar, and ground ginger, once again from a

tube. All that was left at that point was to stir-fry a while longer to cook out most of the liquid, and it was finished!

I sampled a bite of my second dish as well. “All right! This one turned out great too!”

I let the cockatrice soboro cool down just a little, then scooped it into several extra-large Tupperware containers to save for later. I’d made so much that a single container just wasn’t big enough. That sort of precooked meat was incredibly handy for all sorts of things, so I always made a ton. You could eat it as-is on rice, of course, but it was also great inside an omelet, or as an ingredient in fried rice.

“I should really make more of this stuff to keep in stock,” I said to myself, and then set about doing just that, using four portable burners at once to cook up a huge quantity of cockatrice soboro.

By the time I’d finished filling my last extra-large Tupperware container and stored it in my Item Box, the sun was beginning to set.

“Fel and the others have gotta be getting back soon, right...?” I pondered as I sipped a can of coffee. And just as I was finishing up my drink, I noticed Gon flying through the red-tinted sky toward me.

“Welcome back! How’d it go?” I asked as he landed and the others climbed down off him, though judging from the frowns on their faces, I could already guess the answer.

“There are no monsters with meat worth eating to be found in this forest,” Fel grumbled.

“Myconids, maneater blossoms, treants...nothing decent at all,” Gon said with an air of indignation.

«Seriously, it sucked! And then when we thought we’d *finally* found something worthwhile, it turned out to just be some shrimpy little scrap of meat! Boy, did *that* ever piss me off,» Dora-chan complained.

«Mngh! Sui couldn’t find *any* meat!» our party’s slime added.

“I guess that means you struck out, huh? That’s pretty rare, but eh, it happens. Dinner’s ready, in any case! You’ll feel better after a good meal,” I said as I brought out the garlic chive and gigant minotaur bowls.

“It was a fool’s errand indeed, but a good meal will be this evening’s saving grace,” Fel said with a frustrated scowl, then dug into his dish.

“Your food is truly to die for, my liege! I’m starting to feel better already,” Gon said between mouthfuls. He’d started eating the second his food was in front of him.

«Yup, this stuff's awesome! I just wish the meat we found today was even half as good as this,» Dora-chan said. «We'll get some next time, though! Next hunt, we'll catch something delicious for sure!»

«This is really, really yummy, and Sui'll catch some tasty meat next time too!» Sui agreed. Just like Dora-chan, it hadn't even finished stuffing its face, and yet it was already thinking about their next hunt.

“This humiliation cannot stand...but soon we will have the perfect chance to vent our frustrations,” Fel muttered with a dangerous glint in his eyes as he licked his chops.

Feeel! He hadn't come out and said it yet, but he was *obviously* plotting something. Unfortunately, all I could do was eat my rice bowl, shoot him a suspicious glare, and pray that *whatever* he ended up asking me to do, it wouldn't be too outrageous.

Chapter 2: Arriving in Ronkainen

My familiars and I touched down on a grassy plain just a short distance away from Ronkainen.

“We made pretty good time, huh?” I noted.

«Of course! That sort of distance is nothing for me and my wings,» Gon proudly replied.

We’d started the day off with a big breakfast, as always, then took an extended digestion break before setting out. Nevertheless, we’d covered the distance between the border forest and Ronkainen so quickly, we’d managed to arrive before noon.

«Hey, something’s headed our way!» Dora-chan called out. He was fluttering up in the air to take a look at the town and had been the first to notice a group of people who’d left through the front gate and were traveling in our direction.

“Oh? Do they seek to challenge us?” Fel said, already sounding like he was ready for a fight.

«Should Sui pew-pew them all?» Sui asked.

See? This is exactly why I always say you’re a bad influence on it! It’s talking as violently as the rest of you these days! “Come on, Fel, stop acting so bloodthirsty! Those people are probably Ronkainen’s town guard, that’s all. You too, Sui. No hurting them!”

The people moving in our direction were all wearing armor of the same design, and were carrying spears. Considering how geared up they were, it seemed only reasonable to assume they were soldiers of some sort. That was a little confusing, though. I’d made sure to send a message through the Adventurer’s guild to inform everyone I’d be traveling to Ronkainen, so why would they be sending the guard out to meet me...? In any case, I knew that making sudden movements could turn the situation into a massive headache in the worst case, so I decided to just wait where I was until the soldiers arrived.

“A-Am I correct in assuming that you’re Mukohda, the S-ranked adventurer?” one of the soldiers asked when they finally arrived.

“Uh, yes...?” I replied.

"Then please follow me," the soldier said as he beckoned me toward town.

For lack of any reason not to, I decided to do as he said and follow along. As we set out, the rest of the soldiers formed up in a circle around me and my familiars, matching our pace. *Umm...huh? What's going on here?*

One of the soldiers seemed to notice that I was glancing around restlessly. "We've been instructed to escort you to the Adventurer's guild," he explained.

"To escort us? We'd be fine on our own, though," I said.

"Orders are orders," the soldier replied.

Hmm. I guess this came straight from the top, then. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all seemed pretty put off by our escort and grumbled constantly about it, but I managed to talk them into not acting up any more than that, thankfully.

As we walked, I questioned the soldiers about a wide variety of matters. Apparently, they were the fourth division of the town's standing force, and were in charge of watching over the north gate, which I'd happened to land closest to. They wouldn't explain *exactly* what was going on, but I was able to put together a more-or-less complete picture from the bits and pieces they did tell me. In short, the Adventurer's guild had received my message about our imminent visit, and had passed the information along to the local military, who were in charge of keeping the town safe and who took the news with all the grace one might expect from a town guard thrust into their current predicament, which is to say, none. After all, they'd abruptly learned that a Fenrir and an ancient dragon would be rolling into town at any moment!

The Fenrir on its own would've been possible for them to cope with. It was rare, but some adventuring tamers *did* tame large wolf-like monsters, and a few of those adventurers had paid Ronkainen visits in the past. The dragon, however, was unprecedented, and would without question throw the local populace into a state of panic. The higher-ups in the town's military had decided that if they couldn't stop us from paying them a visit, they could at least make sure that we were kept under a highly visible escort as we made our way through the streets. Then, once they'd handed us off to the Adventurer's guild, we would officially no longer be *their* responsibility.

I had to admit that having an escort of armed guards surrounding us *would* probably help keep the locals from freaking out, even if it did make them more curious about us than ever in the process. But while I could understand the thought process behind it all, I personally didn't think the end result would be all that different from if I'd just put on my usual "It's fine! They're my familiars! Everything's perfectly okay!" routine and shouted my way to the guild, like

always.

Judging by the glimpses I got of Ronkainen through the gaps in the soldiers' formation, it didn't have the vaguely European vibe that Karelina and most of the other towns I'd visited in this world so far tended to lean toward. It was right on the border between Leonhardt and the nearby cluster of smaller nations, and I suspected that was why it had a somewhat eclectic feel to its design in a way that reminded me of some cities in Southeast Asia. I'd heard that it could be a pretty rough town, but at a glance, I actually thought it seemed like it'd be a fun place to look around, and decided to take a stroll and sightsee a little if I got the chance. But only if I was sure it'd be safe, of course!

Eventually, we reached our destination. "Welcome to the Ronkainen Adventurer's guild! We've been expecting you!" shouted the guildmaster, a somewhat foppish-looking man with a medium build and a big gray-streaked mustache. It seemed he'd been waiting to welcome us, and in doing so he'd earned us the stares of every single adventurer who happened to be present.



"Now then, if I may, I'd like to get right to the matter at hand," the guildmaster said, wasting no time after we stepped into his office on the second floor.

Between Fel and Gon, who'd shrunk down considerably but was still roughly Fel's size, the room was packed to its limits. Sui was riding on Fel's head, by the way, and Dora-chan on Gon's. I squeezed my way between my two extra-large familiars to take a seat, and the guildmaster jumped right into talking about a quest he wanted us to deal with.

Hmm. I mean, I only came to this town to buy a new magic stove, really...but then again, Karelina's guildmaster did ask me to help clear out all those quests that the various guilds have been sitting on for ages since nobody else can handle them. I guess I can spare the time.

The foppish-looking guildmaster, who was apparently named Orson, explained that while one would *think* that Ronkainen's economy was founded on trade, being situated by the border with so many smaller nations, the region had actually prospered by way of production, thanks to the blessings of a large river called the Eremej situated nearby. The local adventurers were apparently more reliant on the river than anyone, and made their living hunting the monsters that populated its waters. Being as large as it was, however, dangerous monsters that

the locals couldn't handle occasionally made their homes in the Eremej—and that, in short, was what Orson was hoping we could take care of for him.

"At this particular moment we have a kelpie, a black tyrant alligator, and a mad berserker crab all infesting the Eremej River," Orson explained.

A kelpie? Aren't those aquatic horses that eat people, or something like that? Black tyrant alligators and mad berserker crabs were both a little easier for me to picture, on account of the normal animals in their names.

"The mad berserker crab issue is especially pressing, so I'm hoping that you might take that quest on as soon as you can, if you don't mind," Orson said with an apologetic glance.

"I know of these crabs," Fel said out loud. **"They are, as a rule, meek and passive. Did you do something to provoke it?"**

Orson flinched, caught off guard by the fact that Fel had spoken to him so suddenly, but being a guildmaster, he wasn't the sort of man to lose his composure over such a thing and kept the conversation going without betraying too much surprise.

"Yes, I'm afraid a certain group of *idiots* with delusions of grandeur decided to try their luck against it," Orson said with a contemptuous scowl.

I asked for the details, and Orson explained that a group of four young noblemen who'd registered as adventurers for a lark had hired a B-ranked adventurer and gone out to harass the mad berserker crab. The crab was only a C-ranked monster, and typically its kind spent their time passively minding their own business in the muddy riverbed, but they were known to go on rampages when attacked, and in *that* state, they were roughly as dangerous as your typical A-ranked monster. Even worse, once provoked, mad berserker crabs were known to remain on the warpath for as long as a month, or sometimes even longer.

"It's been twenty days since it started, and there's still been no sign of it cooling down," Orson said. The crab had been a serious impediment to the local adventurers' activities, and they'd started pestering the guild to bring *somebody* in to get rid of it ASAP. Unfortunately for them, the mad berserker crab in question was an especially large specimen and unambiguously fell into A-rank territory. "But even if we put out a quest for our local A-rankers, none of them are around right now to take it. Talk about lousy timing..."

Then, just when the guildmaster was at his wits' end, I happened to make my way into town. Hence why it was now up to me to take care of the issue, I supposed.

«So, what do you think?» I asked my familiars telepathically.

«I see little reason to refuse. Crabs of that kind are delicious, after all,»
Fel said.

«Oh, are they? In that case, I shan't object either!» Gon agreed with a nod.

«Same here,» Dora-chan added.

«Sui either!» the slime piped up. The second tasty food entered the equation, everyone suddenly became perfectly enthusiastic about the excursion.

“All right, then,” I said. “We’ll take on the quest and deal with your rampaging crab.”

A smile of relief spread across Orson’s face, but a moment later he seemed to remember he wasn’t quite finished. “What about the kelpie and black tyrant alligator, though?” he asked.

Oh, right. Forgot about those. Kelpies were B-ranked monsters, and there were parties in the area who could deal with one, but since the only material worth harvesting from them was their hide, everyone had decided that the effort wasn’t worth the payout and refused to take the quest. That being said, kelpies were also prone to attack out of nowhere and a fair number of casualties had already been reported, so it had become increasingly clear that *someone* would have to deal with it before long.

Black tyrant alligators, meanwhile, were ferocious A-ranked monsters that were dangerous enough to border on S-rank territory. They were also huge, though, which made them easy to spot from a distance and run away from, as long as you weren’t dumb enough to let them get too close. Thanks to that, the one in this area hadn’t done much damage yet, and the guild had decided that the kelpies and mad berserker crab were the more pressing problems. A monster near the top of the A-rank echelons was a target that only a very high-ranked party of adventurers could take on, in any case, and the task had been pushed farther and farther down the road as a result. That meant that if we *didn’t* deal with it, the quest would probably just keep getting postponed, and Orson was very hopeful we’d take it on.

«What do you guys think? Feel like fighting a kelpie and a black tyrant alligator?» I asked.

“A horse of the sea, is it? You’d hardly believe how bad those creatures taste,” Gon said with a grimace. Orson must’ve been put on guard by Fel speaking earlier, since he didn’t even flinch this time.

“Indeed, they are far from edible. The thick hide of black alligators, however, conceals an abundance of delectable flesh beneath,” said Fel.

“True, true. Those *are* altogether decent,” Gon agreed as he closed his eyes, presumably reminiscing about how black tyrant alligators tasted.

Wait, does this mean that both of them have tried eating kelpies and black tyrant alligators already...? Is there anything they haven't eaten? They sure are making the most of those extra-long life spans.

«Oh, are they? If both of you think it's good stuff, then there's gotta be something to say for it! I'm getting interested,» Dora-chan said.

«Sui wants to try eating one too!» Sui added.

Yeah, I saw that coming.

“Then the matter is settled. We shall hunt your black alligator and your seabound horse.”

“No objections from me!”

«I'm down for it too!»

«Sui too!»

Fel and Gon had spoken out loud, so there was no need for me to relay the message to Orson this time. He breathed a sigh of relief at the news, and flashed me a grin.

I was planning on paying a visit to the local Merchant's guild, like I usually did whenever I reached a new town, and asked Orson where it was located. He explained that it was quite close—just five buildings away, in fact—and offered to escort me there.

“I'm sure the process will be much quicker with me around,” he noted, then explained that since there *was* a fairly substantial amount of trade that passed through the city, on top of the river-related industries, the Merchant's guild was perpetually bustling, and in the worst case I could end up waiting around for hours on end before anyone decided to see me. Having the guildmaster of the Adventurer's guild with me, however, would make them much more likely to let me jump the queue.

Orson explained that he truly didn't mind helping me out like this—I *was* dealing with his most troublesome quests, after all... Though of course, I noted internally that my familiars would be the ones doing all the real fighting as he led me out the door and toward the Merchant's guild.



Ronkainen's Merchant's guild was exactly as jam-packed as I'd been led to expect, but thanks to Orson's presence, the process of getting in and making

myself known went remarkably smoothly. The fact that Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui were all with me sent anyone who saw them running off in the opposite direction, of course, which probably helped as well. In any case, I managed to get in and rent a house for my stay in town without too much trouble.

I didn't know if it was because Orson was there, or if the Merchant's guild associate had just decided to pull out all the stops for me, but one way or another I ended up with a very nice house to stay in. It had been built for a wealthy merchant, supposedly, and featured an astonishing seventeen bedrooms. It was also located in a relatively friendly district of town, and was fairly close to the Adventurer's guild as well.

The only downside was that its yard was a bit smaller than my familiars were used to, but it still earned my approval in spite of that deficiency—especially since none of the other houses available to me had a larger one, so there weren't any better options on the table. And, I mean, even if it wasn't quite as big as the yards of the last couple places we'd rented recently, it was still wide enough to fit an entire soccer pitch, so from my perspective it was more than sufficient.

Considering the sheer scale of the house, it was no surprise that it came with a proportionally enormous price tag. Staying there for one week would cost me a whopping 117 gold coins. It was steep, sure, but I had a few quests to take care of, *and* my most important mission of all—buying a new magic stove—so I decided to suck it up and rent the place for the full week. The representative I was speaking to offered me a discount for renting the place on the spot and lowered the price to 115 gold, but when I tried to pay, Orson stepped in, said that the Adventurer's guild would foot the bill, and proceeded to haggle the price down another five gold coins.

If you're going to haggle for me, then the least I could do is actually pay the bill in the end! I was also a little worried that if the guild was paying for my stay in town, they'd feel empowered to shovel even *more* high-ranking quests onto my plate. I was willing to deal with the three they'd already given me, but I wasn't going to forget that my new magic stove was my highest priority!

With that, our lodgings in Ronkainen were secured and our first day in town wound to a close.



“Come on, guys, do we really have to go *now*? We only just got here yesterday! Couldn't we take just *one* day to rest first?” I moaned.

I had started the day by pulling out some ginger-fried dungeon pork bowls that I'd made back at home for breakfast, then poured everyone some soda for dessert. That was when my familiars started insisting that we should go out and take care of the quests that the Adventurer's guild had given us right away.

"I have no need for rest," Fel said. **"A day spent idle would be a day spent in boredom. Moreover, it has been some time since I've tasted the likes of our quarry, and I wish to eat it soon."**

"Agreed!" Gon said with a nod. "You called it a mad berserker crab, I believe? I've never eaten a monster like that before, and can hardly wait to try it!"

«I know, right? When you hear about a dish like that, you just *gotta* go try it right away,» Dora-chan said.

«Sui's excited too!» Sui squealed.

I let out an internal sigh. Of course that would be their reasoning. When all was said and done, my familiars were driven by their appetites above all else. I couldn't fault their consistency, at least, and slumped my head in resignation as I watched them chatter away about our upcoming crab hunt. *Man, I thought I'd get at least one day to take it easy! Ughh, just look at how excited they are! I pretty much have to go now. I don't have any other choice.*

"Stop dawdling! Let us be off!" Fel urged.

"Okay, okay, I'll get ready now," I sighed. "Oh, but just so you know, we'll have to stop by the guild on our way out of town."

"Why?"

"To ask where the mad berserker crab *is*, obviously!"

"There is no need. I can sense the creature's presence."

"Yes, indeed! We have no reason to go to the trouble, my liege," Gon agreed.

Oh, yes, I almost forgot that the elder ones are playing on extra-easy mode!
Silly me!

«Man, I can't *wait* to get a bite of that thing!»

«Sui's so excited!»

Looks like those two are really taking it easy too, huh?

"Are you not ready yet?"

"Let us be off, my liege!"

Agggh, stop rushing me, please! "Okay, okay! Just one second!"

And so we set out for the Eremej River right after breakfast to hunt down a mad berserker crab.

«**I sense it. Over there!**» Fel barked telepathically. I'd been clinging to his back, and sat up just enough to give myself a view of what was ahead of us. I was greeted with the sight of a vast expanse of water.

“That’s the Eremej River...?” I muttered. I’d been picturing, well, a *river*, but not one of this scale. It was so wide that I almost couldn’t see the other shore, and if someone had told me that it was a sea, I doubt I would’ve even questioned it.

I was a little overwhelmed by the sheer size of the river, but Fel’s telepathic voice soon snapped me out of my stupor. «**What are you gaping at? The river matters not. Our prey is over there!**» he said, gesturing with his snout.

I turned to look, and... *Huh? That’s weird. My vision must be acting up because I had my eyes clamped shut for so long.* I rubbed my eyes, and took another look at what was before us.

...Hm. Hmm. Is my depth perception completely shot, or something? Because it sure looks like there’s a crab the size of a semitruck hanging out by the riverbank! It was outrageously, preposterously huge, and the snap of its massive pincers clamping shut was so loud, it practically shook the surrounding landscape.

“Okay, seriously, that’s *too big* to be real, isn’t it?” I said in a daze. It was a monster, sure, but that just wasn’t a good enough justification for a *crab* to be that huge.

«**Indeed, it is larger than the one I ate previously. This will be a substantial meal,**» Fel said.

«A monster of that size is sure to fill even *my* stomach!» Gon added.

«You said it! Dunno about that shell it’s got, though. Doesn’t look like it’d be very nice to sink your teeth into,» Dora-chan noted.

«That’s okay! Even if it’s hard, Sui’ll eat it as long as it’s tasty!» Sui declared.

«**Ah, the shell, yes. It was not inedible, but neither did it taste especially good. It is the meat within the shell that is exceptional.**»

I’m sorry, Fel, but does that mean you actually ate its shell the last time you took down one of these things? Then again, all of my familiars had been eating their prey raw until they met me, so it sort of stood to reason that they’d have chowed down on a shell or two.

“Just for the record, you’re not supposed to eat crab shells! Only the meat inside them is edible!” I said.

«**Hm. Very well, then. We shall leave that part to you, and partake of**

the dish you make with it,» said Fel.

“I know, I know,” I sighed.

«Grah hah hah! Now that’s something to look forward to!» Gon exclaimed.

«Right? Let’s hurry up and take it down!» Dora-chan agreed.

«Sui’ll pew-pew it right away!»

“Wha—Sui?!” I yelled as the slime leapt ahead of the rest of us, bouncing at a rapid pace toward the mad berserker crab on its own. “Guys!”

«Yeah, I see it too! Dang it, Sui, not fair! No running off on your own!» Dora-chan shouted as he flew after Sui.

«Oh? I see Sui and Dora both have energy to spare!» Gon commented.

Fel let out a sigh. «**Truly, traveling with the likes of them is a trial...**»

“Hey! Fel, Gon, what’re you doing?! Go save Sui already!” I shouted as I jumped off Fel’s back and tried to physically push them into action.

«**You know full well of Sui’s strength,**» Fel said with a roll of his eyes.

«Indeed, my liege,» Gon added. «Sui is perfectly formidable on its own.»

“I know that, yeah, but it’s *also* still just a kid! Now get out there!” I snapped, pushing even harder than before.

«**If you insist,**» Fel sighed as he plodded off to help Sui.

«You’d do well to try and worry less, my liege,» Gon said, matching Fel’s pace. I stayed at a distance, myself, though I could still hear their voices as the fight began.

«You won’t hit Sui like *that!*» Sui shouted gleefully as the mad berserker crab snapped its pincers in a fruitless attempt to bisect the little slime as it rushed between its legs.

«Hah! I can dodge slow-ass attacks like these too, no problem!» Dora-chan said as the crab turned its attention to him, doing its best to pluck him out of the air.

«Here goooes!» Sui said. While the crab’s attention was focused on Dora-chan, the slime extended a tentacle to go on the offensive.

«Ah, Sui! You’re cutting in line again!» Dora-chan protested.

«**Sui, wait!**» Fel shouted. «**Do not attack it with acid! Any flesh you melt away is flesh we will not be able to eat once the battle is done! Bring it down through means that will not befoul its meat!**»

«Hmm... Okay, then Sui’ll use water magic! Take this!»

Pschooo!

Before I even knew what was happening, the crab had tipped over and fallen onto its back, prone and unmoving.

«Yippee! Sui did it!» Sui exclaimed, bounding about ecstatically in front of the fallen mad berserker crab.

“Huh? Wait, what? *How...?*” I stammered in bewilderment. Whatever Sui had done, I hadn’t been able to follow it at *all*. The crab clearly wasn’t a threat anymore, though, so I ran over to catch up with the others.

«**Hmm. You bored a hole through the beast, but only a small one. Well fought, Sui,**» Fel said as he investigated the crab’s massive corpse.

«Hooray! Uncle Fel says Sui did a good job!» Sui yelled with a remarkably high bounce of glee.

«You *are* quite skilled in combat, it seems!»

«Hee hee! Old Man Gon praised Sui too!» Sui squealed, unable to contain its joy as it bounced higher still.

Dora-chan, meanwhile, was sulking. «Sheesh, take all the fun for yourself, why don’t you? That wasn’t fair, Sui!»

«Was too! Sui got there first!»

«Well, *I’m* taking down the next monster!»

«Aww, but Sui wants to beat the next one too!»

«Too bad, ’cause it’s mine!»

«It’s Sui’s!»

Sui and Dora-chan were both leaning toward each other, their faces almost colliding. “Okay, guys, that’s enough,” I said as I stepped in to pull them apart. “Man, though, that thing’s *huge*,” I added as I looked up at the expired mad berserker crab. It sure wasn’t every day I got to inspect a crab the size of a semi. “How’d you beat it, Sui?”

«Umm, well, Uncle Fel said Sui couldn’t melt it, so Sui used Water magic to beat it instead!»

“Water magic?” I parroted.

«Yeah! Sui took water and pshooed it into the big crabbie!»

It... “pschooed” water at it? What, like some sort of ultra-high-pressure water gun? But wait...

I gave the crab’s shell a couple knocks. “This thing’s *gotta* be as hard as some metals, at least, and you shot through it with a jet of water? How much power must it have taken to do that?” I muttered. Sui might’ve been ecstatic, but *I* was just getting more worried than ever that its only available role models were turning it into more and more of a battle-hungry warrior.



«Now then, let us eat!»

«Indeed! The stage is yours, my liege!»

«I'm still pissed that Sui stole my kill, but that doesn't mean I'm not gonna eat it.»

«Sui'll eat lots of the crabbie Sui beat!»

All of my familiars were excited as could be to get a mouthful of crab—so excited that they'd forgotten the obvious. “What? No, wait, what're you guys saying? We can't eat it *now!* We have to bring it back to the guild to prove that we took it down!”

“Hey, they never said we had to bring back *all* of it! Who'll even notice if we sneak a bite now?” Dora-chan said. The other three quickly piped up in agreement, but I still wasn't sold.

“How do you expect me to even cook it? My only magic stove's still broken, so cooking it out here is a no-go right now!” I pointed out.

I'd appraised the mad berserker crab, and the info box had noted that its flesh was “exquisite when boiled.” I was positive that boiling it whole would produce the best possible results, but the question was how exactly I was supposed to go about boiling a crab the size of a semitruck. I couldn't think of any good way to cook the meat as it was, which meant I'd have to do it in smaller pieces, and even that would be a trial using the small portable burners I had on hand.

“See what I mean? Let's head back to the guild and have them take a look at it first. *Then* we can take our time cooking it up!”

«Hmph!»

«A shame, truly.»

«Peh!»

«Booo!»

“C'mon, guys, quit sulking! We're just taking it to the guild to have them *see* it. We'll get it back right afterward,” I reassured my chowhounds. They finally agreed, albeit reluctantly, and I shoved the mad berserker crab's corpse into my Item Box.

Just as I was getting ready to head back to town, though, Dora-chan piped up again. «Hey, we've still got plenty of time, right? Let's go take out the next one too!»

«Hmm,» Gon muttered thoughtfully. «Yes, I suppose if we can't eat the monster we just defeated now, I wouldn't mind continuing our hunt for a time.»

«A sound point, yes. We have come this far already, so it would be an efficient use of our time to dispatch the seabound horse and the black alligator while we are here. And any other delicious-looking monsters we may happen to encounter along the way, for that matter.»

«Yaaay! Sui gets to beat up more baddies!»

«Oh, no you don't! The next one's *mine*, remember? Keep your grubby tentacles off of it!»

“W-W-Wait a second!” I yelped. “I can tell you’re all very excited to deal with the other quests too, but we don’t have to do *all* of them today! We dealt with the crab, so why not pack up and go home for the afternoon?”

Unfortunately, my argument fell on deaf ears. According to Fel, «**All that awaits us at home is boredom,**» and the others were eager to chime in with their agreement.

“Uh, umm... O-Oh, I know! The crab! You want to eat it, right?!” I said, grasping for whatever straws I could find.

«Yes, indeed,» Gon said. «We’ll be partaking of the crab for dinner tonight, won’t we, my liege?» Once again, the others piped up to agree. They were in the mood to hunt, and if there was any possible way I could stop them at this point, I hadn’t the slightest clue what it was.

I let out a bedraggled sigh. “Okay,” I said. “In that case, I guess we can deal with the kelpie first. It’s supposed to attack from out of nowhere, though. Do you think you can sense a monster that’s underwater?”

«**Hmh. Such a thing can indeed be...challenging,**» Fel admitted. «**It is not beyond me, but water dulls the precision of my senses.**»

I’d come to think of Fel as a master at detecting monsters, but apparently water—or at least water on the scale of the massive Eremej River—posed difficulties even for him.

«I could say the same, I’m afraid,» Gon said. «Though of course, I would sense it if it were nearby.»

«**Likewise,**» Fel said with a nod.

Having to get close to sense the kelpie meant that this task was going to be a pain. The river was so wide that you couldn’t see the opposite shore in some places, and I had a bad feeling that if the kelpie were in the middle of it, it would slip past Fel and Gon’s senses. It was looking like we’d have to buckle down and deal with the kelpie quest the old-fashioned way...but that was when Dora-chan spoke up again.

«What, is that really a problem? Why don’t we just fly down the middle of

the river?» he suggested.

“Huh? What do you *mean*, fly down the middle of the river?” I asked. “You and Gon can do that, sure, but the rest of us would have to wait on the shore! I don’t wanna make the two of you search for the kelpie on your own. Or are you expecting us to swim along with you in monster-infested waters? Because I don’t think that’s happening.”

«**It most certainly is not! I will never!**» barked Fel, our resident water-hater.

«I’ve no objections to conducting the search from the air,» Gon said.

«However, if we fly too low we’ll disturb the water’s surface, which may drive the monsters away from us.»

He had a point there. Scaring all the monsters away would render our whole operation pointless.

«What’re you people *talking* about?» Dora-chan asked incredulously. «Of course you wouldn’t have to swim. You have *Sui*! Don’t you remember that time we went to the ocean?»

“Oh!”

«**Ah!**»

It hit Fel and I at the same moment. *That’s right! Back when we went to that one seaside town, Berléand, Sui grew and we rode out onto the sea on its back!*

“Of course! Dora-chan’s right. How could we forget about *Sui*?!” I said.

«**Indeed! Sui does hold the answer!**» Fel agreed.

Suddenly, all eyes fell on our party’s slime. «What can *Sui* do?» *Sui* asked with a happy bounce, seemingly pleased by all the attention.

Gon, who’d only joined our party recently, was the exception. He cocked his head and said, «Hmm. I haven’t the faintest idea what you are talking about. What *is* it that *Sui* can do?»

“It’s kind of a long story,” I said, then gave Gon a very quick rundown on what had happened back in Berléand.

«Oh, did it? I see! In other words, with *Sui* on our side, we can tackle any seabound monster without difficulty!» Gon said.

“Yup, pretty much,” I confirmed.

«You heard ‘em, *Sui*!» Dora-chan said. «Grow bigger, let us get on you, and jump into the river!»

«*Oooh!* *Sui* finally remembers! You mean like when *Sui* got big so you could ride *Sui* in the salty water!» *Sui* exclaimed. Dora-chan’s prompting had finally made it realize what we were going for, and it took action at once.

«Here goes! Mnhhh!» Sui grunted as it grew to a tremendous size.
«Masterrr, look! Sui's big!»

“You sure are! Everyone’s gonna climb up now, okay?”
«Yeaah!»

We set off down the Eremej River, surveying the waters from atop Sui’s enlarged back.

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«Ah, a fishie! Hiyah!» Sui shouted, then sent a tentacle piercing through a large fish that was swimming nearby. «Master, look! Sui caught another one!»

“Nice job! Just pass it over here... Whoa, that’s another heavy one!” I said as I heaved the fish—which looked to be about 1.3 meters long or so—into my Item Box.

The fish had whiskers like a catfish, its scales were rugged and armor-like, and it was apparently called an Eremej megalodoras. They were supposed to be one of the most popular species of fish to catch in the river—even though they were technically monsters—and appraising it informed me that it had light-colored flesh with a simple but appealing flavor profile. I figured I’d sauté or fry it for my familiars at some point. Thanks to Sui catching pretty much every fish it saw as it navigated the river, I had already amassed a stock of roughly thirty Eremej megalodorases in my Item Box, along with around twenty Eremej saratogas, which looked like arowanas and were also quite popular. People dried them out to preserve them, it seemed.



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All the fish in the world, however, couldn't make up for one simple fact.

"No sign of the kelpie, huh?" I sighed.

«No kelpies at all,» Sui said.

«You got that right,» Dora-chan added. «Hey, Fel, you picking up anything?»

«**I have not sensed any trace of it. Have you fared better, Gon?**»

«I'm afraid not. I haven't sensed so much as a single trace.»

"Guess we'd better keep heading down the river, then?" I suggested.

«Indeed,» Fel said. «**We have no choice but to keep moving along until we unveil our quarry.**»

Sui let itself be carried along by the river's gentle flow, drifting with us on its back, until finally...

«**Hm?**»

"What is it, Fel?"

«**I have found it.**»

«And I as well! It is here, no mistaking it,» Gon added. It seemed their senses had finally picked up on our target.

«**There—it lurks near the left bank. Move us in that direction, Sui.**»

«Okaaay!» Sui replied, then started navigating us to the left.

"Hmm?" I muttered as I peered out toward the bank. "Wait, are there people on the riverbank over there? Adventurers, maybe?"

A group of five individuals was standing on the bank. They were carrying what looked like harpoons with cords attached to them, hunting for some sort of prey I couldn't pick out.

«It would seem our prey has found some prey of its own,» Gon commented.

"Prey? You mean the kelpie's going after them?"

«Precisely.»

"Seriously?! You could've mentioned that sooner!" I yelped, then stood up and started shouting at the adventurers on the shore at the top of my lungs. "Hey, you five! There's a kelpie after you! Run!"

My voice seemed to reach them, judging from how they immediately looked out across the river at us in confusion, but at that exact moment, the kelpie emerged from the water with a splash, directly in front of their group. It let out a monstrous, triumphant whinny as it bore down on its prey. Four of them managed to get clear of the river in time, but the fifth, a woman, had stumbled as she fled and was now trembling in terror on her backside, left behind as the

kelpie loomed closer and closer.

“Oh, crap! We’ve gotta help her!” I shouted. Just as I was starting to panic, a tiny silhouette shot past me like a bullet, faster than the eye could see.

«This one’s mine!» Dora-chan’s voice rang out in my mind.

«Aww, that’s not fair!» Sui whined.

“*Dora-chan!*” I shouted.

«I’ll bring you down with a single shot, you horse-faced loser!»

Shwick! Dora-chan manifested a thick, pointed ice stake and rammed it directly through the kelpie’s midsection. The monster let out a high-pitched, shrieking whinny of pain and collapsed, dead as a doornail.

«Arright!» Dora-chan shouted, doing some celebratory flips in the air.

«**I expected nothing less from you, of course,**» Fel said.

«Of course,» Gon agreed with a nod. Neither of them seemed even remotely surprised by the pixie dragon’s one-hit victory.

«Hmmmph! Sui wanted to beat that one up!» Sui grumbled.

«Yeah, well, *you* took out the crab before, so this makes us even!» Dora-chan jabbed back.

I felt a little bad for ignoring my familiars’ celebration, but there was something I still had to take care of. I turned my attention toward the adventurers on the riverbank. The five of them were just standing there, staring at us with their jaws practically touching the ground.

Oooof, yeah, they’re totally frozen, aren’t they? Explaining ourselves sounds like a pain, so let’s just grab the kelpie and get out of here before we have to bother.

I quickly stashed the kelpie corpse in my Item Box, then made myself scarce with my familiars in tow.



«Awwright, we’re killing this! Let’s keep it up and take out that black alligator while we’re at it!» Dora-chan shouted. He’d gotten a little worked up after his victory over the kelpie, but I quickly slammed on the brakes.

“Nuh-uh, not this time! Haven’t we done enough for today?” I said. “The mad berserker crab was the only urgent quest, and the kelpie was about to kill someone so that was important too, but we already dealt with those!”

Orson had told me that black tyrant alligators were ferocious and *almost* tough enough to qualify as S-ranked monsters, but also that they were so big that

nobody would fall prey to them unless they made some seriously ill-advised decisions and decided to get up close on purpose. In other words, there was absolutely no reason for us to rush out and clear every single quest we'd been given in a single day.

«**What nonsense are you subjecting us to?**» Fel asked. «**Dora is correct. Our next step will be to eliminate the black alligator as well. After all, it is already close by.**»

«Yes, Fel's right,» Gon added. «It's just ahead, in fact! Monsters that live in the water are a trial to track down, so I believe slaying it now while we know where it is will be far more efficient than having to find it all over again, my liege.»

Ugh! I hate it when they're right... I hadn't been accounting for how Fel and Gon's ability to sense monsters dropped when water entered the picture. That meant that we had to get much closer to our targets than usual in order to find them, and if we let our conveniently located quarry get away this time, we might have to trawl the whole Eremej River in order to find it again. That sounds like just as much of a pain as dealing with it now. Hmm...

“All right, I guess we have no choice. We'll keep hunting,” I sighed.

«That's more like it!» Dora-chan shouted.

«Yaaay!» Sui exclaimed. «Sui wants to fight the next one!»

«**No. I shall slay the black alligator,**» Fel said. «**It lurks far beneath the river's surface, and neither of you have attacks capable of reaching it.**»

«Booo,» Dora-chan and Sui protested in unison.

«Oh, don't be like that,» Gon said. «Do you realize how deep the river is? Just for reference, if I were to return to my full size and sink into it, I could fully submerge myself with room to spare!»

My jaw dropped. “Wait, seriously? It's *that* deep?!”

«It is indeed! Take care not to fall in, my liege.»

I shot a nervous glance at the river and gulped. I could swim as well as the next guy, to be clear, but that only applied to water that *wasn't* infested with a whole ecosystem of bloodthirsty monsters. *One misstep, and it might be curtains for me...*

«**I hope the two of you take heed of Gon's warning as well, Dora, Sui,**» Fel said. «**This is precisely why I will be handling the black alligator.**»

«Tch! Okay, fine. If it's *that* deep, then maybe you've got a point. Maaan, this blows! Thought I'd get a shot at the next one,» Dora-chan grumbled, reluctantly resigning himself to the fact that our next target was off the table for

him.

«Mnhh... Sui can't reach it either,» Sui sadly conceded. I got the sense that it had actually tried stretching a tentacle out as far as it could go, and hadn't managed to reach the bottom.

“That's okay, though, isn't it? You each got to hunt a monster already, didn't you?” I noted.

«Yeah, true enough. Guess it's not our turn anyway,» Dora-chan admitted with a shrug.

«Sui got to beat up the crabbie, so Sui can wait,» said the slime.

“Ha ha! That's more like it! And don't forget, we get to eat crab once we're back in town! I bet it's gonna be tasty,” I reminded them.

«Oh, hell yes!»

«Yaaay!»

«Well said, my liege! You heard the man, Fel. Make it snappy!»

«Oh, calm yourselves. Forward, Sui! The black alligator lies just ahead.»

«Okaaay!»

Sui followed Fel's directions and bobbed its way down the Eremej.

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«**Stop here, Sui.**»

«Okay!» Sui replied, bringing us to an immediate halt.

“Is it nearby?” I asked.

«It is,» Gon answered in Fel's place. «Specifically, it is directly beneath us.»

I looked down. Sui was transparent enough to see through, but even so, the water was far too deep for me to see the riverbed. I could pick out the shadowy outlines of a few fish, but beyond them was a seemingly bottomless void.

«So anyway, just how big *is* this black alligator thing gonna be?» Dora-chan asked, seemingly out of idle curiosity.

«**Significantly larger than the crab we slew earlier,**» Fel replied.

«Oooh, seriously? Man, why's this stupid thing gotta hang out on the riverbed? I would've given it *such* a beating,» Dora-chan grumbled bitterly.

Wait a second. It's significantly larger than the crab? But that crab was the size of a semitruck! This world just loves reminding me how terrifying it can be sometimes... “So, how're you planning on taking it down, Fel?” I asked.

«Using Lightning magic,» Fel replied.

“Huh? Wait, don’t tell me you’re—”

«Indeed. I will strike the river with an especially potent bolt of lightning.»

I’m sorry, what? “You can’t possibly be telling me that you’re going to hit this river with a bolt of lightning so powerful it’ll kill a black tyrant alligator that’s all the way down on the riverbed?”

«Yes.»

I gaped at Fel. Fel stared back.

“Nooope! Nope, nope, absolutely not! ‘Yes’ my rear! That’s so far out of the question, it’s not even funny!”

«Why?»

“Oh my god, you’re *seriously* asking that?! Let me spell it out for you: if your spell’s powerful enough to kill a monster at the bottom of the river, then there’s no way that all of us up on *top* of the river will come out unscathed! And that’s only the *start* of all the reasons why this is an awful idea!”

«I shall raise a barrier. We will feel nothing,» said Fel, who clearly still didn’t see the issue.

«Yes, I was thinking the same thing! In fact, my liege, I will handle the barrier and personally ensure your safety,» Gon added.

They really don’t get it at all, do they? “Okay, sure, we might be fine, but there’s still a whole list of *other* huge problems!” I wailed.

«What problems would those be, my liege?»

«Yes, quite. What issue do you take with my methods?»

Oh my god, you two, please! Think about what it’s like to not be an outrageously powerful super monster for just one second, I’m begging you! “Okay, think about it like this: if you strike the river with lightning powerful enough to kill a black tyrant alligator, then what will happen to all the *other* monsters nearby?”

«They will perish, of course,» Fel replied blithely.

«Yes, naturally,» Gon agreed.

Okay, so they understand that much, at least. What they don’t get is why that would be a humongous issue. “Well, I may not know what the area of effect of your Lightning magic is *exactly*, but considering how your magic usually turns out, I think it’s pretty safe to assume it’d be pretty darn huge. Am I right?”

«Well, when you put it that way, I suppose it would be.»

Excuse me, Fel, why do you look proud about this? I’m not complimenting

you, for your information! “And *that* means that every single monster in the area would die instantly, right? What do you think would happen then?”

«I could not care less. The deaths of weaklings are of no concern to me, no matter how many are slain, though I would, of course, ensure that we secure the corpses of any that are worth eating.»

«Yes, I would say the same. So, my liege? What’s the problem?»

“Oh, for the—*that’s* the problem! And it’s a huge one! Listen up, you two...”

Fel and Gon just weren’t getting it, so I more or less had to pound the explanation directly into their skulls. In short, I told them that Fel’s spell would kill the black tyrant alligator, *plus* literally every other monster within the spell’s area of effect. That sort of collateral damage, in turn, would cause *major* issues for the adventurers of Ronkainen. Most of them made a living by hunting the monsters in the river, after all.

Adventurers also tended to live paycheck to paycheck, which meant that having monsters around to hunt was essentially a matter of life and death. Relatively high-ranked adventurers could simply pick up and move to another town or hunt land-bound monsters instead, but low-ranking adventurers would have a hard time doing the same.

“In other words, the plan you’re proposing would mean throwing most of the local adventurer population into poverty, in the worst case. And if *that’s* not bad enough for you, all of those adventurers are going to know exactly who was responsible for their troubles, and would hold one hell of a grudge against us for it.”

«Mnhhh...» Fel and Gon groaned in unison.

“Stories about this kind of thing spread like wildfire, you know? We wouldn’t be welcome in *any* Adventurer’s guild, no matter where we went, and *that* means I wouldn’t be able to get ahold of your precious meat nearly as easily.”

«B-But, why?»

“Do you really have to ask, Gon? It’s obvious; I can butcher small animals with a little effort, but the big ones are totally beyond my ability to handle on my own. Asking the guild to deal with them is the only way we can get our hands on their meat. You don’t seriously think I could cut up a black tyrant alligator on my own, do you? That’s *never* happening.”

Everyone was silent for a moment.

«Hey, Fel. Don’t even *think* about going crazy with that lightning crap. I’m *never* gonna let you live it down if you mess up our meat options,» Dora-chan

said.

«No more meat? Sui doesn't want that! Sui wants to eat lots and lots of meat!» Sui whined. I hadn't really noticed the two of them listening to what I was saying, but the moment they realized what was at stake, they jumped right into the conversation.

«Yes, you should refrain from any especially large lightning strikes, Fel,» Gon said, laying a heavy forefoot on Fel's shoulder. «I'm sure you understood my liege's explanation just as well as I did, and will agree that you have no grounds to protest.»

Oh, dang! I even got through to Gon?!

«**Yes, the point has been made,**» Fel grunted with an irate scowl as he brushed Gon's forefoot away. «**I will restrain myself and ensure that my spell does not kill any of the surrounding monsters outright. Now, raise your barrier, Gon. It is time.**»

Then, before I had a chance to interject, a bolt of lightning crashed into the surface of the water with an ear-splitting boom!

“H-Holy crap! You could've warned me!” I yelled as the crackling of electricity faded away.

Within moments, so many stunned fish had floated to the surface that you could barely even see the water anymore. And then...

“O-Oooh, boy,” I said when the body of an enormous alligator finally broke the surface as well, its white, defenseless underbelly exposed to the open air. “Y-Yup, that's another big'un, all right...”

«**I held back, as you instructed me to. That, of course, means that unless the killing blow is dealt soon, it will regain consciousness.**»

“Huh? Wait...seriously?!” I shouted, starting to flail about in a panic.

«If you tell Dora or Sui to do the deed, they'll just end up bickering again,» Gon said. «I believe it would be best for you to finish it off personally, my liege.»

“What, *me*? Not one of you two?”

«**This course of action was your suggestion. It falls to you to see it through.**»

“I didn't suggest a course of action, I just pointed out the obvious!”

«**Hurry up.**»

“Oh, for—*fine!*” I shouted, before pulling one of my magic swords, Gram, out of my Item Box. I moved over to the edge of Sui's enlarged body, taking my time and crouching down to make sure I didn't fall off, then leaned over and

thrust my sword down at the black tyrant alligator. Gram slid right into its jaw, emerging a second later on the other side—I'd skewered the monster's head straight through.

The alligator let out a blood-curdling roar, and I gave my sword a twist, just to be extra sure I'd finished it off. It twitched violently and splashed up a storm in the process, but in the end, the enormous monster fell still.

"I... I did it," I said between heaving gasps.

«**Did what?**» Fel jabbed. «**All you have done is deal the killing blow to a foe that was all but finished. What have you accomplished here?**» he asked with a thoroughly fed up scowl.

"Well, excuse me for not living up to your expectations!" I countered. "You told me to finish off that huge alligator out of nowhere, and that it would wake up again right away if I didn't! I was freaking out!"

«**Yes, you were. In fact, you were the only one of us to fly into a panic.**»

Grr! Seriously, stop trying to judge me by your standards! I'm not like you bloodthirsty battle freaks!

In any case, I stowed the black tyrant alligator's corpse in my item box with some difficulty. It took everyone's help to pull the thing up by one of its forelegs and push it all the way in there, but we got it done in the end.

"Phew!" I said, wiping my brow after we finished. "By the way," I added as I surveyed the droves of fish still floating along on the surface of the river, "you're sure those aren't dead, right?"

«**Of course,**» Fel replied.

«Master, Master,» Sui said, «can we take all these fishies back with us?»

«Eh, some of 'em look like they'd be pretty gross. Let's leave those and take the tasty ones,» Dora-chan suggested.

"Yeah, we can't take *all* of them. Dora-chan's right. Let's just grab some of the better-tasting ones."

We chose a few varieties of fish, using my appraisal ability to figure out which ones would be tasty, and then everyone went out to gather them up. I wouldn't be suffering through any unfulfilled fish cravings anytime soon, it seemed...as long as I could satisfy myself with freshwater fish, anyway.

Chapter 3: Crab for Dinner

“Huh? I-I’m sorry, could you run that by me again?” Orson said, his mouth agape.

We’d returned to town after finishing our quests, and went straight to the Adventurer’s guild to report our success. A receptionist had called the guildmaster down, I had informed him that we’d finished, and his jaw had dropped, which brings us back to the present moment.

“Like I said, we hunted down the mad berserker crab, the kelpie, and the black tyrant alligator,” I repeated.

“All three of them?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“Yup.” Apparently, it was so hard for him to believe he felt the need to triple-check. “I have a feeling that showing you the bodies is going to be the quickest way of dealing with this, so if you wouldn’t mind getting the purchasing process started...?” I suggested.

That finally seemed to snap Orson back to reality. “Y-Yes, of course,” he said, then led us to a part of the guild I had grown very familiar with across its various branches: the storehouse.

“Okay, I’ll start with the mad berserker crab,” I said, then picked an empty section of the storehouse to dump the crab corpse onto. It tumbled out of my Item Box and landed on the floor with a heavy thud. Orson just stood there, mouth open, gazing up at the crab in stunned silence. “So, umm, we were actually planning on having this one for dinner, so I’m just gonna take it home with me, if that’s okay,” I added.

“Huh? You’re going to *eat it*!?” Orson shouted, his eyes as wide as dinner plates.

Do people not eat crabs in this part of the world, or something? “Yeah, that’s the plan. They’re supposed to be really tasty boiled,” I said.

“No, but—wait, that’s not the issue!” said Orson. “You can’t just *boil* it! Mad berserker crab shells are an incredibly precious resource! Armor and shields crafted from them are highly sought after!”

According to Orson, mad berserker crab shells in the hands of a skilled craftsman could be turned into armor even sturdier than the shells were in their natural state. They made for high-class armor that fetched quite an extravagant price. The shells were lighter than most metals, but significantly sturdier than leather. In fact, it supposedly rivaled even magic iron in terms of its sturdiness. Armor or shields made from it were the sort of equipment that every high-ranking adventurer hoped to own someday. Orson *desperately* wanted to buy the crab off me, and did his best to convince me, but unfortunately, I had other ideas.

“Sorry, but tasty food is my party’s top priority.”

«Indeed. We will eat the crab, though I could not care less about what becomes of its shell once we are finished.»

«Well said! I’ve been told these beasts are delicious, and I’ve waited a long time to try it for myself.»

«Yeah, seriously! No way in hell am I gonna let some twerp like this guy snatch it out from under our noses!»

«Sui’s gonna eat the crabbie!»

The pressure that my gluttonous quartet were exuding was downright palpable.

I gave Orson a shrug. “So, yeah, I think you get the picture. Feel free to confirm the kill, but we’ll be taking it back after that. This *is* the mad berserker crab that we were supposed to kill for the quest, right?”

“Y-Yes, it is,” said Orson. “There’s no mistake about that, considering its size.”

“Great! I’ll just put it away, then,” I said, then shoved the crab right back into my Item Box. Orson let out a little moan of regret, which made me *really* uncomfortable, but we’d already decided that we’d be eating the thing. It was set in stone, and I wasn’t going to let myself get guilted into changing my mind.

“And, next up’s the kelpie,” I continued, dumping the aquatic horse on the ground. It wasn’t nearly as oversized as the crab had been, but it *was* a solid fifty percent larger than a typical horse (and the horses in this world were a size larger than the racehorses people rode in my old world to begin with). “These taste pretty bad, supposedly, so this one’s all yours if you want it,” I added.

No sooner had the words left my mouth than Orson was calling in a squad of guild employees to haul the kelpie corpse away. It almost felt like they were worried we’d change our minds and claim it if they didn’t hustle, though since I genuinely had no use for it, they really didn’t have to bother.

According to Orson, “The hide’s the only part of a kelpie worth harvesting, but at the same time, those hides are *very* valuable.” Most adventurers tried to stay away from the monsters, so there weren’t very many pelts out on the open market, which was a shame since they were actually quite practical. Kelpie hides were totally waterproof and made for excellent wagon canopies, so there was a lot of demand for them in the merchant community.

Huh! That’s all news to me. “Well, the last one’s also the biggest,” I said. “Here it is—one black tyrant alligator! Its meat’s supposed to be really tasty, so I’d like to keep that, along with just a bit of its hide.”

I’d realized that some black tyrant alligator hide would make a great souvenir for Lambert, and had decided to bring just a bit of it back with me. I also wanted a little for myself, as well. Back when I was an office worker, I had always liked the idea of having some little accessory made out of gator leather, but the stuff was so expensive that I had never been able to fulfill that desire. Taking the gator down had reminded me of my old ambition, and since I had its hide on hand, I figured I might as well get something made out of it.

“Understood,” said Orson. “Now then, regarding your reward for the quests and your payment for the materials we’ll be purchasing...”

It seemed that Orson could put together our reward for the quests immediately, but assessing the materials we’d brought in would take about two or three days. I decided to keep things simple, and asked him to bundle all the payments together, which I would come to collect three days from now. I was in a bit of a hurry, after all, on account of team glutton’s incessant telepathic harassment campaign.

They were relentless, I swear. Every second I got a «**You are still not finished?**» or a «Hurry up!» or a «I could really go for some crab right now» echoing into my mind, though the worst by far was Sui’s tragic little «Masterrrr, Sui’s hungryyy!» Together, they drove me to hurry through my discussion with Orson, promise that I would come back in three days, and hustle out the door.

At my familiars’ urging, I mounted Fel while Sui and Dora-chan climbed aboard Gon’s back. Then we raced off down Ronkainen’s main street at a breakneck pace. The street in question was pretty crowded with pedestrians, but Fel and Gon running side by side had a way of prompting everyone before us to clear a path as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, I was busy mulling over how I could possibly go about boiling the mad berserker crab. An appraisal had specified that it would be “exquisite

when boiled,” so I was dead set on cooking it that way, no matter what. The only way I could think of to manage that would be to chop it up into pieces and boil those, but I knew that cutting a crab before you boiled it would rob it of its natural umami and result in a somewhat watery final dish, so I wanted to avoid doing so unless it really was my only option. *How else am I supposed to do it, though...?*

«Sui’s really excited to eat the crabbie, Master!» Sui happily transmitted into my mind as we ran along.

«Ha ha! Yeah, I bet you...wait a second.»

That was when it hit me: back in...the Dolan dungeon, probably? Whichever dungeon it was, we’d encountered a bunch of bee-like monsters called killer hornets there, and had taken them out by trapping their whole nest in an enormous orb of water. *Maybe we could do something similar here?*

«Hey, Fel, Gon,» I transmitted telepathically. «I just had an idea! Take us out of town again, okay?»

«Hm? Were we not returning to our lodgings to eat the crab?»

«Right, that’s the thing. I just realized that we’re gonna have to leave town to cook it!»

«Fel, my liege would not give us such an order without reason. Let’s do as he says,» Gon chimed in.

«Yeah, I don’t really care where we go as long as we get to eat crab there. I’m seriously gonna starve to death at this rate,» Dora-chan added. All of our stomachs rumbled in unison, almost as if they were set off by his words.

«**We will eat the crab, and it will be delicious!**» Fel shouted as he changed course, once again leading us out of town.



We headed out into the wilderness all over again, and eventually came to a stop in a clearing just a little ways away from the Eremej River. I didn’t want to be *too* close to it, since I was worried that monsters might show up to interrupt us, but I also needed somewhere to dispose of the water I’d be boiling the crab in. I figured this spot would be far enough from the bank that we would be able to work in peace without issue. And speaking of getting to work, my first step was to take the mad berserker crab corpse out of my Item Box!

«**So then, what exactly do you plan to do with it?**» Fel asked.

“Well, I’m...actually, I’ll just show you. Hey, Sui, can you come over here

for a sec?”

«What is it, Master?» Sui asked as it hopped off Gon’s back and bounced over to us.

“Do you think you could use Water magic to make a really big water orb? Like, big enough for the crabbie to fit in?”

«Okaaay!» Sui said. It spent a moment storing up power with a cute little grunt, then brought a gigantic ball of water into existence before us. «Is this good enough, Master?»

“Yeah, that’s perfect! Nice work.”

Okay, what’s next, I thought, then started by chucking in a bit of salt, going light on the seasoning initially, of course! I briefly stuck my finger into the orb, then licked the digit to see how the water tasted.

“Okay, I guess I should’ve expected that to not be enough for *this* much water,” I muttered to myself, then dumped more salt in and gave it another taste. “Okay, now it’s just a little bit salty! Wouldn’t wanna overdo it, so this should be fine, I guess.”

And, next up... “Fireball!” I shouted, casting a spell that conjured a volleyball-sized globe of flame into being, which I sent flying into the water orb...where it completely vanished with a pathetic little *hiss*.

«**What in the world was that supposed to be?**» Fel said with an exasperated shake of his head. «**I understand what you are trying to do now, but a flame of that size will be woefully insufficient for the task.**»

«Yes, I’m afraid I must concur,» Gon agreed. «I see that you were hoping to heat the orb of water, but your fireballs are just too small.»

“Ugh! I-I know, okay?! That was just a test!” I shouted. *You have to fine-tune these things!*

«Oh, is *that* what you’re going for? I can handle that, easy!» Dora-chan said, then manifested a fireball that was about *three meters* in diameter.

“Wha—oh god, no, nuh-uh! Dora-chan, stop!” I frantically shouted.

«Huh? Why?»

“Because we’re trying to *boil* the water, not evaporate it instantly!”

«Sheesh, picky much? Okay, so what’s *your* plan?»

“To hold back a little, that’s all! This is a delicate process. You three—Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan—can all use Fire magic, so let’s start by gathering you all around the orb. Actually, wait...you *can* use Fire magic, right, Gon?”

«Needless to say.»

The three of them and I—all of my party’s fire-wielders—formed up around

the gigantic ball of water.

“Okay, let’s start by throwing in fireballs about this big,” I said as I produced a burning sphere the size of a basketball to show to everyone.

«What, *that* tiny? You sure?» Dora-chan asked.

“This is just a test, so yes,” I replied.

Dora-chan was a magical powerhouse who cast spells with practiced ease, so he managed the task without breaking a sweat. Fel and Gon, however...

«**Is this what you desired?**» Fel asked as he showed me a fireball easily a meter in diameter. It was like he hadn’t even been watching me demonstrate.

“No, that’s way too big,” I sighed.

«**Grr... Mnhh... There! How about this?**»

“I mean, that’s a bit big too, but I guess it’ll probably work out.” His second attempt was still bigger than any basketball I’d ever seen, but I decided to call it good enough.

«What of mine, my liege?»

“Holy—you have to ask, Gon? That’s way too big! It’s even bigger than the one Fel made a minute ago!” It was like he looked at the one I’d chewed Fel out for and thought “I can do better than that,” or something.

«No good, you say? Then, hmm... Grrah... Hah! There! Is this better?»

“It’s still too big, but yeah, I guess I can work with it,” I said. He’d managed to reduce his fireball’s size to roughly the same as Fel’s second attempt, which, again, seemed close enough. “Okay, then, let’s do this!”

Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and I all threw our fireballs into the orb of water. They vanished inside with four sizzling little *pfs* sounds, and...didn’t have much of an effect at all, really. I gingerly stuck a finger into the orb and found that it was still only lukewarm, which meant that it was time for another round with slightly larger fireballs.

“Okay, is everyone ready? Three, two, one, throw!”

Pfsh! Pfsh! Pfsh! Pfsh!

Once again, the four fireballs vanished into the sphere of water. It started steaming ever so slightly this time, but still didn’t seem hot enough to boil a crab in, at a glance. I gave it a finger check, and found it was about as warm as a hot bath. We still had a ways left to go, so I got everyone ready for one more fireball barrage, increasing our power level yet again.

“Good to go? Ready, throw!”

Pfsh! Pfsh! Pfsh! Pfsh!

A third salvo of flame disappeared into the water. *Okay, let’s see if that did*

the trick... Oh, yeah, this seems just about right! I thought as I noticed bubbles rising up toward the top of the water orb.

“I think that should do it!”

«**At long last.**»

«That was a chore indeed!»

«You said it. Sheesh.»

“Oh, don’t be like that, guys! Anyway, now that the water’s boiling, it’s Sui’s turn again. Go scoop the crabbie up in your water, okay?”

«Okaaay!» Sui said, grunting and focusing once more as it moved the sphere over to the mad berserker crab and sucked it up inside. «Phew! Like that, Master?»

“Yup, well done!” The water orb itself, however, had quickly stopped bubbling. Putting the crab in seemed to have lowered the temperature of the orb, which meant it was time for another round of fireballs. “Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, we’re giving it another hit! Try to make them a little less powerful than the last set of fireballs we threw at it, though. Oh, and be careful not to hit the crab!”

«**We are more than capable of figuring that out for ourselves.**»

Once again, we all formed up around the orb and threw in our fireballs, taking care to not graze the crab in the process.

Pfsh! Pfsh! Pfsh! Pfsh!

The fireballs were swallowed up, and just like that, the orb of water was bubbling and steaming away once more. We kept heating it up again every once in a while, making sure it never dropped too far below a boil, and eventually...

«**Surely it must be finished by now?**»

«I fear our stomachs will not last much longer, my liege.»

«Yeah, I’m friggin’ famished! How much longer does the crab hafta cook?»

«Sui’s hungry, Master!»

“Just a *little* longer...” I said. The massive crab had started changing colors, gradually turning a vibrant shade of red. “A little more...and...okay! That should do it! No point having all that boiling water around anymore, so you can throw it away, Sui. Oh, but be careful not to splash any on us!”

«Okaaay!»

Splooosh!

“Aaaaugh, that’s hot!” I yelped. In spite of Sui’s best efforts, tossing out the orb had caused quite a splash and a little of it had nailed me in the cheek.

«*Masteeer!*» Sui shouted as it raced over to me at an astonishing speed.

“I’m fine, I’m fine!” I quickly reassured it. “I just got a tiny bit of hot water on my cheek! It surprised me, that’s all.”

«Sui’s sorry, Master,» the slime muttered abashedly, reaching out to press a nice, cool tentacle against my cheek.

“Oh, thanks! That’s just what I needed,” I said. Sui had cooled my cheek and warmed my heart with its kindness in one fell swoop.

«**Your frailty never ceases to astonish,**» Fel jabbed.

“Hey, you don’t have to be frail to not want a faceful of boiling water!” I countered.

«**More importantly, it must surely be finished by now? Feed it to us at once!**»

«I can hardly wait as well, my liege!»

«Same here! Gimme that crab!»

«Sui wants to eat the crabbie now too!»

So much for anyone being worried about me! I guess nothing can win out against those gluttons’ appetites.

I gave the crab a little longer to cool down, then tried to decide how to approach the next step. “I wonder if I’m strong enough to tear off a leg on my own? Guess it’s worth a shot... Hup!”

Snap!

“Oh, hey, that was actually pretty easy!”

With that question answered, I went around and snapped off all of the crab’s remaining legs.

“All right! Now I just have to cut open the shells, and we’ll be able to get right at its meat...but the shell was supposed to be really hard, wasn’t it?”

Orson the guildmaster had been *really* dejected when I told him that we’d be eating the crab and couldn’t sell its shell to him. If it was that useful of a material for armor crafting purposes, it stood to reason that it had to be pretty tough stuff.

“I bet an ordinary knife’s off the table, then,” I said to myself, but I decided to at least give it a try. I pulled out one of the trusty knives I’d bought from my Online Supermarket and made my best effort to break through the crab’s shell with it.

Crack!

“Oh? Wait, is this actually working?” I said, a little surprised. The shell had offered a little resistance, but my supermarket-grade knife had still managed to penetrate it without too much fuss. *The shell was supposed to be really strong, but maybe boiling it made it a lot less durable?* I speculated as I set about

processing all the crab legs. Then I bought some rubber gloves off my Online Supermarket, put them on, and reached into one of the shells.

“Hmmph!” I grunted as I tugged at the meat within the crab leg, yanking it right out of the shell! I could tell immediately that the meat was as tender and juicy as could be, and pretty soon all of my familiars’ personal dishes were piled high with the stuff. I made sure to save three of the smaller legs for use in a future dish, by the way—though when I say “smaller,” one has to keep in mind that they were only small compared to the other legs of a semitruck-sized crab. They were still plenty girthy in their own right.

“Phew! Okay, I think that should just about do it!”

«**H-Hey! You must be finished now, yes?**» Fel said eagerly. He, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all had their eyes glued to the heaping bowls of crab meat.

“Yes, yes, they’re done,” I said, barely suppressing a chuckle as I placed the bowls in front of them. They dug in so fast that you’d think they hadn’t eaten in days, and this time, I stuffed *my* face just as quickly. The first mouthful of crab was downright electrifying. I looked at my familiars, they looked back at me, and then all of us shouted in unison.

“*Delicious!!!*”

Crab has a very particular sort of deep, rich umami and sweetness to it, and I couldn’t stop a smile from spreading across my face as that delectable flavor filled my mouth. It was, as far as I could remember, the best crab I’d ever eaten. My familiars were totally entranced by their servings, and I was right there with them, though of course I also had to keep scooping more crab meat out of the shell as I ate to keep us supplied.

Oh, right! I think it’s about time to give this a try, I thought as I brought out a bottle of sauce. The slight saltiness of plain boiled crab was great and all, but I had always liked it even better with a little something to boost the flavor further, with my favorite type of sauce for the job being a mixture of ponzu and soy sauce. I dribbled a dash of sauce onto the crab, took a bite, and...

“Wow, that’s good!” I exclaimed. The acidity of the ponzu was a perfect match for the crab’s flavor.

«**Wait a moment. What is that?**» Fel asked.

“It’s a ponzu soy sauce blend! The crab’s even better with a bit of this stuff on it,” I explained.

«**Give it here!**»

«**For me as well!**»

«**Same!**»

«Sui too!»

Just boiling the crab had made for a truly exquisite dish, and the idea that it could be made even *better* lit a fire in my familiars' eyes. I prepared second helpings for everyone, this time topped with a dash of ponzu soy sauce.

«Mmh! Yes, this is delicious!»

«Indeed! I'm surprised by how well the sour note of the sauce suits the crab!»

«Now *this* is good! Damn good!»

«It's super super yummy!»

It seemed that my gluttonous quartet were real fans of the ponzu soy sauce, just as much as I was. *All right, last but not least...* I pried open the shell of the crab's massive abdomen, and found exactly what I'd been hoping for within.

“All right! It’s full of meat, and plenty of tomalley to boot!”

«Hm? What is that?» asked Fel, who'd always had incredibly keen ears when it came to food talk.

“It’s another part of the crab! Part of their digestive system, basically. We had it before when we went to the sea, remember?”

«You sure about that?» Dora-chan asked as he peered into the crab's shell.

«I dunno about that stuff. It's got a pretty gross color, and all.»

Wow, rude! Though I guess the crabs we had by the sea were small enough that you couldn't really see it well, and we did have it mixed with the actual meat of the crab back then. “C'mon, you can't judge food by its color! Crab tomalley's super rich and a touch bitter in just the right way! It's delicious!”

«It's bitter? Then Sui doesn't want any.»

«Yeah, I'll pass on that stuff too. Seriously, food's not supposed to come in colors like that.»

Come ooon, Dora-chan! You liked it the last time we had it! W-Well, whatever! Their palates just aren't refined enough for this stuff, apparently. Those two are just little kids, after all! I told myself as I pulled out some of the crab's inner meat, smeared a decent amount of the tomalley on it, and took a bite.

“Oooh, yes, that's the stuff! Makes me want some sake to go along with it,” I said.

«Is it truly that delicious? Then I shall partake as well,» Fel said.

“Didn't you try this stuff back when we went to the sea too, Fel?” I mentioned as I prepared him a plate of shell meat and tomalley, which he chowed down on without wasting a moment.

“Well? What do you think?”

«It is...not unappealing. I do not dislike it, but I overwhelmingly prefer the meat by itself.»

Grr! I swear, Fel, you have a grade schooler's taste in food sometimes! I'll admit, the crab meat is really, really good, but the tomalley's great too, dang it!
“Well, fine! More for me, then! And I'm gonna buy myself a drink to have with it!” I declared with a pout.

«I shall join you, my liege!»

“Yes! I knew I could count on you, Old Man Gon!”

«Well, of course! I'm never one to turn down a drink when it's available.»

“Now that's what I like to hear! C'mon, Gon. We *adults* have some great food to enjoy!”

Gotta do some prep work first, though! The traditional way to cook a crab's tomalley was to do so right in its shell, but in this case the shell was just too darn big to make that practical, so I gave up on that right away. Instead, I appropriated a piece of shell from one of the crab's legs, mixed the tomalley with some of the meat in there, and drizzled a little sake and soy sauce on it before cooking the whole thing on one of my portable burners. Once the liquid had boiled off, it was ready to eat!

“Hup!” I grunted as I poured sake from a big, two-liter bottle into a rather deep dish for Gon. I'd chosen a brand that was brewed in Niigata this time, which was supposedly very popular on Liquor Shop Tanaka's rankings. I was actually already aware of the brand, thanks to a coworker of mine who was really fond of sake and who had described it as nice and smooth when you drink it straight, but also perfect for cooking with. I poured some for myself as well into a glass cup that I'd bought specifically for that purpose. I had always preferred drinking sake out of small transparent cups, for some reason.

With that, I was finally ready to try a bite of my crab tomalley mixture.

“Oooh, now *this* is the stuff!”

«Let's see,» Gon said as he scooped up a clawful of the mixture and gave it a tentative lick, then gulped down a mouthful of sake. «Oh ho! Yes, this *is* quite something, my liege!»

“I know, right?! Now *this* is how grown-ups eat! There isn't much that can top crab tomalley and sake!” I said. Before I knew it, the two of us were drinking away and having a blast.



«‘How grown-ups eat’? Surely you jest. You two are nothing more than a pair of drunkards,» Fel groused, but I decided to pretend I hadn’t heard him.

“Oh? Looks like you can really hold your booze, huh, Gon?” I noted. He’d already drained his cup. “Here, have another,” I said as I filled it back up again.

«Oh! Many thanks, my liege. And I must say, it is truly remarkable how well this dish and this drink complement each other! I find myself constantly going to take a sip without even realizing it!»

“Tell me about it! Having this stuff on the side’s a great way to end up drinking way more than you were planning to!”

<Ahem, ahem! I hope you’re not forgetting a certain acquaintance of yours who happens to be very fond of sake! >

“Oh. Demiurge...”

< I wouldn’t say no if you decided to send a sample my way! >

Oh, I get it. He wants in on this. I had sent Demiurge an ample stock of sake before departing for Ronkainen, and he definitely hadn’t run out yet, but I guess he just couldn’t resist the allure of a snack that was supposed to pair so perfectly with it. “Okay, okay, I can do that! I’ll get a portion ready for you right away,” I said, then scooped out a serving to send to him.

< Ooooh, wonderful! Many thanks! > Demiurge said as the dish vanished with a faint flash.

«Gra ha ha! I see that even the gods themselves forsake their dignity in the face of your cooking, my liege!» Gon cackled. «Though of course, we’re hardly ones to talk,» he added as he glanced over at Fel, who was still stuffing his face with crab.

“Ha ha! Well, I guess even the gods need something to spice up their lives every once in a while,” I replied.

< Oh, that’s right! You’ll recall that I mentioned you’d be receiving a reward for your efforts with the church, yes? It will be arriving momentarily, so look forward to it! >

And they know that humans do too, apparently. Seriously, how did this world end up with such a free-spirited pantheon in the first place?

Chapter 4: A New Magic Stove

My familiars and I had just finished breakfast and were lounging around in the living room. I wasn't supposed to meet with Orson until the day after tomorrow, which meant I could take it easy today and spend tomorrow shopping for a new magic stove.

...Well, that was *my* plan, anyway.

“Let us depart! The hunt awaits!” Fel declared out of absolutely nowhere.

“Whoa there, Fel! What do you mean, ‘the hunt’?! Where’s this coming from?!” I protested.

“The crab we ate yesterday was delicious, was it not?”

“Well, yeah, it was. What about it?”

“I wish to partake of it again, and today we have a perfect opportunity to hunt down several more.”

“Oh ho! An excellent idea indeed!” Gon bellowed.

«Yeah, I like the sound of that!» Dora-chan said. «I could go for a few more of those crabs, for sure!»

«Sui wants to eat more crabbies too!» Sui added.

The whole gang was instantly ready to go along with Fel’s proposal, but I wasn’t going to let myself get argued into submission that easily.

“Nope, not happening,” I said. “Today’s the day we accomplish our main objective for coming to this town in the first place, so hunting’s off the table.”

“Our main objective?” all four of my familiars repeated in bewilderment.

Sheesh. All of them forgot? Seriously? “A magic stove, remember? We’re here to buy a new one!”

That finally seemed to jog my familiars’ memories. My magic stove had been smashed to oblivion by a behemoth, and getting by without it had been all sorts of inconvenient.

“We *need* a new stove, guys. We’ve managed to get by on this trip thanks to all the food I made in advance, sure, but if you want me to cook something you hunt while we’re on the road or if I run low on premade stuff, you’re gonna find yourselves with *way* fewer options than usual when our meal times come around! I can’t cook on the spot if I don’t have the tools I need!”

I made a point of precooking meals whenever I had the chance, but knowing my resident gluttons' appetites, it always felt like we were just a meal or two away from running dry. Having a magic stove handy to cook from scratch with was the one thing that would reassure me.

"Hm? You mean to say our meals are at risk?" Fel asked.

"Exactly," I confirmed. "I stocked up on way more food than usual before we left on this trip, and since we're in town, we're okay for now, but what do you think would happen if we ran out of premade stuff in the middle of a forest or something? I'd *have* to cook then and there, right?"

"It stands to reason."

"I'd think so, yes."

«I mean, *somebody's* gotta make our grub for us!»

«Sui doesn't want to not have food!»

"Right? And if I wanna cook on the go like that, I *need* to have a magic stove on hand."

"So it is an important tool indeed!" Fel said, sounding almost indignant that we could be caught without one.

"I mean, that's literally what I've been telling you this whole time, yeah!" I replied. "Like I said, we can't get by without one!"

"Then now is no time to be chasing crabs. Obtaining a magic stove is a much higher priority. I trust you all agree?" Fel asked. Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all quickly voiced their approval. **"We can hunt as many crabs as we wish, after the stove is ours."**

"Agreed!"

«Yeah, same!»

«Yeeeah!»

I guess our crab hunt's only been postponed, not canceled. Well, as long as they understand that the stove's the higher priority, I suppose it all worked out for the best. And with that, I think it's time to head into town!



We'd settled on going out to buy a magic stove, but now I was confronted with a new dilemma: choosing a shop to get it from. Fortunately, this was exactly the sort of question that the Merchant's guild was there to answer, so I started off my quest by paying them a visit. I explained that I was searching for a pretty big stove, and they told me that I would have to visit one of the larger

magic tool stores in the area. They gave me a list of the three best shops in town, and sent me on my way. I made sure to get directions to all three while I was at it, of course, and decided to visit each of them before I made any purchases.

First up was a store called Waldner's Magic Tools, which was just two blocks and a left turn away from the Merchant's guild. As I was walking over there, my familiars following behind me, I noticed that the people around us were giving us a *very* wide berth. I mean, they were pretty much pressing themselves up against the buildings on either side of us, which felt just plain excessive to me. The little performance we'd put on during our first day in town meant that everyone should've been perfectly aware that Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui were my familiars, but, well...

I glanced over my shoulder at my enormous traveling companions.

«**What?**»

«Yes, my liege?»

“Oh, nothing,” I sighed. *Yeah, I can't really blame anyone for freaking out when a giant wolf and a dragon are walking down the street in front of them. I guess I should just be thankful we're not causing an uproar this time.*

Before long, we arrived at Walden's Magic Tools.

“Okay, this should be the place,” I said.

«We shall wait out here, then,» Gon said as he glanced inside. The store was packed with goods and lacking in space for someone as big as him or Fel to move around in. My other familiars seemed to pick up on that as well, and lined up on the side of the street to wait.

Having those four loitering around might be a pain from the locals' perspective, but I guess I'll just have to hope they give us a pass. “I'll be as quick as I can,” I said, then stepped inside.

No sooner had I entered the store than a shopkeeper stepped up to greet me. “Good day to you! Can I help you find something?” he asked.

“Umm, actually, yes. I'm looking for a magic stove,” I said, then gave him a rundown on the specs of the stove I'd been using up till that point and asked if he had anything that was as good or better in stock.

The shopkeeper frowned regretfully. “I'm afraid to say that we would have to place a special order for a stove that would suit your needs,” he explained.

Yeah, I guess that makes sense. The one I'd bought in Dolan had apparently only been there to draw in customers who were curious about what the latest model of magic stove would look like. It had been a spectacle piece, not something they intended to actually *sell*. The shopkeeper at Waldner's,

meanwhile, told me that the only magic stoves they currently had in stock were the most popular model, which featured a scant two burners. Getting anything bigger than that would involve placing a custom order, and while he *could* do that for me, it would take almost a year to fulfill. That ruled out his store right off the bat, unfortunately, and I took my leave.

“Okay, guys, time to move,” I said as I stepped outside. “We’re heading to the next one.”

«**That was rather swift,**» Fel noted.

“Yeah, they didn’t have any stoves that would be big enough for us. I just hope we find something at the next place...”

I led my familiars to the next store on my list. This one was a shop called Rigoni’s Magic Tools, but just like at Waldner’s, they regretfully informed me that they couldn’t help me, as they also only stocked the most popular two-burner model and would have to order out for anything larger.

Well, this isn’t looking great. At this rate, I might have to go all the way to the capital after all. That, or suck it up and wait for a custom order to get finished, I guess. Hmm...

I tried thinking things through, but no amount of pondering could make the local stores sell me a product they didn’t have in stock. All I could do was stake my hopes on the last shop on my list: a place called Alfaro’s Magic Tools. The people at the Merchant’s guild had told me that it was the largest of the three shops they’d recommended, so I still had some hope that things would work out, and prayed that they’d have what I wanted as I led my party toward the store.

“This must be the place,” I said with a nervous gulp. The people at the guild hadn’t been kidding when they said it was the largest magic tool shop around. “Okay, I’ll be right back. You guys wait out here.”

I left my familiars in the street and headed into the store. A shopkeeper arrived to help me right away, and I explained what sort of magic stove I was looking for to him. He listened attentively...then broke out in a smile.

“Well, it’s your lucky day, sir!” he said. “As it just so happens, we have a magic stove in stock that doesn’t just meet your requirements, it *exceeds* them!”

“Seriously?! Can I see it?!” I shouted, my hopes skyrocketing in an instant.

The shopkeeper chuckled, then led me to the storage area where the oven in question was being kept. I caught my eye almost instantly: a magic stove so huge, it dwarfed even the majority of commercial-use ovens. It put my old magic stove to shame, and boasted six burners, plus a feature I’d never even dreamed of.

“It has *two* ovens?!?” I gleefully—and unintentionally—exclaimed.

“It does indeed! You could roast two whole cockatrices at once in this beauty, if you wanted to!” the shopkeeper said, pivoting into a sales pitch without missing a beat. “If your skills in the kitchen are up to snuff, then between the ovens and all those burners on top, you’ll be able to host entire *banquets* at home single-handedly!”

I nodded excitedly, imagining just how much food I’d be able to prepare at once on a stove like that. It was perfect—so perfect, in fact, that I was half convinced it had been made just for me. *I have to buy it, right? That’s literally the only option here, right?!*

“I’ll take it! Sold!” I declared.

The shopkeeper, however, wasn’t quite as ready to take the leap as I was. “Are you certain, sir? You haven’t asked how much it costs yet,” he noted.

“I’m technically an S-ranked adventurer, so trust me, I have the money!” I said. My familiars had been earning me one hefty paycheck after another, and seeing as I needed a magic stove to cook their meals, I figured that buying this one, no matter how much it cost, would be a way I could pay them back for their efforts.

“An S-ranked adventurer?!?” the shopkeeper said. “My apologies! Well then, we can handle payment right away...”

The magic stove, as it turned out, cost an eye-watering 1,200 gold coins. It was expensive, to be sure, but considering the stoves’ capabilities, I couldn’t exactly call it overpriced. The last magic stove that I’d bought had cost 860 gold, and this one seemed like a proportionate step up. I settled my tab on the spot, of course, and the shopkeeper was nice enough to throw in a magic stone to power the stove, on the house. He was positively beaming when I made the whole payment in a single lump sum.

“Where shall I arrange for the stove to be delivered, sir?” the shopkeeper asked.

“Oh, you don’t have to bother! I have an Item Box,” I said, then stowed my new magic stove away without missing a beat.

Phew! That’s a load off my mind. I could hardly believe that I’d managed to get ahold of *that* nice of a stove. *All’s well that ends well, I guess!*

“I seriously can’t believe you had this thing,” I said. “Everyone’s been telling me that if I wanted one this big, I’d have to custom order it.”

“Well, as it so happens,” the shopkeeper said, launching into an explanation. He’d gotten pretty talkative after realizing what a windfall he was about to

make, and was happy to tell me that the magic stove I was buying actually *had* been custom-ordered by a nobleman. When the stove had been all but completed, however, the nobleman had decided that he wanted to completely alter the specifications of his order. Normally, changing your mind like that would require you to pay the full manufacturing cost for the original item, but the nobleman had decided that since it wasn't technically finished yet, he shouldn't be obligated to do so, and the store had found themselves with no recourse. They'd had no choice but to foot the bill for the now-unclaimed stove themselves.

In the end, the store had been left with a massively expensive piece of dead-weight merchandise on their hands, and no hopes of ever getting rid of it...until I showed up and bought it on the spot, that is. The whole affair had been something of a disaster from the shop's perspective, but it was a phenomenal stroke of luck from mine.

As I left the store, the shopkeeper saw me out and thanked me with a very deep bow. I found Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all fidgeting restlessly as they waited. I had really drilled it into them that I couldn't cook unless I got my hands on a stove, so I could understand why they'd be eager to learn whether or not I had succeeded.

«**So? How did you fare?**» Fel asked as I walked over to them.

“Pretty darn well,” I said. “I managed to buy an even better stove than the last one!”

«**Oh, wonderful! Well done, my liege!**» Gon said.

«**Aww, hell yeah! We’re back to dining fine no matter where we are!**» Dora-chan shouted.

«**Yummy food! Yaaay!**» Sui squealed. Everyone was ecstatic to hear the news, it seemed.

«**This is a well-timed success indeed. Let us celebrate with a meal!**»

«**Yes, that’s an excellent idea!**»

«**I was just getting hungry, so I’m down for it!**»

«**Food time, food time!**»

And just like that, the gluttonous quartet were riling themselves up again. “You guys are impossible...but yeah, okay. Let’s give this stove a test run!”



The moment we arrived at home, I jumped straight into testing out my brand-

new magic stove by making us a meal. It was still a little early for dinner, so I had plenty of time to put together a somewhat elaborate dish that had been on my mind ever since I had stashed a portion of the boiled crab away.

My party's resident chowhounds had looked heartbroken when I had told them that it would take me a while to finish the recipe, of course, so I'd brought out some premade dungeon pork bowls to hold them over. Said bowls were piled high enough to feed *several* ordinary people, but from my familiars' perspective, they were a snack, at best. That was enough to buy me the time I needed, in any case, so it all worked out.

While they were polishing off their appetizers, I got to work making the special dish I had planned for dinner: crab and cream croquettes! I'd received canned crab from acquaintances of mine in my old world a few times, and had used them to hand-make my own croquettes. I could've just gotten them from a store, but making them yourself meant that you could tune the ratio of crab to cream to your liking, and there was nothing quite like a croquette stuffed with an extravagant quantity of crab.

Making it with *this* crab, I figured, would be even better! Cream croquettes with canned crab in them were already awesome, so I could hardly even imagine how good cream croquettes with exquisitely delicious mad berserker crab meat in them would be. In fact, just attempting to imagine it was starting to make me drool... *No, no, stop that! I have more important things to do, like getting started on the cooking, for one!*

The house I'd rented had a perfectly serviceable kitchen with a magic stove that could get the job done, no problem, but needless to say, I ignored it entirely in favor of giving my new stove a go. The whole point of this was to try it out, after all! I also pulled out another piece of kitchen gear, that being the magic refrigerator that I'd found in the bandit king's treasure hoard. I had obtained and installed the right sort of magic stone needed to power it back in Karelina, so it was ready to use whenever I wanted it. The rental *also* had one of those in its kitchen, but it was pretty small, so I decided to use my own instead.

Thinking about magic stones reminded me of an incident from the day before. While Old Man Gon was eating his crab tomalley, he happened to catch the mad berserker crab's magic stone in a mouthful and asked if I would mind if he ate it. I told him to knock himself out without really thinking about it much, only to be shocked as I watched him crunch the stone to pieces and swallow it down, just like that. I asked him if magic stones tasted good, and he explained that they didn't taste like much of anything, but that eating them replenished a

bit of his magic reserves. Gon had enough innate magic that doing so was pretty pointless, but it seemed he still felt the urge to snack on a stone every once in a while.

I'd never heard of anyone eating magic stones before, so I asked my other familiars what they thought about it. Fel told me that he had eaten them on occasion before he met me, same as Gon, but wouldn't stoop to wasting his appetite on them these days. He'd explained that he detested how gritty they felt in his mouth, scowling all the while, which didn't surprise me at all considering that they were, y'know, rocks.

Dora-chan, on the other hand, was firmly disinterested in eating magic stones, and always had been. He'd *tried* once when his magic stores had been running low, but his pixie dragon teeth hadn't been able to make a dent in it. It seemed that only a monster with jaws like Fel's or Gon's stood any chance of getting through a magic stone meal. He'd also apparently tried swallowing one whole once, but it had given him such a terrible stomachache that he'd sworn to never try it again. I didn't ask how big the stone in question had been, but considering how tiny Dora-chan himself was, it felt like pretty much any magic stone would be too big for him.

Sui, of course, had met me and Fel not long after its birth, and had never eaten a magic stone before. When I brought the subject up, it said that «Sui would eat one if you want Sui to, but if they're not yummy then Sui doesn't want to try.» I wasn't about to pressure Sui into eating rocks, so that settled the matter then and there. Not even Gon seemed to *enjoy* eating them. He'd only eaten the crab's because it was already in his mouth, and spitting it out wouldn't exactly have been great manners.

Considering that they fetched a pretty decent price when I sold them to the guild, and that I could use that money to buy *much* better food, we decided that not eating magic stones would be for the best in the future. In any case, I was a little pleased by the fact that despite spending every single day with my familiars, I was still making new discoveries about their lifestyles every once in a while.

Whoops! This is no time to reminisce. I've got work to do! I can only imagine how obnoxious those four will be if I'm not done in time for dinner.

To start, I opened my Online Supermarket and purchased the ingredients that I didn't have on hand (though in this case, that turned out to be just butter and milk). With that out of the way, I was ready to get cooking! I snapped on a pair of rubber gloves, brought out the leftover mad berserker crab legs, and got to

work digging out all the meat I possibly could from them.

“Phew! Okay, think that’s all of it,” I said once I’d finished processing the last leg. I’d extracted enough crab meat to fill four extra-large bowls far past their brims.

The next step was to mince up some of Alban’s special-grown onions. The ones from his garden had a wonderful sweetness when you cooked them, and since I used onions so often in the meals I made, I was really grateful that he had provided me with as many as he had.

I oiled up a relatively deep frying pan, tossed in the minced onions, and let them sauté until they were soft. Then I added the crab meat, stir-fried it for a moment, seasoned it with salt and pepper, and finally poured in some white wine before stir-frying it some more until the alcohol had all been cooked out.

Next, I had to make some béchamel sauce. I took another frying pan that was even deeper, put it on a low flame, and melted some butter in it. Next, I sifted in a bit of flour, stirring it around constantly to make sure it didn’t burn as it incorporated into the butter, forming a roux. The last ingredient to go in was the milk, which I added in stages, stirring vigorously each time. Once the sauce started to thicken up, I added in the last of the milk and cooked it for a little while longer, now whisking it to prevent it from burning.

Before long, the sauce became very thick and smooth, and I dumped in the stir-fried onions and crab meat, seasoning the mixture lightly with salt and pepper before stirring a while longer until everything was evenly distributed. Then I poured it into a shallow tray, let it cool down just a little, covered it with plastic wrap, and popped it into the refrigerator to chill for an hour.

In the meantime, I prepared a bowl of frying batter and some garnishes for our meal. The batter was made from eggs, water, and flour, and I readied a dish of panko as well. For garnishes, I shredded some cabbage and sliced tomatoes into wedges. It wasn’t the most creative pair of veggies to serve with croquettes, but I was of the opinion that the classic option also happened to be the best, in this particular case. The cabbage and tomatoes came straight from Alban’s garden as well, by the way!

Once I was finished processing the veggies, I checked the time. “Hmm. It hasn’t quite been an hour yet, but eh, I bet it’s cool enough already,” I said to myself, then pulled the cream and crab croquette mixture out from the refrigerator. The cold had firmed it up, which made it easy to divide and shape into individual cylindrical croquettes.

“Okay! Now I just have to fry them,” I said once I was done shaping the

cream and crab mixture. I dunked each croquette into the batter, then rolled them in panko and fried them in oil that I'd heated to just about 180 degrees Celsius. When they turned golden brown, they were ready to serve!

"I've gotta do a taste test," I muttered. Taking the first bite was a cook's special privilege, after all! I bit into one with a spectacularly satisfying crunch...and let out a yelp. "Agh! Gah, that's *hot*! Way too hot, but so *good*!"

The shell was gloriously crunchy, and was a textural match made in heaven with the thick, oozy filling. I'd added plenty of crab, so the flavor of the meat came through incredibly well, even paired with the rich béchamel sauce. It might sound a little stuck-up to say this since I was the one who made them, but they'd turned out absurdly delicious, and I immediately set about frying them up by the dozen. I wanted to keep that fresh-out-of-the-oil heat and crunch, so I made sure to store them in my Item Box the moment they rolled off my cream croquette assembly line.

"Phew! That's the last of them, finally. Now I just have to plate everything!"

I laid out the cabbage and tomatoes on a plate, then piled the crab and cream croquettes up in a very satisfying pyramid beside them.

"And with that, dinner's ready! Better go feed the chowhound crew before they starve to death!"



"What are those?" said Fel, who had started scowling in irritation the second he caught sight of the cabbage and tomatoes on the dish I brought out to him.

"They're crab and cream croquettes," I explained. "The veggies are just a garnish, and yes, I know, but just eat them first, okay? That way they won't go to waste."

Fel kept sulking about it, but he did as I suggested and ate his cabbage and tomatoes in a single mouthful, polishing off the foods he disliked so he could move on to the good stuff. *Jeez! You didn't even want some mayo on them? Suit yourself.*

"Did you say *crab* and *cream*, my liege? You mean this dish contains the crab from yesterday?" Gon asked.

"That's right!" I replied. "These things are chock-full of mad berserker crab meat! They're *really* good, trust me. Oh, and the cabbage and tomatoes are better with some mayo on them, by the way," I added, and then I dressed Gon, Dora-

chan, and Sui's cabbage salads with a squirt of mayo.

“What?! You did no such thing for my portion!” Fel protested.

“You didn’t give me the chance! I’m not gonna bring out any more veggies, though, so you can wash the taste out of your mouth with a croquette. You should try your first one without any sauce or anything. They’re good enough to hold up just fine on their own. Oh, and be careful! They’re really hot.”

«These have yesterday’s crab in ‘em, eh? Sounds like they could be pretty tasty!»

Oh, trust me, Dora-chan, they’re exactly as good as you’re imagining!

«They’re all gooey inside, and they taste sooo yummy! Sui loves these!» our party’s slime said. It had sampled the croquettes before anyone else, and was now jiggling with glee.

«Hot damn, no kidding! It’s crunchy, melty, *and* tastes just as awesome as the crab did! I’m seriously into these things!» Dora-chan agreed as he took his first bite.

“Truly, this is beyond scrumptious! I’ve never eaten anything like it before! Of course, it feels like *everything* you’ve served me has been a brand-new experience, my liege. I’m quite confident now that I will never tire of our travels together! How glad I am that I chose to follow you!” Gon said, sounding almost moved as he ate one croquette after another. His choosing to follow me had increased *my* workload by a hefty margin, of course, but I decided not to mention that.

“I demand seconds! Without the accompanying plants, of course,” Fel said as he pushed his plate—which he’d licked clean—toward me. He hadn’t given me his impression of the croquettes, but considering how quickly he’d demolished them, I felt safe assuming he was a fan.

“Okay, okay! Coming right up,” I said, then brought out another plate of croquettes for him, sans veggies. “Oh, do you want some Worcestershire sauce on them this time? They’re great on their own, like I said, but a little sauce does wonders!”

“Yes. At once,” Fel replied. I sauced his croquettes, and he got right back to scarfing them down. It didn’t take long for him to clean his plate again, and then he looked over at me while licking the sauce off his thoroughly stained chops.

“Tomorrow, we will hunt for more crabs. I will brook no argument.”

“I heartily agree!”

«Thirded!»

«Yay! Let’s hunt some crabbies!»

And just like that, our plans were set in stone. We'd be spending all of the next day out on the Eremej. *Maybe feeding crab and cream croquettes to those four was a mistake...*

Chapter 5: Hitting it Off in the Worst Way Possible

Fel made good on his declaration. The next day, he dragged me right out to the Eremej to go giant crabbing. Sui grew itself once more so we could all ride on its back, and we spent the whole day drifting along the river, searching it up and down. Our efforts bore fruit, thankfully, and we went home with three more mad berserker crabs, though none of them fell into the semitruck-size category.

Even though they were smaller than the first crab we'd found, everyone was satisfied with our haul. They weren't exactly easy monsters to find, so securing three was a great success. We also expanded our supply of freshwater fish, so it was a pretty productive trip from my perspective as well...though that didn't change the fact that spending all day on the river left me in a state of exhaustion. Sui did its best to ferry us around, and I didn't want to be ungrateful, but I was also beyond relieved to feel solid land beneath my feet again at the end of it all.

I took it easy the day after, lounging around in my rented house until a little before midday. Then, after making lunch, I set out for the Adventurer's guild. Said lunch, by the way, had consisted of saucy dungeon pork steak bowls. I had wanted to fry up some Eremej megalodoras—the fish we'd caught that bore a strong resemblance to catfish—but my familiars had demanded non-fish meat, so my plan had gone right out the window. The pork bowls I had served them were topped with a thick sauce made from soy sauce, sake, mirin, sugar, and minced garlic, and the gluttonous quartet had earned their title all over again by asking me to make one serving after another. My new magic stove had already proven its worth, and then some.

Anyway, after we finished our meal, we headed to the guild. My familiars had decided to accompany me, as usual, mostly since they didn't have anything better to do. Sui was riding Fel on one side of me, and Dora-chan was riding Gon on the other. Everyone *else* on the street, meanwhile, was giving us a very wide berth.

I knew that it was only natural for them to react that way, but, well...hearing a little kid shout, "Wow, look! A big wolf and a dragon! I wanna pet them!" only for their mother to hush them and tell them not to look at me just...well, it didn't

feel *nice*, that's for sure. And, I mean, Fel and Gon *looked* terrifying, but when all was said and done, they were both way more interested in filling their stomachs than terrorizing townsfolk, and were perfectly pleasant to be around once you got to know them.

Before long, the Adventurer's guild came into view.

«We're going to be receiving the meat from the alligator today, aren't we? I find myself rather excited to taste it,» Gon said with a smile.

Gon... I know you don't mean to come across as threatening, but the locals can't tell the difference between a dragon smiling and baring its teeth. You're terrifying them, so please stop.

«**Yes, indeed. Tonight, we shall dine on alligator flesh!**»

Same to you, Fel!

«This'll be my first time trying gator too! Can't wait!»

«Sui's so excited!»

Stop jumping around like that, guys! Can't you see how confused all the townspeople look?! I did my best to hustle my familiars into the guild before they sent the street into a total state of chaos.



“Your monster extermination rewards come out to 200 gold coins for the mad berserker crab, 135 gold for the kelpie, and 170 gold for the black tyrant alligator. As for the materials we'd like to purchase...”

Upon arriving at the guild, I had been quickly ushered into the guildmaster's office, where Orson was now enumerating how much I'd be paid for the quests I had taken care of and the monster parts he wanted to buy from me. He was willing to pay top dollar for the hides of the kelpie and the black tyrant alligator in particular, and the final sum came out to 650 gold in total. At the end of his explanation, he asked me if I'd be willing to take my payment in larger forms of coinage, which was more or less business as usual for me, so I accepted without protest.

“In that case, here you are! This should be the full sum, but feel free to confirm,” Orson said as he passed me a hefty sack.

I peeked inside and found that it was filled with the same sort of large gold coins I'd been seeing an awful lot of lately. I pulled them out and quickly counted them up, for formality's sake.

One, two, three, four...yup, that's sixty-five large gold coins, all right! Part of

me wished that he had paid in normal gold coins, since they were much less of a hassle to spend, but at least this was better than getting paid in platinum. *Those coins were a humongous headache to actually use, if it was even possible to use them at all. Let's not even get started on the fact that I've been handling sums of money on this scale so often lately, it doesn't even faze me anymore. Ha ha ha...*

“All right, everything seems to be in order,” I said. Then, as I was sweeping the coins back into their sack, a question occurred to me. “So, just out of curiosity, is the nobleman-turned-adventurer who provoked the mad berserker crab still in town?”

Orson’s description had made the guy sound like a pampered little princeling with a major attitude problem, so if he was still around, I wanted to go out of my way to *not* run into him. My familiars followed me pretty much everywhere, of course, so I had a hard time imagining him causing any *real* trouble for me, but you could never predict the creative ways in which genuine morons like him could ruin your day. *A certain cult certainly proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt not too long ago.*

“No, no, he’s long gone. He fled the area at the first opportunity, leaving us to clean up his mess,” Orson said with a heavy sigh.

Yiikes. My condolences. The fact that the crab was no longer an issue probably helped a little, of course, and the fact that I *wouldn’t* have to deal with someone as obnoxious as the nobleman in question was a load off my mind.

“While we’re on the subject, about the mad berserker crab...” Orson said, a little hesitantly. He’d been very interested in its shell, so I could more or less imagine what he wanted to ask. Unfortunately, he was going to be disappointed.

“We already ate it,” I explained. “It turns out that those crabs are *really* good boiled, for whatever that’s worth.”

“Indeed, it was quite serviceable. I have tasted far worse.”

“That crab’s flavor exceeded my wildest imaginings! And we were lucky enough to hunt down three more, as well.”

«I’m a crab fan now, that’s for sure!»

«The crabbie was super super yummy!»

All of my familiars felt the need to chime in at the mention of the crab. Dora-chan and Sui did so telepathically, so Orson didn’t hear *their* comments, but since Fel and Gon spoke out loud, he definitely didn’t miss their input.

“So you really *did* eat it, in the end? And you boiled it, of all things,” Orson said, his shoulders slumping with disappointment.

“Huh? Is there something wrong with boiling them?” I asked.

“Mad berserker crab shells are rather tricky materials to handle,” he explained. “They have to be treated before you apply any significant amount of heat to them. Otherwise, they become exceptionally brittle. I’ve never heard of anyone deciding to *eat* one instead of selling it, which is no surprise, considering how valuable their shells are...”

I hate to say it, but it’s a little too late to un-boil that crab. And, huh, heating their shells makes them brittle? I’d been wondering why the supposedly rock-hard shell had been so easy for me to break through. Does he really have to be that upset about it, though? There are plenty of other adventurers around, so I’m sure somebody’ll bring another crab in eventually.

Just then, Orson’s face lit up as he seemed to realize something. “Wait a moment. Did I hear that right? You caught another *three* mad berserker crabs?!?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah,” I said. *We did, but that doesn’t mean—*

“Please, allow us to take them off your hands!”

“Err...”

I glanced over at my familiars.

“That is, needless to say, out of the question.”

“Quite. We caught those crabs to eat, and that’s final.”

Fel and Gon shot the idea down in an instant, and Orson’s shoulders slumped all over again. Our perspectives just weren’t lining up. He saw the crabs as priceless resources, and we saw them as ingredients.

I did my best to keep up a strained smile as I bid Orson farewell, then made for the guild’s storehouse, where I was given the black tyrant alligator’s meat and a portion of its hide. With that, our business at the guild was complete—as was the day’s itinerary in general, for that matter.

“I guess we could peek into a few shops while we’re in town?” I suggested.

«Oh, hell yeah!» Dora-chan exclaimed. «And if we see any good-looking food stalls, you know we’ve gotta try ‘em out!»

«Yes, I would not be opposed to this plan. We do manage to find worthwhile meat at those stalls from time to time.»

«Oh, you do? I’d love to give them a try myself, in that case!»

«Sui wants meat too!»

Before I knew it, “do some window shopping” had turned into “go on a food stall tour.” *Eh, I guess that works.* We headed for the door as we chatted telepathically, but just before I could leave the guild...

“Wait, is that you, Mukohda?”

...someone called my name. I turned to look, and found a whole party of

familiar faces behind me.

“Oh! What’re you guys doing here?!” I said. There stood Gaudino, equipped with his trusty bastard sword; Gideon, still as handsome as a Hollywood-tier celebrity; Sigvard, a warhammer-wielding dwarf; and Feodora, an incredibly beautiful elf with golden hair and strikingly green eyes. I had stumbled my way into a surprise reunion with Ark, the adventuring party I’d met in Aveling’s dungeon.



“I heard the rumors about you getting a dragon as your familiar, but I gotta say, I never imagined they were actually *true*,” Gaudino said with a somewhat faraway look in his eyes as he took in my party.

I know it’s a shock, but it would be a lot easier for both of us if you’d just accept that this is reality and move along!

“Not to mention,” Gideon started, but then he paused, glanced around the room, and leaned in to whisper into my ear. “That’s an *ancient* dragon, isn’t it?”

“Well, I mean, yeah,” I admitted. Apparently, Gideon was one of those people who could just *tell* that Old Man Gon was something special. He and the rest of his party were A-ranked adventurers, to be fair, so it made sense that they’d be used to picking up on that sort of thing.

“If it were anyone else, I literally wouldn’t believe it,” Sigvard commented.

Excuse me, what’s that supposed to mean? Why am I some sort of exception in your mind, Sigvard?! Stop that! And stop nodding in agreement, Feodora!

“Err, umm... Oh, right! You guys all remember the time we ran into Ark, don’t you?” I said to my familiars, doing my best to change the subject.

“Indeed,” Fel said. **“I do recall meeting them in a dungeon.”**

«Yeah, that was it! I remember ‘em too!» Dora-chan added.

«We had dinner together!» Sui noted.

“That’s right! And this is Old Man Gon, my newest familiar! We hadn’t met him yet when we ran into you guys,” I said, turning back to Ark and trying my best to dispel the awkward atmosphere with a quick introduction.

“I have no interest in any humans other than you, my liege,” Gon grunted dismissively.

“Gon! You can’t just say stuff like that out loud!” I yelped. Agh, too late! Just look how uncomfortable they all look now! Come on, Gon, you’re the oldest person here by a mile, so you should be the most capable of being tactful!

The situation was more awkward than ever. I desperately searched for a way to turn things around.

Umm, umm... “A-Ah, I know! Why don’t we go sit down and have a chat?!” I finally suggested. The members of Ark took me up on it, and we made our way to the Adventurer’s guild dining hall.



I sipped the ale that I’d ordered—which had arrived lukewarm—as we restarted our conversation.

“So, what brings you to Ronkainen, Mukohda?” Gaudino asked.

“It’s a long story,” I said, then gave him and his party members the rundown on how my magic stove had gotten destroyed, and how I’d made my way to Ronkainen in the hopes of finding a new one. I left out the part where we had stopped along the way to level the Church of Rubanov’s main temple, needless to say.

“Ouranos, he says,” Gaudino sighed.

“Sounds like you’re still managing to find your way to the most outrageous places on the continent,” Gideon commented.

“Course, a place like that is probably nothing for you and your crew,” Sigvard said.

Would you please stop looking at me like that? You’re exasperated, I get it! And for the record, I told them not to take me there!

“Didn’t you clear the Brixt dungeon too, just a little while back?” Gideon said. Gaudino and Sigvard muttered about having heard similar rumors as well.

“I did, yeah,” I said. “My familiars *really* wanted to take it on, so I couldn’t exactly say no.” Dungeons were perhaps the only thing my familiars valued as highly as they did their meals.

As it happened, the teleportation stone I’d used to skip the first several levels of the Brixt dungeon had been given to me by none other than the members of Ark. I chuckled as the thought struck me, and took a bite of the crab and cream croquette that I was eating.

I’d brought said croquette out on Fel’s request. When I had ordered the ales, he’d telepathically demanded that I bring something out for him too. I had gone with the croquettes because I had wanted to avoid bringing out anything too aromatic in the middle of the Adventurer’s guild, and they were the least fragrant dish out of all the meals I had stocked up in my Item Box. Still, it was kind of a

shame to eat them now, considering how precious they were. *I was saving those, dang it...*

As a side note, Feodora was entirely ignoring the conversation as she happily munched away at her own croquette. The hopeful, hungry look in her eyes when I produced them had been so intense and her stare so persistent that I just couldn't bring myself to ignore her.

But anyway, I was more interested in hearing about how Gaudino et al. had been lately than I was in recounting my own stories. "How did you guys end up in these parts?" I asked.

"We're here on escort duty," Gaudino explained.

It seemed that Ark had continued exploring the Aveling dungeon for some time after we said our goodbyes. Then, just when they'd accomplished enough to start feeling the urge to move on to another town, a merchant they were acquainted with had hired them to escort him to Ronkainen.

"Are you planning on sticking around here for a while?" I asked.

"If only," Gaudino grumbled with a scowl, which didn't really tell me much.

"Dealing with water monsters isn't exactly in our wheelhouse," Gideon explained in his place.

Oh, right. All the adventurers here work around the Eremej, so that would be a problem.

"It's not like we *couldn't* handle the monsters 'round here in a pinch, but this town's not exactly known for being the safest place either," Sigvard added as he glanced at Feodora, who was still happily savoring her croquette.

That slight gesture made it pretty easy to imagine what he was getting at. Feodora was old enough to have grandkids, sure, but she *looked* like a lovely young elf in the prime of her life. If public order was as poorly maintained in this town as people claimed, it wasn't hard to imagine that her looks alone could wind up drawing trouble to her if they stuck around for too long.

"I guess you'll be moving on to another town soon, then?" I asked.

"We're thinking about it," Gaudino said, "but we haven't settled on a destination just yet."

"We thought about headin' to the capital or Dolan, but we've spent enough time in both of those towns to know 'em front and back. Would be nice to go somewhere a little more fresh," Sigvard added.

"No kidding! Can't even count how many times we've been to those cities," Gideon sighed. All three of them looked a little pensive, but a moment later, Gideon's face lit up. "Oh, of course! Just for reference, where are *you* headed

next, Mukohda?” he asked.

“I’ve already done everything I needed to here, so I was thinking about heading home the day after tomorrow, or thereabouts,” I said. I’d obtained the magic stove that I had come here for, so I figured I’d do my usual donations tomorrow, then head back to Karelina the day after.

Hm? That’s weird. Why do they look so confused? Did I say something strange?

“Home?” Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard repeated in unison.

“Yeah. Oh, right—I ended up buying a house in Karelina a little while after the last time we saw each other,” I explained.

“S-Seriously...?”

“He’s got a base of operations now...?”

“If I wasn’t jealous already, I sure am now...”

I have to admit, the envious gazes I was getting from most of Ark’s members made me feel just the slightest sense of superiority. I took their reaction to mean that it was pretty rare for adventurers to own their own homes. In my case, of course, it was all thanks to my familiars bringing in such hefty paychecks for me.

“Oh, I know! Why don’t you all come back to Karelina with me?” I suggested. “There’s more than enough room for you to stay at my place, so you wouldn’t need to bother renting rooms at an inn, and it’s a really nice town!”

Having a high-ranking party of adventurers like Ark around would be a boon for both Karelina’s Adventurer’s guild and Karelina itself. The guild and its guildmaster had helped me out time and time again, so I figured that inviting Ark back with me would be a good way to pay Willem back a little.

“Karelina, eh?” said Gaudino. “Come to think of it, we’ve always passed straight through that place. Never took the time to see the sights.”

“That’s true, now that you mention it,” Gideon agreed.

“Yeah, maybe we *should* go to Karelina. I mean, why not? Let’s do it! Never hurts to have Mukohda around, after all!” Sigvard said, pumping his fists in agreement. Feodora nodded vigorously as well, for some reason. I was actually a little surprised to realize that she’d been listening to us after all.

“You two have no shame when it comes to chasing your desires, do you?” Gaudino commented.

“Tell me about it,” Gideon added. “Everyone knows you’re after Mukohda’s booze, Sigvard, and Feodora’s aiming for his cooking.”

“Figured me out, have you?” Sigvard said with a chuckle. “I admit it—the

drinks he treated me to back then have been on my mind ever since. Now *that* was the good stuff,” he added as he crossed his arms and closed his eyes, basking in the memory of the alcohol I’d shared with him.

“*Nothing* is better than good food!” Feodora said, which marked the first time I’d actually heard her say a proper sentence at a reasonable volume.

Yeah, those two really are slaves to their desires, I thought as I cracked a smile. It wasn’t like treating them to a drink and a meal or two would be too much trouble for me, so I was prepared to indulge them a little. Just as the adventurers of Ark and I were getting started on working out the details, though...

“What exactly gave you the idea that you would be returning home? We have other business to attend to first,” Fel said.

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“He meant precisely what he said, my liege!” said Gon. “Though of course, Fel had to explain the situation to me as well.”

“What situation? What’re you two talking about?”

“Rather than returning home, our next destination will be a dungeon.”

I spent a couple seconds just gaping at Fel. “*What?! Wait, wait, since when?! This is the first I’m hearing about it!*” *I was all ready to go straight home!*

“Hold on a second, Mukohda! What’s this all about?” Gaudino asked. He and his party seemed bewildered by the sudden turn that our conversation had just taken, and I was right there with them. Nobody had told me *anything* about a dungeon being part of our travel plans!

«Woo-hoo, it’s finally time! It’s supposed to be a totally untouched dungeon too, right? I am so hyped up for this!» Dora-chan said.

«Dungeon time, dungeon time! Sui’ll beat the whole thing!» Sui sang gleefully to itself. *They* were both in the know, it seemed, and were more than a little excited about this.

Hm? Wait a second. A totally untouched dungeon...?

I paused for a moment as Dora-chan’s words sank in.

“Oh god, that’s *right!*”

“Heh heh! I see your memory has been jogged,” Fel said. **“We were told of an untouched dungeon in this vicinity back in that town we traveled to during our previous trip. You could hardly expect us to forget a tidbit of information that compelling, now could you?”**

Maybe not, but I sure did, dang it all! It had happened all the way back when I was doing my donation tour in Brixt, and visited the church of Vahagn, the

God of War. His worshippers had told me about a supposedly untouched dungeon that existed somewhere in the cluster of small, constantly warring nations that bordered Leonhardt.

“Those so-called small nations are nearby, are they not?” Fel pressed with a smirk that showed off his razor-sharp canines.

Oh, great. I can already tell that he’s not gonna take no for an answer. Gon was clearly on board with the plan too, and Dora-chan and Sui were already beside themselves with excitement, so there was no way I could expect any backup from them.

“A dungeon in the border states, huh?” Gaudino said thoughtfully.

“And an *untouched* one, to boot,” Gideon added.

“Who knows what sort of loot could be sleeping away in a place like that,” Sigvard mused.

“And what sort of delicious ingredients,” Feodora noted.

The adventurers of Ark had been listening in, apparently, and had put together the pieces well enough to get a grasp of the situation. It seemed to have lit a fire in their adventurers’ spirits as well—or whatever Feodora’s equivalent of that was—and their eyes were now practically sparkling with excitement.

“Hmm. I suppose you all have some familiarity with the appeal of such things?” Fel said in a more-than-slightly condescending tone.

“You’d better believe it. What could be better than an untouched dungeon?” Gaudino replied. Gideon, Sigvard, and Feodora quickly agreed.

“Then what say you to coming along with us?”

“Can we? Seriously?”

“They are your friends, are they not?” Fel asked, glancing over at me.
“That being the case, I have no objections.”

“Then we’d love to! Absolutely!” Gaudino immediately agreed.

“Be warned, however—not even I have set foot within the dungeon we journey to. You will need to tread carefully, or else pay the price,” Fel cautioned.

“We wouldn’t have it any other way,” Gaudino replied.

“Hah hah hah! Then we have much to look forward to!”

“Ha ha ha, no kidding!”

No, no, stop! Cut that out! This is the worst thing you guys could possibly hit it off over! And couldn’t you give this at least a little thought before you sign your whole party up for it?!



For reasons that still baffled me, the adventurers of Ark had signed up to explore a dungeon with us, leaving me to sigh in exasperated despair.

Honestly, how do things always end up turning out this way? I wondered as we made our way back to the house we'd rented with Ark in tow. Everyone *except* for me was having the time of their lives, by all appearances. Gaudino and his crew had found a kindred spirit in Fel, and before long even Gon—the dragon who'd insisted he had no interest in their kind—was chatting away with them. Making even less sense was the fact that Dora-chan and Sui, who couldn't even *communicate* with the members of Ark, seemed to be forming an immediate friendship with them as well. Their shared interest in dungeons was apparently powerful enough to overcome any barrier.

Actually, wait, when did we even decide that their whole party would be staying at our place? Fel had informed them that our business was finished and that we'd be departing at once, then casually told them to follow us, and just like that, it was set in stone. Sending them away at that point would've felt way too awkward, considering how enthusiastic they were at the prospect of crawling the dungeon with us. Feodora had even started outright pumping her fists in excitement when the subject had come up at the Adventurer's guild, though I was pretty certain she was still just looking forward to the food. Anyway, I had offered to let them stay at my house in Karelina, but I definitely didn't remember saying anything about letting them stay at the place I'd rented in Ronkainen!

Seriously, how do things keep turning out this way? Haven't we been through enough dungeons lately? First there was the one in Dolan, then Aveling, then the meat dungeon, and then Brixt! And we cleared every one of them all the way down to the bottom floor! That should be enough dungeoneering to satisfy anyone, but here we are, plunging right back into a new one...

And of course, everyone except for me was as excited as could be at the prospect. It was enough to make me want to throw my hands in the air and stop caring entirely.



“For crying out loud... They’re all set to turn this into a straight-up party, I swear,” I grumbled to myself. I was in the kitchen, getting ready to cook up some alligator meat for dinner.

The moment we arrived at home, Fel had said, “**Now then, it is time for our**

meal. An occasion such as this calls for alligator meat!" as if he hadn't already been talking about having me cook the alligator all day long. He had also gone into condescending-mode again and told the members of Ark that he would *allow* them to join us for dinner. Thankfully, Gaudino and Gideon were apparently pretty good-natured and had played along by thanking him in spite of his posturing. Sigvard had done the same with a grin that looked rather mismatched with his stern features, while Feodora had literally jumped for joy.

Old Man Gon had told the members of Ark that they should "Make sure that you are thoroughly prepared, and partake of my liege's cooking with caution," which struck me as pretty silly, considering how eagerly *he'd* gorged himself the first time I had fed *him*. Dora-chan and Sui, at least, were busy speculating about what alligator meat would taste like and talking about how excited they were to try it, which put a smile on my face.

In any case, I was going to have to make dinner sooner or later, so I ended up making a beeline to the kitchen the moment I found an opening. The fact that doing so *also* meant I wouldn't have to be part of the conversation while everyone else got worked up about how much they loved dungeons was also a factor, I'll admit.

Seriously, what do they see in those places? I just didn't get it. Sure, the payoff for a trek into a dungeon could be immense if you hit the jackpot, but I just couldn't comprehend the mindset that drove people to shoulder the immense risk of setting foot in a place like that. *I guess now's not the time to speculate about that sort of thing, though. I've got an order of gator meat to fulfill!*

First things first, I had to figure out how the black tyrant alligator meat actually tasted. I had no clue what it would be like this time around—I'd heard people say that gator meat tasted a lot like chicken, but I'd never tried it for myself.

I lightly seasoned a piece of the meat with salt and pepper, then cooked it up just like that. I'd eaten plenty of snakes by that point, not to mention even weirder creatures—many of which were monsters that didn't even exist in *any* form in my old world—so I felt no hesitation about taking a bite of gator flesh. *Let's see how it tastes!*

"Hmm... Yeah, this *does* taste a bit like poultry," I muttered to myself. "It sort of reminds me of white fish too, actually. It's got a nice, subtle flavor that doesn't overwhelm you, and it's not gamey at all."

Seeing as the members of Ark would be dining with us, I figured that this would be a good night to go with an old standby. That inevitably led me to

conclude that I should make karaage. The members of Ark had loved the dish when I served it to them the last time we met, and I knew all too well how much my familiars adored it.

As for what sort of seasonings I'd use, I had a feeling that the gator meat would work best with a simple soy sauce-based marinade. That didn't mean that I was planning on keeping it *too* simple, though—I was also going to provide a bunch of toppings like mayo, lemon juice, shichimi pepper, and maybe a green onion sauce as well. That way we wouldn't be lacking in variety!

I wanted to make at least one other dish as well, and decided to go with a somewhat safe choice: a simple sauté. Considering how mild the meat's flavor was, I figured a nice, rich cream sauce would work really well with it, and decided to throw some mushrooms into the sauce for good measure. With the menu for tonight's dinner decided, my next step was to do some shopping in my Online Supermarket. *Let's see... I'll need this, and this, and these...and, all right, that should do it!*

My preparations were all complete, and I decided to start by getting to work on the karaage. I sliced the alligator meat into chunks, then got them marinating in the same soy-based mixture I habitually used. It would take a while for the flavor to soak in, and in the meantime, I pivoted over to the karaage toppings and the alligator sauté.

The green onion sauce I had decided to make was an incredibly easy recipe. I just finely chopped some green onions, put them in a bowl, and added some minced garlic and ginger. You can find minced garlic and ginger sold by the jar in supermarkets sometimes, and those work perfectly well if you don't want to do it yourself! Next up, I added vinegar, soy sauce, water, sugar, and sesame oil, then thoroughly mixed all the ingredients together. I had decided to use black rice vinegar this time, which would give the sauce a rather mellow sort of acidity, but it is possible to use a different kind if you want to change up the flavor.

That wrapped up the green onion sauce, so I moved right along to the sauté. I got to work preparing the two types of mushrooms I'd be using first. I broke up the shimeji mushrooms I had bought, cutting off their roots and separating their stalks, then thinly sliced the white mushrooms lengthwise.

Once the mushrooms were prepped, I cut the alligator meat into pieces roughly the size of my palm, scored them with a knife, lightly seasoned them with salt and pepper, dredged them in flour, and started cooking them in an oiled frying pan, flipping them partway through. Then, when both sides of the

alligator meat were browned, I removed them from the frying pan again so I could prepare the sauce.

Less fat had rendered out of the meat as it browned than I'd expected, so I didn't even bother wiping the pan. I just threw in a pat of butter, followed by all the mushrooms once the butter was melted. I stir-fried them until they were soft, seasoned them with salt and pepper, and then stirred everything together for just a little longer before adding the white wine. I let the wine simmer for a moment to cook off its alcohol, then added a bit of heavy cream and some chicken stock granules, keeping it simmering until it started thickening up.

Last but not least, I tasted the sauce and fine-tuned its flavor with a bit of extra salt and pepper. With that, my mushroom cream sauce was good to go! I sometimes liked to add a little powdered cheese as well, which made the sauce even richer and creamier, but I didn't bother this time. All I had left to do was dish the sautéed alligator out and top each piece with an ample scoop of the sauce.

"That should do it! Sautéed alligator topped with mushroom cream sauce, order up!"

I had to pat myself on the back as I looked over my work. Thanks to the benefits of my Solitary Chef title, I had managed to make an incredible number of servings of alligator sauté, which I stored away in my Item Box to keep them hot while I finished up the karaage. I decided to double-fry them this time for that extra bit of crunch, with the oil at a higher temperature for the second stage of frying. I fried batch after batch after batch, until I was left with a towering pile of golden-brown karaage.

"All right, that oughta be enough! I think I'm all ready," I said as I moved the karaage into my Item Box, then headed back into the living room, where my gluttonous quartet (and also Feodora, actually) were waiting for their meal with palpable impatience. "Okay, everyone, dinner's served!"

I knew very well how much my familiars would eat, so I filled their usual deep dishes with massive helpings of alligator sauté, and gave each of them a mountain of karaage on a large plate as well. For myself and Ark, however, I went with individual servings of sauté, but served the karaage on a big dish between us, family-style. I also bought a bunch of dinner rolls from my Online Supermarket, which I put on the table in a basket for people to grab whenever they felt like it. I didn't forget the lemon wedges, mayo, shichimi pepper, and green onion sauce for the karaage either, of course!

"Tonight's meal features meat from a black tyrant alligator," I explained. "I

used it to make a sauté, and a bunch of karaage too! Enjoy!”

My familiars had already started chowing down before the words even left my mouth.

“Ahh, yes! Karaage is truly delicious!”

“Indeed. And the meat with the white sauce on top of it is pleasing in its own right!”

«I know, right? The sauce is crazy rich, and it works incredibly with the gator meat!»

«They’re both really, really yummy!»

Looks like going with an old standby was the right choice after all, I reflected. “Oh, I almost forgot! I have a bunch of sauces and stuff for the karaage this time, if you want to try them.”

“Say these things before you serve us!” snarled Fel, who was already licking his plate clean.

Oh, come on. It’s not like you’re not gonna ask for seconds anyway.

“I demand seconds!”

What’d I tell you?

“Yes, good—and with sauce as well,” Fel ordered as I prepared his second helping. Mayo and karaage were a classic combo, so I decided to start him off with that. Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all watched me put the plate together, of course, and all requested second helpings with mayo for themselves as well.

Meanwhile, Ark’s adventurers were savoring each and every bite of their meals with relish. They had seemed a little freaked out when I told them it was all made from black tyrant alligator meat—probably on account of it being an ultra-expensive luxury item—but after a little encouragement on my part, they had finally started eating. Of course, a certain elf had proved to be the exception to all of that yet again. Glutton that she was, she hadn’t hesitated for a second to start piling up pieces of karaage on her plate.

I wasn’t quite finished treating them yet, of course. “I bet that you’ll be interested in this as well,” I said as I brought out a large bottle of beer that I had already popped the cap off of, and set it down in front of Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard.

“Oh, will we ever!” Gaudino said. “You’re one hell of a host, Mukohda, I’ve gotta say!”

“No kidding! Thanks, Mukohda,” Gideon agreed.

“I can hardly believe I get to drink your booze again! Talk about a blessing,” Sigvard added. All three of them sounded overjoyed.

I was feeling the urge to have a drink myself, so I decided to bring out a slightly fancy gift set of beer from Liquor Shop Tanaka's menu that I had been tempted by. It was one of the items that Agni regularly requested in her offerings, and while I usually wouldn't indulge quite *that* much on my own, a dinner party with guests felt like the perfect opportunity for a bit of a splurge. Feodora had ended up getting a glass of soda instead, by the way. Her elf senses must've tipped her off about the stuff while I was pouring the drinks my familiars had requested, and her persistent stare had once again pressured me into giving her a share as well. Considering how her face lit up after her first sip, it seemed pretty clear she was a fan.

"Now *this* is the good stuff!" Gaudino shouted after his first hearty swig of beer.

"It's *beyond* good," Gideon said. "Good enough to make me wonder what the hell the slop we usually get at pubs is even supposed to be."

I took a sip as well, and had to agree—it really *was* one heck of a brew. The beer's aroma was fantastic, and it had an incredible body as well.

That was when I heard Sigvard gasp for breath. "*Another!*" he shouted as he slammed his glass to the table.

"*Already?*" Gaudino sighed incredulously. "You could stand to slow down a *little*, Sigvard."

"Slow down?! Are you kiddin' me?! You can't take beer *slow* when it's this good!"

"I mean, yes, it really is just that good, but that's exactly why you *should* slow down! You have to *savor* drinks like this!"

"Oh, I'm savoring it, believe me! Just in the dwarven way—we guzzle our drinks down by the tankard, and savor every last drop while we do it!"

"It's fine, it's fine! We have plenty! Here," I said, refilling Sigvard's glass.

"Oh ho! Thank you kindly, Mukohda," Sigvard said, then chugged his second glass down just as quickly as he'd finished off the first. Meanwhile, I glanced toward the center of the table.

"So, I know that you're busy savoring your beers," I said, "but nothing goes better with a beer than some karaage, and if you don't move fast, you might miss your chance to have any!"

Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard finally turned their attention to the karaage pile as well, only to find that it had already been reduced to less than half of its former glory.

"*Dammit*, Feodora, haven't you ever heard of restraint?!"

“Seriously! And stop shoveling them into your mouth with both hands! That’s *not* allowed!”

“You can’t take *all* of it for yourself! Save some for us, for pity’s sake!”

But Feodora—who was holding a fork in each hand—just kept shamelessly skewering and devouring piece after piece of karaage as quickly as she could claim them.

“Oh, for the...” Gaudino sighed. “Should’ve known better than to try to pry her attention away from food this good. Come on, guys. Let’s get in on this before it’s all gone!”

There was something so childlike about the way Ark’s members had ended up fighting over their karaage, I couldn’t help but let out a chuckle. Dinner tonight was becoming even rowdier than our meals usually were, and I was enjoying every moment of it.

Chapter 6: Next Stop: an Unexplored Dungeon!

A new day arrived, which I would be using to visit Ronkainen's churches and orphanages. It had become something of a custom of mine to make charitable donations in all of the towns I spent time in, and I had yet to do so here.

While I was occupied with my donations, the members of Ark would be getting some shopping done in preparation for our upcoming dungeon excursion. They'd told me their plans earlier that morning, and had been over the moon when I informed them that they didn't need to bother stocking up on provisions, since I would handle our meals over the course of the adventure. I had been somewhat bemused to think that they'd be *that* happy to eat my food at first, but when I probed a little deeper I learned that there was a bit more to it after all. They *were* excited for my cooking, yes, but more importantly, provisions accounted for the majority of a typical party's baggage going into a dungeon. In short, they were relieved to *not* have to haul days' and days' worth of food around with them.

Ark made it a point to carry only the bare minimum of baggage on their persons, relying on Feodora's Item Box for bulk transport purposes. Her Item Box, however, was apparently on the smaller side compared to those that other elves possessed. Their dungeon expeditions sometimes lasted upwards of a month, and in those cases, the vast majority of her storage space ended up being occupied by food. To make matters worse, it wasn't even *good* food—jerky and hardtack tended to be their staples.

In any case, by the time they'd crammed their food, spare weapons, potions, and various bits and bobs of dungeon-delving gear into Feodora's Item Box, it usually ended up being literally filled to capacity. A worker at the guild had told me how important provisions were for dungeon expeditions back when I went into Dolan's dungeon, but hearing it from real, active-duty adventurers made the advice feel much weightier than it had back then, when it had been purely hypothetical from my perspective. And for all the inconveniences involved, they made it clear that it could still be even worse.

“We’re lucky to have someone with an Item Box, period,” Gaudino

explained.

“And we’ve got a magic tool that spits out all the drinkable water we could need,” Sigvard added. “Makes all the difference in the world, that. We picked one up as soon as we could, and never looked back.”

I saw his point immediately. All the food in the world wouldn’t keep you alive for long without anything to drink, after all. Adventurers without a tool like Ark’s had to bring casks full of water into the dungeons with them, so it was easy to understand why Sigvard felt so grateful to not have to go through all that hassle.

I recalled Fel telling me once that water produced with magic wasn’t safe to drink, certain special circumstances aside, which meant that just having a party member who knew Water magic wouldn’t be enough to dodge the issue. Fortunately, having a divine blessing was one of those special circumstances, and since everyone in my party had those, it had never been an issue—not to mention that my Online Supermarket rendered the whole point moot regardless.

I know it might sound condescending to call them *ordinary* adventurers, but hearing about the struggles that Ark faced really put a lot of stuff into context for me. They told me about how parties that didn’t include any members with Item Boxes were forced to rely on magic bags instead. Unfortunately, the only ways to get one of those were to either find one in a dungeon or to buy one, and the latter option required you to already have a *very* healthy financial situation—assuming there even were any available to be bought in the first place, of course, since magic bags were rarely put up for sale. They were such essential tools for parties without Item Boxes that most adventurers weren’t willing to part with the ones that they found.

I was really getting the impression that life was pretty rough for most dungeon-faring adventurers. According to Gideon, “Whether or not a party’s got someone with an Item Box or a magic bag on hand has a huge impact on their chances of ever making it past C-rank.”

That made sense to me as well. Dungeons seemed like the best place available for adventurers to level up, and being able to make regular excursions into one felt like it could have a huge impact on one’s overall abilities—and needless to say, one’s abilities played a major role in determining their rank as an adventurer.

Awkwardly enough, I had actually obtained *several* magic bags of my own. It’s not like I was just sitting on them—my familiars used them all the time to store their prey when they went out hunting—and I had already sold all the ones

that I didn't have an immediate use for, but hearing Ark's story made me realize that if I found any more magic bags in the future, putting them up for sale would definitely be the right thing to do.

All things considered, if even the members of Ark—an adventuring party capable enough to rise to the distinguished position of A-rank—felt all these pressures, it seemed safe to say that adventuring really was a harsh occupation on the whole. Hearing everyone's stories made me keenly appreciate just how fortunate I was.

Anyway, that whole conversation had happened over breakfast, and shortly thereafter, we had split up to handle our respective errands in town. Orson had given me the rundown on the town's church situation, so I knew that there were temples dedicated to the Goddesses of Wind, Earth, Fire, and Water here, plus a relatively large church dedicated to the God of War, which was popular on account of the town's proximity to the warlike border nations.

My plan for the day was to go around to all the churches to make my donations, and then make *another* set of donations to the gods themselves, as it were. If I didn't send them their offerings before I set out for the dungeon, I knew I'd probably end up postponing it for ages, so it seemed better to get it done now while I had time. After all, I knew how eagerly the gods would be awaiting their gifts, and I was well aware of how obnoxious they'd probably become if I put this off.

I'd already taken their requests the night before. They'd asked for pretty much the same things as always, but the sheer number and variety of goods I'd need to buy made it a pretty laborious task anyway. I wanted as much time to get that done as possible, so I decided to wrap up my donation tour as quickly as I could, starting with the nearest church: the one devoted to Kisharle.

“All right, guys. The Goddess of Earth’s church is up first! Let’s get going!”



“Well, *that* sure took longer than I thought it would. The church of the God of War’s up next, though, and that’s the last one!”

«**Then let us finish our task, and return home at once,**» Fel groaned.

«I *wholeheartedly* agree,» said Gon, who sounded just as worn out as Fel.

«Yeesh. You guys doing okay down there?» Dora-chan asked from atop Gon’s back.

«Are you all right?» Sui said, echoing Dora-chan’s sentiment from its

perch on Fel.

«**I am through with those irritating fools,**» Fel replied.

«Apostle this, apostle that—they were relentless,» Gon muttered.

I rolled my eyes. *I can't believe you two have the gall to complain about it, considering how much you were loving all the attention at first!*

To make a long story short, it seemed that in the aftermath of the Rubanov affair, the popular consensus was that Fel and Gon were clearly the apostles of the God of All Creation. That, understandably, meant that their unexpected appearance at a church—even a church devoted to one of the goddesses rather than Demiurge himself—prompted quite the uproar. Demiurge had transmitted his confrontation with the Rubanovs to authority figures in all of the prominent religions, so it was no surprise that word had spread like wildfire.

When we got to the first church on our list, which was dedicated to the Goddess of Earth, their highest-ranking priest had fallen to his knees before Fel and Gon, followed by the rest of his congregation in short order. It was quite the sight to see, and since the two of them didn't seem to mind having their egos stroked, I got into the spirit of things and informed the head priest that my donation came “courtesy of Demiurge’s apostles,” and in doing so turned the scene from a commotion into an uproar in no time flat. The head priest wept—no, *bawled*—tears of joy, and the various worshippers ended up surrounding us in an ecstatic fervor.

It took us a long time to get out of there, and when we finally made it to our second stop, the church of the Goddess of Water, we were met with an equally enthusiastic reception. I stuck to my gift-from-the-disciples story and, predictably, caused an uproar all over again. I was in it for the long haul at that point, unfortunately—after all, if I changed my story after the first church to claim that the next donations were from me personally and the stories started getting out, it felt like it could have some really unpleasant consequences in the long run.

So, yeah—we were trapped inside by the worshippers all over again, and more or less had to bulldoze our way through the crowd to get out, leaving with a hasty explanation that I had to move along to the next church. We went through the exact same process in the Goddess of Wind’s church, and then yet *again* in the Goddess of Fire’s. After having to listen to all that fawning and adulation about the mighty disciples of Demiurge, even Fel and Gon had grown sick of the whole deal.

Finally, we arrived at our last destination: the church of Vahagn, God of War.

We stepped inside their compound to find a group of burly men already kneeling on the ground with their hands pressed to their hearts in a show of subservience.

“We bid you welcome, O disciples of the divine,” said a particularly muscular man in the center of their group. He looked like he was somewhere around middle-aged, and his stubbly facial hair complemented his features quite nicely.

“**V-Very good,**” Fel said.

“Y-Yes, indeed,” Gon agreed. This was a very different reception than we’d gotten at the last four churches, and both of them seemed to be kind of thrown off by it. I was just as perplexed, but since I had more or less ended up playing a supporting role in the proceedings, I could just stand back and watch how the exchange played out.

“As followers of the God of War, it is our belief that to trade blows is a far greater honor than to trade words. I would request a match, if you are willing,” said the man.

Oh, wow, for real? This guy’s actually challenging Fel and Gon to a fight? He doesn’t even look scared! That said, it did strike me as overly fight-happy for him to just come out and ask for a match just moments after we met him. I had to wonder if this was the cultural influence of the nearby and supposedly warlike border nations at work.

While I pondered the man’s behavior, Fel and Gon seemed somewhat intrigued.

“**Oh?**” Fel said, shooting Gon a glance.

“Hmm,” Gon muttered, returning Fel’s look.

“**Which of us, then, would you have your match with?**” asked Fel.

“The ancient dragon, if it pleases you,” the man replied, his gaze fixed on Gon. The look in his eyes was *terrifyingly* intense. Fel, meanwhile, immediately started sulking.

“Oh, would you? Come at me, then,” Gon said, spurring the man on.

Around that time, Dora-chan fluttered off Gon’s back and made his way over to me. «This is getting good, huh?» he commented, but I didn’t share his enthusiasm.

«Be sure not to hurt him, okay, Gon? Don’t go overboard!» I telepathically transmitted.

«No need to worry, my liege,» Gon replied. «A frail little creature like him could never hope to wound me, yet he had the courage to issue his challenge anyway, even knowing he doesn’t stand a chance. The least I can do to

acknowledge his spirit is to grant him a chance.»

The stubbly, muscle-bound man stepped forward. A moment later, however, another muscular man—this one with a clean-shaven head—raised his voice as well. “I want a round with the Fenrir!” he shouted.

“**Heh! Then you shall have it,**” Fel said, accepting the challenge with an air of complete nonchalance.

Sui, who was still riding on Fel’s back, sent me a message. «Master, is Uncle Fel gonna fight?» it asked.

«Yeah, looks like it,» I replied.

«Aww, Sui’s jealous. Sui wants to fight too!»

«Sorry, Sui, but this is kind of a special circumstance. That guy wants to fight Fel specifically. You’ll have plenty of chances in the dungeon, though,» I said, perfectly aware that any chance I might have had at getting out of the dungeon excursion was already well and truly sunk.

«Oooh, the dungeon! Yeah! Sui’s gonna pew-pew lots and lots of bad guys in the dungeon!»

«Ha ha ha! Yeah, I bet you will,» I said as I heaved an internal sigh. *Looks like Sui’s going to go on another rampage this time, then.* «Oh, right! You too, Fel—make sure not to maim the guy!» I added, just in case.

«**I am well aware,**» Fel replied.

The stubbly man readied a spear, while the bald man took up a bastard sword. Meanwhile, the rest of the burly, sweaty Vahagn-followers gulped as they watched their fellows square off against the two legendary beasts.

“Ready yourself!” the stubbly man shouted as he charged Gon.

“Have at you!” the bald man cried as he leapt at Fel.

As for my familiars’ responses, well...to start, Gon did nothing. He simply sat there, not budging as the stubbly man thrust his spear right into his face. Fel barely moved either, though he at least put in enough effort to raise a foreleg and intercept the bald man’s sword with a single claw. A loud crack rang out as the tip of the stubbly man’s spear snapped clean off, followed immediately by a sharp *schwing* as the bald man’s bastard sword was sliced clean in half by Fel’s claw. The two men gaped at their ruined weapons, while the rest of the War God’s followers stood there in stunned, slack-jawed silence.

Okay, but seriously, though—I know you guys were probably pretty confident, but you were up against an ancient dragon and a Fenrir, for crying out loud! I was a little exasperated, but I also couldn’t just stand there and let the awkwardness linger. Just as I was trying to come up with my next move,

however, Fel and Gon reached out telepathically once more.

«**L-Let us be on our way. Immediately.»**

«Y-Yes, I do believe that would be for the best.»

To my shock, both of them sounded downright panicked. I followed their gazes, curious about what could make them freak out like that...and saw a cluster of children, hiding away in the undergrowth and the shadows of a nearby building as they watched Fel and Gon, their eyes sparkling with curiosity.



Ha ha, oh, is that what's going on? They want to get away before the kids start to swarm them? I guess I can go with that, just this once. I handed over my donation to one of the nearby War God followers with a perfunctory "Courtesy of the apostles," then made a hasty exit with my familiars in tow.

«**That was too close for my liking,**» Fel sighed with relief. «**I cannot abide whelps that know no restraint.**»

«Agreed,» Gon said. «They are far too unreserved, even with the likes of us.»

The two of them had ended up indulging the curiosity of more than a few children during our previous donation tours, and they were both clearly not eager to repeat the experience.

“Oh, what’s the big deal? They’re just kids,” I said.

«Right? Just brush ’em off, and they’re not an issue,» Dora-chan agreed.

«Why don’t you play with them? It’s fun!» Sui suggested.

Fel and Gon just scowled. The thought that the two creatures who were supposed to be the mightiest in the entire world found their ultimate foes in the form of rambunctious children brought a chuckle to my lips.



“All right, let’s get this done!” I said to myself. My familiars and Ark’s members had already gone to bed, but I had one last task to finish before I followed suit.

I’d taken the time to buy all of the gods’ requested items after we finished our church and orphanage donation tour. The tour had taken longer than I’d been planning on thanks to all the complications we encountered, but I had somehow managed to get everything together in time regardless. I was at a total loss as to what to do about the local religions’ newfound reverence for their apostles, and compared to Fel and Gon, I’d gotten off *lightly*. *They’d* taken the full brunt of the worshippers’ reverence, and by the end of the day, they had both seemed entirely fed up with it.

I wonder if this is going to keep happening every time I pass through a town and hand out donations. If it did, I figured I’d have to come up with a new way to distribute them. After all, if I kept putting Fel and Gon into situations like that, it seemed like it would only be a matter of time before one of them flew off the handle.

Well, I guess I’ll have plenty of time to think about that later. For now, I have

to send the gods their gifts! We had decided to head to the dungeon tomorrow—and by “we,” I mostly mean my familiars and Ark. I would’ve preferred to take it a bit slower, but they were just too excited for me to turn them down. Anyway, I had a busy day coming up, so I wanted to send out my offerings and get to sleep as soon as possible!

“Okay, everyone, it’s time!” I called out. Instantly, I heard the thudding of footsteps in my mind.

<Finally! Finally!>

<Hee hee hee! It’s certainly been quite a while!>

<Hey, nice! I’ve been looking forward to this.>

<I was waiting.>

<Ohh, yes! It’s time at last!>

<Yes, yes, yes!>

I see the gods are as worked up as ever. “So, umm, since I have to get up early tomorrow, I’m just gonna dole these out as quickly as I can, if that’s okay with you,” I said.

<You’re heading to another dungeon, yes? And it won’t be long at all before you get your next tenant, if memory serves!>

I think that was...Kisharle’s voice, probably? And wait, they already know about the dungeon? Have they been spying on me again?

<’Course we have! Watching you’s the only entertainment worth bothering with up here.>

That’d be Agni, I think, and ugh, would you please not call my life “entertainment”? Don’t I have a right to privacy? Not that complaining to a bunch of gods about their behavior is going to get me anywhere, I guess.

<Oh, stop worrying! We don’t watch you when you’re taking care of business in the little boy’s room. I don’t even want to see that.>

That one was Ninrir for sure, and if you don’t want to see stuff like that, you could just not spy on me at all! Sheesh.

<But who cares about any of this? What matters right now is your next tenant! I want a sweets shop—one that sells all the traditional stuff from your homeland!>

I care about that, Ninrir! And like I’ve said, there’s no telling what sort of tenants I’ll be allowed to choose from until the choice is given to me!

<I want an ice cream shop. I need an ice cream shop.>

Not you too, Ruka!

<Oh, for the—are you people even listening?>

< Didn't you hear the part where he said that he won't know what his options are till he unlocks the Tenant? >

Thank you, Hephaestos and Vahagn! "That's exactly right. Also, my next Tenant won't unlock until I reach level 160! That's still way, way off in the future," I reminded them.

The gods were *majorly* jumping the gun this time. I didn't anticipate hitting level 160 for a very long while. The last time I had checked my level was when I got my Solitary Chef title, and I had been level 90 back then. There was no way my level was going to shoot up *that* quickly.

"Anyway, I'm going to start handing out your offerings now! First up's Ninrir, so get ready!"

Once again, Ninrir had asked for—well, demanded, really—a selection of Fumiya's seasonal cakes and dorayaki. The store was doing a spring-themed promotion at the moment, and I had bought her all sorts of cherry blossom-themed cakes. There was a cherry blossom mont blanc topped with beautiful light-pink icing, a sponge cake that had actual cherry blossoms incorporated into its layers, and a roll cake covered in pure white whipped cream and decorated with pink icing piped into the shape of cherry blossoms.

All of the cakes looked beautiful—not to mention delicious—and seeing the cherry blossom theme made me realize that it was probably spring at the moment back in Japan. I felt a little wistful as I picked the cakes out, regretting the fact that I'd probably never see cherry blossoms in full bloom again, but I kept those thoughts to myself. Anyway, special items aside, I got Ninrir her usual assortment of cake slices, whole cakes, and a massive quantity of dorayaki, which remained her favorite.

"Okay, here you go," I said as I set her box on the table. It and the hoard of sweets within quickly vanished with a faint flash of light.

< Many thanks! Ha hah, cake and dorayaki! I've waited so, so long for this! > Ninrir shouted with glee, though not quite loudly enough to cover up the sound of a cardboard box being torn open.

< Oh, please, Ninrir! Must you do that here? If you're going to eat, then go back to your own chambers first! >

< Quit nagging, Kisharle! > Ninrir griped. < And I was already planning on doing just that, thank you very much! I'll take my time enjoying these all by myself! Heh heh heh! >

A moment later, I heard the sound of footsteps fading into the distance. Ninrir, it seemed, had left the building, and I could only hope that she wouldn't

use her newfound solitude as an excuse to gorge herself on her entire offering of sweets.

< *That Ninrir, I swear. She simply doesn't know the meaning of calm,* >
Kisharle sighed. < *Well then, I believe it's my turn next!* >

I know, I know. Coming right up!

I brought out another cardboard box that was considerably smaller.

Kisharle's chosen items were pricey, but compact, so her delivery ended up being a lot less bulky than the others'. She'd asked for cosmetics from the ST-III series once again. Their luxury skincare products had completely charmed her, and she had started insisting that her skin simply wouldn't accept anything else at this point. She had also asked for some toner and body lotion, and had given me an extended lecture during which she showed off all the cosmetics knowledge that she'd obtained through her studies while she was at it.

According to Kisharle, < *If you want to maintain your skin, then moisturizing is far and away the most important step!* > Hence why she used a healthy quantity of the ST-III skin lotion on a daily basis. She also claimed that using their facial treatment masks on a daily basis was very helpful. The one problem was that using luxury cosmetics like those every single day was just plain unaffordable.

Kisharle, of course, had an answer to that issue all planned out. < *It seems there are plenty of cheapo treatment masks on the market, and these days, many of them do a much better job than you'd think, given their price! You just have to save the expensive, high-quality ones for those special days when you know you'll need them! Everything started coming together the moment I read about this trick, truly!* >

Personally, I thought it was pretty shocking to hear Kisharle use a word like "cheapo." The idea of gods having days when they know they'll need to look especially good kinda came out of left field too, though needless to say, I didn't voice either of those thoughts.

< *The people in your old world really know their stuff when it comes to beauty! I can't tell you how much I've learned, and I'm certain there's even more knowledge out there that I haven't discovered yet!* > Kisharle added. I was starting to worry that all this exposure to Japanese culture wasn't actually good for her at all—her interest in beauty products had developed into an outright obsession, as of late. Then again, she was clearly enjoying herself, so I decided to keep my doubts to myself.

In the end, Kisharle had requested bottles of ST-III toner and body lotion,

plus three packs of cheapo facial treatment masks, which came thirty to a box. I had chosen them from Matsumura Kiyomi's top-three list for cosmetics, so I was pretty confident they'd satisfy her.

"Here you go, Kisharle!"

<Thank you ever so much!> the goddess replied as her box disappeared.

<Okay, I'm next!> Agni said in her usual, slightly gruff tone.

She, of course, had asked for beer. According to her, there was nothing quite like cracking open a cold one after her morning training session. <Knowing I've got a beer coming up helps me put my all into my training too,> as she had put it, though I had also noticed Ninrir muttering, <Much to the chagrin of all the lesser gods that serve you,> followed by Kisharle whispering, <Yes, they have been grumbling about how hard it is to train with her, haven't they?> immediately afterward.

Agni had decided to leave the specifics of her order entirely in my hands this time. I had figured she'd enjoy drinking a bunch of different varieties of beer to see which ones she liked best, so I ended up basing her offering around taste-testing gift sets.

For starters, I got her a gift set of Y-bisu beer that contained six varieties, all of which advertised themselves as being brewed entirely from domestically produced ingredients. Next, I picked up a gift set made by S-Company, which was famous for their whiskies. The beer in that set had apparently been matured in whiskey barrels, and was supposed to be the product of an incredibly selective brewing process, giving it a very luxurious feel. I also threw in a couple of craft beer sets made by artisanal breweries, and a few microbrew sets as well. Finally, since Agni had mentioned that she wanted to drink something with a really crisp, clean flavor, I got her a box of silver-canned beer that was well-known for delivering precisely that drinking experience.

I heaved three rather heavy cardboard boxes onto the table. "All right, here's your offering, Agni!" I said.

<Oh, thanks! Looks like I'll have something to look forward to after training tomorrow!>

Guess she's getting pumped for her workout already. Good luck, lesser gods, I thought, hoping that my mental encouragement would somehow reach them.

<I'm next.>

And there's Ruka, right on cue. She had requested the same items as always as well: cake and ice cream. This time, though, she had wanted more of the latter than the former. She had asked for a large quantity of vanilla ice cream, as usual,

but told me that she also wanted to try sampling a bunch of different varieties. She'd clearly turned into an ice cream lover without equal.

As far as the cakes went, I had gotten her the same seasonal ones that I'd bought for Ninrir, plus a handful of slices for good measure. The rest of the order, I had filled with ice cream. I had bought one of everything on Fumiya's menu, to start, then bought every variety of vanilla that my main Online Supermarket stocked, and finally spent the rest of her budget buying whatever other ice creams happened to catch my eye. By the time I had finished, I was sure that the quantity and variety of ice cream I'd be sending her would be to her liking.

I lifted two boxes onto the table this time, one full of cake and the other full of ice cream. "Here you go, Ruka," I said.

< *Thanks. I'll savor them,* > Ruka replied. Unlike a certain divine disappointment, *she* was clearly planning on spacing her treats out strategically. I liked the way she did things.

< *All right, we're next!* >

< *And not a moment too soon!* >

That'd be the boozehound combo, Hephaestos and Vahagn. The two of them had *wanted* to ask for the same ultra-high-class whisky they'd requested last time, but they'd also found themselves in something of a predicament when the time came for them to place their order.

< *Why must your world's drinks be so good?! You take one sip, and you're hooked for life!* >

< *You said it. It's delicious beyond measure, but the really good stuff's so expensive! Too expensive!* >

< *Exactly! The six bottles we got last time were incredible—superb, even—but ordering them left us with not even close to enough whiskey to go around!* >

< *But that flavor! I can't stop thinking about it!* >

At the time, all I could think was *fair enough, but there's no point complaining to me about it! It's not my fault!*

The two of them had hemmed and hawed over their options for quite some time, but in the end, they just couldn't bring themselves to give up on the top-shelf brands and had asked for three of the same ones they'd requested before: one with a distinctive blue label, one that had won the gold medal in an international whiskey competition six times and was known for the richness of its flavor, and one that was called a chocolate malt and came in a notably classy bottle.

They'd asked me to use the rest of their budget on any whiskeys I could find that they hadn't tried yet, and since Liquor Shop Tanaka happened to be running a promotion for Canadian whiskies, I'd chosen the rest of their offering from there. I couldn't remember having given them many Canadian whiskies at all so far, so I figured they'd be satisfied with that. I had picked out a brand that had always struck me as the quintessential Canadian whisky, known for its straightforward, refreshing flavor, as well as a whisky that was distilled three times and then aged in a white oak barrel, giving it a smooth, pleasant taste. I had also grabbed a hundred percent rye whisky—the only Canadian brand brewed in that manner—known for having a sweet, rich flavor that made it go down really smoothly.

Those three standout whiskies aside, I had filled the rest of their order with other Canadian brands that lay near the middle of the ranking and fit into the gods' price range. The order had ended up containing several more bottles than the last one, so I figured they'd probably be satisfied.

I pulled a cardboard box packed full of whiskey bottles out of my Item Box, and set it down on the table. "Okay, Hephaestos and Vahagn, here's your long-awaited whiskey!"

< Woo-hoo! Thanks, pal! >

< Feels like it's been an age since we've been able to drink our fill! Thank you! >

The two of them were about as worked up as they could get, and it was plain to see that they were going to go home and start drinking right away. *Just don't go overboard, okay?*

With the bulk of my offerings finished, I only had one task left: sending a gift to one last divine recipient. "Oh, Demiurge?"

< Yees? >

"I have an offering for you! Here you go."

< Well, thank you very much! >

As usual, I'd bought him a variety of sake and umeshu. I'd found a gift set of ten bottles of sake, each made by a different brewery and each of the highest quality, which had struck me as the perfect gift for a sake aficionado like Demiurge. I got him a set of umeshu as well, with each bottle having been made using a different type of plum, which struck me as a fun gimmick. I filled up the rest of his order with the usual snacks and premium canned goods.

After his box vanished away, Demiurge and I spent a moment chatting.

"Things have been pretty crazy since, you know, all *that*," I said. "Actually,

this entire trip to Ronkainen has been one heck of a wild ride.”

<Well, yes, of course! It goes to show that you and yours did a wonderful job,> Demiurge replied.

“Of course”? I don’t think you understand what we’re dealing with down here, Demiurge! I can’t even count how many times I heard the word “apostle” today!

<That’s only natural. After all, I did make sure that every authority figure associated with the major churches heard the whole exchange. It makes perfect sense that they would conclude that the Fenrir and the ancient dragon are my disciples, and really, they’re not even that far from the truth in thinking so.>

“Huh? Wait, you mean you’re actually making them your official apostles? I’m pretty sure you never said anything about going that far, did you?”

A lengthy pause ensued.

<Well, many thanks! Fare thee well!>

“What do you mean, ‘fare thee well’?! Get back here! Demiurge!”

Oh, come on, really? Fel and Old Man Gon are officially his apostles now? I-I mean, I guess that might be better than having everyone be constantly terrified of them, but boy, it is really hard to decide what I should think about this.



We headed out right after breakfast the next morning, returning the key to our rental to the Merchant’s guild a day early. Next, we stopped by the Adventurer’s guild to say our goodbyes, and then left Ronkainen behind us. The Adventurer’s guild had paid for my rental, of course, and Orson’s expression grew distinctly strained when he learned that one day’s worth of that payment would go entirely to waste, but considering that I had completed all the quests he wanted me to, I was hopeful that he wouldn’t take it too personally. It wasn’t like I had much choice, considering the current collective attitude of the gluttonous quartet...

“The time for a new dungeon has finally arrived!”

“This is one I’ve never visited before, and I’m rather excited to see it!”

«Nothing gets you worked up quite like a totally new dungeon, eh?»

«Yeah! Sui’s excited too!»

Their inflated expectations were downright palpable, and they weren’t alone.

“I know I don’t usually talk like this, but I’ve gotta say I’m pretty fired up for this one. An untouched dungeon! Just think about it!”

“Feels like we used up a lifetime’s worth of luck to get in on this, yeah!”

“And that’s not even starting on the loot we’re likely to find in there!”

“I just hope there’s good meat inside.”

Ark’s expectations were just as elevated as my familiars’, it seemed. There was no way I could’ve demanded that we stay in town for another day in the face of *that* much excitement.

“Will this vicinity suffice, my liege?” Gon asked as he glanced around the area. It seemed like a reasonable enough location to take off from, so I gave him the okay. “Very well—then climb up on my back, everyone!”

Needless to say, we were planning on riding Gon to get to the border nations’ dungeon. “Oh, I know you’re carrying a bigger load this time, but don’t expand too much, okay?” I said.

“Yes, understood,” Gon replied.

Gaudino and his party members, meanwhile, gaped at us.

“Uhh, Mukohda?” Gaudino said. “You’re not telling us to *ride* the ancient dragon, are you?”

“Well, yeah,” I replied. “It’s the fastest way to get there, after all.”

“You are my liege’s acquaintances, and so I will permit you to ride upon my back. No need to hesitate,” Gon said.

Gaudino hesitated for a moment, then timidly climbed up onto Gon’s back. Feodora didn’t falter at all and just clambered right aboard, while Gideon and Sigvard...

“Huh? What’s wrong, you two?” I asked when I noticed they were still on the ground, looking rather pallid.

“Oh. Those two aren’t big fans of heights, see,” Gaudino explained with a strained smile. “Hey, hurry it up! The more time you waste here, the longer it’ll be till we get to that dungeon!”

“Gaaah, to hell with it! Time to man up!” Gideon shouted, then climbed aboard Gon’s back—though given how pallid he still looked, I could tell he hadn’t *really* conquered his fear. “Come on already, Sigvard!”

“Damn and blast, fine! A true dwarf never falters!” Sigvard said, and then he scrambled up onto Gon with some difficulty, due to his short dwarven legs.

“Well then, let us be off!” Gon said. Then he flapped his wings and ascended into the air.

“Aaaaaaaaaugh!”

“Ugraaaaaaaaaah!”

The throaty screams of two terrified adventurers echoed across the plains,

reaching all the way to Ronkainen's outskirts.

Chapter 7: The Dungeon Expedition Begins!

“I-I can’t believe I survived that,” Gideon groaned as he slid off Gon’s back and took a few unsteady steps. He was tottering around like a newborn calf, and looked like he could collapse at any moment. The sickly pallor of his face did his Hollywood-tier looks no favors, that was for sure.

Gaudino, meanwhile, let out a hefty grunt as he heaved himself off Gon’s back with Sigvard slung over his shoulder. “Phew! How is this man so *heavy*?” he marveled as he dropped the short but heavily muscular dwarf to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Sigvard didn’t reply, on account of him having passed out mere moments after Gon lifted off.

“Pathetic,” Feodora jabbed at Gideon and Sigvard as she gracefully leapt to the ground.

“Sh-Shaddup! At least I didn’t pass out, okay?!” Gideon moaned.

The fact that he’d planted his hands on his knees in an effort to stay upright made his case a little less than compelling, but I could understand where he was coming from. I had flown on Gon plenty of times at this point, and it was only very recently that I’d started getting used to the sensation. Even then, I couldn’t help but think about how nice it was to be on solid ground again as I clambered down from Gon’s back myself.

«**Good. Now, let us proceed inside at once.**»

«With any luck, there will be something inside strong enough to even pique my interest!»

«Hell yeah! Let’s do this!»

«Dungeon tiiiiime!»

My familiars were ready to plunge into the dungeon the second we touched down, but I quickly slammed on the brakes. «No, no, not yet! Let’s wait till tomorrow to head in,» I said telepathically.

That sure soured the mood in an instant. «**For what purpose?**» Fel grunted.

«Well, it’s almost nighttime, isn’t it? You guys’ll be hungry for dinner pretty soon, and this’ll be a lot more enjoyable if we take some time to eat and

rest up now, and then go in tomorrow morning. Try to remember that we have company on this trip,» I added, shooting a glance over at Ark's members. Gideon still looked just about ready to pass out, and Sigvard had yet to awaken.

«**Rather feeble, are they not?**» Fel sighed.

«Peh! No kidding,» Dora-chan spat.

«Feeble!» Sui gleefully parroted.

«All this, simply from riding upon my back? I'm offended. If this is the thanks I get, then maybe I'll have them *walk* next time.»

«Oh, don't be like that,» I scolded, thankful that at the very least we hadn't had that exchange out loud. I could only imagine how depressed Gideon and Sigvard would've been if they'd overheard us.

Everyone has things they just can't deal with, okay? And besides... «I figured we'd find the dungeon in no time, since you two were so confident about it, but it ended up taking way longer than I was counting on,» I noted. The extended search was why our flight had been such a prolonged one, as a matter of fact.

«**W-Well, that is hardly our fault. The dungeon's location simply made it excessively difficult to notice.**»

«He's right, my liege! A dungeon this remote would be a challenge for anyone to find. Without us, there's no way you would ever have spotted it!»

«I'm not denying that, but still...» I replied.

Fel and Gon did have a point. This dungeon, located somewhere in the territories of the small nations that bordered Leonhardt, really *was* in an incredibly inconvenient place. Its entryway was situated in the middle of a wasteland, hidden in a crevice formed by a number of massive boulders that looked like they had come straight out of a Western. Finding the comparatively tiny hole that led inside would've been a major ordeal without their senses at our disposal.

«Well, regardless, we can go in tomorrow. Okay?» I said.

«**Hmph! Very well.**»

«As you say, my liege.»

«You hear that, Dora-chan, Sui? We're gonna head into the dungeon tomorrow!»

Dora-chan clicked his tongue. «Fine, I guess,» he grumbled.

«Aww, tomorrow?» Sui whined.

Come on, guys, it's not like I'm trying to cancel the trip altogether! And believe me, I'd really like to do just that!

“Anyway, I’ll get to work on dinner,” I said. I’d cooked up a stock of premade food back at the house, but I figured it would be better to save those meals for when we were actually in the dungeon. I decided to whip up something nice and quick for tonight instead, so the first thing I had to do was pull my newly obtained magic stove out of my Item Box.

“What in the—M-Mukohda?!” Gaudino yelled.

Oh, that’s right. I guess this is the first time they’ve seen my stove, isn’t it? “I was just about to start making dinner,” I explained. “My familiars are all big eaters, so I keep a magic stove with me to cook for them.”

“That’s one hell of a thing to just *keep with you*,” Gaudino whispered, though not quite quietly enough for me to not hear him.

I guess it makes sense that this would surprise him, at least the first time. This is about as big and hardcore as magic stoves come, after all. I wouldn’t be able to handle everyone’s appetites with anything smaller, though!

In any case, it was time to whip up some dinner. It *had* to involve meat, thanks to my party members’ carnivorous tendencies, and when it came to meat dishes that could be made in a hurry, rice bowls were hard to beat. They’d become a go-to for us for a reason!

What sort of bowl to make, though...? Ah, I know! I’ll go with sesame-flavored pork and cabbage bowls! They were a wonderfully appetizing dish, thanks to the fragrance of the ground, toasted sesame seeds that they were loaded up with, and more importantly I wouldn’t have to buy any ingredients from my Online Supermarket in order to make them. I couldn’t exactly let the members of Ark see me opening the menu, after all! *Come to think of it, I should stock up on seasonings and stuff after everyone goes to bed tonight, just to be on the safe side.*

For the moment, though, I had some rice bowls to make. I’d be using dungeon pork for the meat, and some cabbage that I had on hand, which came straight from the garden Alban maintained back at home. As for the recipe, it could hardly be any easier!

To start things off, I thinly sliced the dungeon pork, cut the slices up some more until they were nice and small, and chopped the cabbage into chunks. After that, I mixed together some soy sauce, sake, mirin, sugar, and white sesame seeds that had been toasted and ground into a powder. I heated some sesame oil in a frying pan, browned the dungeon pork, then added in the cabbage. Once the veggie chunks got nice and soft, I poured in the seasoning mixture I’d made before and stir-fried everything together to complete the dish. All I had left to do

was bring out a pot of freshly cooked rice from my Item box, pile it up in some bowls, add a scoop of the sesame-flavored pork and cabbage stir-fry, and top it all off with a sprinkle of sesame seeds.

“Okay, that should do it!” I said to myself, right before I looked up and nearly jumped out of my skin. While I had been focused on my cooking, the gluttonous quartet had assembled in front of my magic stove, drooling and watching my every move with bated breath—and this time, they weren’t alone.

“Feodora, please,” I sighed. Ark’s elf was right there alongside my familiars, eyes sparkling with excitement as she stared at the newly finished rice bowls. “Yes, yes, I know what you want! I’m bringing them over now, so go wait with the others, okay?”

A look of sorrow came over her face as I put the rice bowls and my magic stove away in my Item Box. *Look, we’re going to eat them in just a second, okay? Stop looking at me like that!* I thought with a tired smile, and then I headed over to Gaudino and the rest of his crew.

“Oh, you’re awake, Sigvard?” I said as I drew closer. “Are you feeling all right?”

“More or less,” Sigvard replied. He still seemed a little under the weather, but I had a feeling he’d recuperate the moment he saw what I’d brought him.

“We’ll be exploring the dungeon from tomorrow onward, so I thought we might as well get in a drink or two while we still can,” I said as I brought out a few bottles of beer—the extra-fancy sort that people give as gifts—and gave them out to Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard.

“Ooh, you’re up for sharing, Mukohda?” Gaudino asked.

“Honestly, I can’t believe we get to drink at all in a place like this. What could be better?” Gideon added.

“Woo-hoo!” Sigvard shouted. “Booze! You’ve done it again, Mukohda!”

My offer of drinks had sent all three of them over the moon. Clearly, none of them had ever imagined that they’d be able to have any out here in the wilderness.

“Drinks? May I join you, my liege?” asked Gon, who’d proven to have a taste for booze as well.

“If you insist,” I said, and then I poured some beer into a deep, wide dish for him. It took a lot more than just one bottle to completely fill it, of course, but that’s just how it went sometimes.

“And here, Feodora. I think you’ll be more into this,” I added as I brought out a bottle of slightly fancy, undiluted apple juice. Feodora downed her glass in an

instant, then gasped for breath and grinned. “I’m guessing you three want some as well, right?” I said, pouring bowls of the same apple juice for Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui. “Okay! Next up, here’s dinner!”

I placed a sesame-flavored pork and cabbage bowl in front of each member of our current party. My gluttonous quartet—plus one equally gluttonous elf—dug in without waiting for so much as a second.

“Thanks for this, Mukohda,” Gaudino said.

“*Gods*, this looks good!” Gideon exclaimed.

“And judging by the scent, it’ll go perfectly with this booze,” Sigvard noted.

“You’ve got that right!” I said. “This dish and beer are a match made in heaven!”

I went ahead and cracked open a bottle of beer for myself as well, then took a big bite of my rice bowl. *Mmh, now that hits the spot!* It was salty and sweet, and the sesame flavor elevated the whole experience to addictive new heights. I wolfed down a few more bites, then took a lengthy swig of beer. “*Delicious!*” I exclaimed. *I knew a beer would be perfect with this! So good!*

“Seconds, at once!”

“For me as well! Oh, and I wouldn’t say no to another drink either, my liege.”

«Get another goin’ for me too!»

«Sui too! And Sui wants another drink!»

My familiars pushed their now empty dishes toward me in unison.

“Mmph!”

You too, huh, Feodora? Also, you should really wipe your mouth. You’ve got rice all over it!

“Ever consider showing some restraint, Feodora?!” Gideon shouted. Feodora, however, didn’t even seem to notice his jab, or if she did notice, she didn’t care.

“There’s nothing that woman cares about more than a good meal,” Gaudino sighed.

“And to think, she’d be the perfect party member if it weren’t for that,” Sigvard added.

“It’s fine, honestly. I’m used to cooking for four of the heaviest eaters you’ll ever meet, so I made more than enough for her to have seconds. I’m just glad to see someone enjoying my food that much,” I reassured them as I refilled Feodora’s bowl. “Do you guys want more too?”

Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard hesitated for a moment before giving in and accepting their own refills. Then, a moment later...

“Think I could trouble you for another one of these as well, Mukohda?” Sigvard said with a hopeful air as he shook his empty beer bottle.

“I guess the alcohol’s the main event for you, huh?” I chuckled.

“Oh, for the—I’d better not hear you complain about Feodora’s appetite from now on, Sigvard!” Gaudino said.

“No kidding,” Gideon agreed with a roll of his eyes.

“Hah hah hah! How am I supposed to help myself when his booze is *this* good?” Sigvard said.

I snickered as I listened to them banter and handed another bottle over to Sigvard. “Just don’t go *too* hard on this stuff! We have a dungeon to explore tomorrow, remember?”

“Oh, believe me, I know!” Sigvard said before chugging his second beer as quickly as he had his first one.

After that, Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard fell into a highly enthusiastic discussion about the dungeon we’d be crawling come morning. My familiars were just as excited, of course, but I had to wonder: would we *really* be all right? If the dungeon was truly untouched, then the way I saw it, there was no telling *what* we might find in there.

I do hope that I’m just worrying for no reason, but still... Even with Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui’s incredible might on my side, I couldn’t help but worry a little about what was to come.



“There’s something really special about this ‘miso’ soup,” Gaudino said as he slurped away at his broth, which was filled with bits of cabbage, onion, and deep-fried tofu.

“I know what you mean. It’s relaxing, for some reason,” Gideon agreed.

“I’m leaning toward these ‘rolled omelets,’ myself,” Sigvard said. “They’re so *soft*, and their *flavor!* It’s so good, I can’t even describe it!” he added, then popped another piece of omelet into his mouth.

“You’re not wrong about that,” Gaudino agreed, tearing himself away from his soup for long enough to grab a piece of omelet as well.

“I mean, really, *everything* Mukohda makes is incredible,” said Gideon, who was busy stuffing himself with rice balls that I’d made using a rice seasoning mixture I bought from my Online Supermarket (mustard leaf based, in this particular case).

“True,” Gaudino and Sigvard both agreed with emphatic nods.

It was a rather light and perfectly pedestrian breakfast as far as I was concerned, but I had to admit, I didn’t mind the compliments. My familiars demanded meat-heavy meals starting first thing in the morning, but I assumed that Ark’s members would find that diet just as hard on the stomach as I did, so I had prepared the same comparatively light food for them that I’d made for myself. I had made their servings a fair bit larger than mine, though—they all had pretty athletic builds, and I figured they’d be heavy eaters.

Oh, and while Feodora was the group’s only slim member, I knew for a fact that she was the heaviest eater of them all, so I had upped her serving size as well. Of course, she had still polished off her breakfast before I knew it, and I ended up making her three additional rice balls as well. It seriously felt like I hadn’t had time to blink before she had finished everything and started giving my familiars and their cockatrice teriyaki bowls an openly envious stare.

I know the food was on the lighter side this time, Feodora, but that doesn’t mean you can just keep stuffing your face with it! And why are you getting so jealous over their massive meat piles? Maybe I misread things, and adventuring has a way of making people want to eat tons of meat first thing in the morning? I thought, in spite of the fact that I was, technically, an adventurer myself.

“So, I can’t stand eating a ton of meat in the morning, and I made you guys the same thing as me since I figured you’d feel the same way,” I said. “Was I wrong about that? Would you guys have preferred something more meat-heavy for breakfast?”

“No, no, not at all,” Gaudino said. “I’m right there with you. Lighter food’s just right for the mornings.”

“Same here,” Gideon agreed.

“Maybe when I was a lad, but these days, I lean toward lighter breakfasts as well,” Sigvard said.

Okay, I guess I was right after all! With one likely exception, anyway. “I get the feeling Feodora would’ve preferred meat, though,” I said as I glanced over at the elf, who was still staring intently at my familiars.

The other three members of Ark shook their heads. “We are *not* like her, believe me,” Gaudino said. “I’ve seen that woman order two servings of steak first thing in the morning, and polish them both off without batting an eyelash.”

“A figure like that, and she eats more than any of us. It just doesn’t make sense,” Gideon said.

“Pretty sure her stomach’s forged from magic iron,” Sigvard commented.

Okay, that's going a little too far, isn't it? But then again, considering how long they've known each other, I'm guessing he's speaking from an awful lot of experience.

«I need you to do something about this elf,», Fel telepathically grumbled at that precise moment.

«She's been staring at us this whole time,» Gon explained.

«And it's *really* starting to get on my nerves,» Dora-chan added.

«She's looking at our food and drooling!» Sui noted.

I'm almost impressed. It takes a lot to make the gluttonous quartet complain like that, Feodora.

Fel's leg

“Hey, Feodora,” I said as I held out a cockatrice teriyaki bowl. Her gaze locked onto it in an instant, and when I moved it from side to side, her head swiveled to track its motion.

Heh heh! Okay, this is kinda fun, I thought as I moved the bowl all over the place and watched Feodora pivot her head in every direction to match. *Wait, whoops! What am I even doing right now?*

“We shouldn’t be gorging ourselves right before we go into a dungeon, so just one bowl, okay?” I said. Feodora nodded repeatedly, and when I passed her the teriyaki bowl, her face lit up with an ecstatic smile.

“Sorry Feodora’s being such a hassle,” Gaudino said with a chuckle.

“Honestly, I don’t know what to do with her,” Gideon sighed.

“It’s an obsession,” Sigvard added. “Nothing can pry that woman away from tasty food, no matter how hard you try.”

Feodora finished her food off, licked the bowl clean, and looked pretty downcast over it all being gone, but I stuck to my word and refrained from offering her any more. Having Ark’s members around had once again made our meal time a little more eventful than usual, but still, it wasn’t long before breakfast was finished. We took a moment to collect ourselves, and then it was finally time.

“Let us be off, then.”

“I do hope there’s good meat to be found within the dungeon!”

«Right?! You’ve got your priorities straight, Gon!»

«Sui wants to pew-pew looots and lots of baddies!»

My familiars and I stepped into the dungeon in our usual carefree fashion, accompanied by the grim-faced and completely professional members of Ark.



“O-Okay, that’s different.”

“Wha—water?! Nobody said anything about there being water!”

“Oh ho! Yes, this is a twist. Interesting!”

«Hot damn, guys! You know what this means? Fish is on the menu!»

«Fishies, yay! Sui wonders if there’ll be meat too.»

While my familiars and I chatted about our first impression of the dungeon, the members of Ark just stood there in horrified silence. Even Feodora, who was usually pretty laid-back, was grimacing for once. I couldn’t exactly blame them, to be fair, considering what we were looking at.

When we had first entered the dungeon, we proceeded through a cave-like tunnel for some time. Eventually we'd reached a staircase, at the bottom of which we had been greeted by the sight of, well...water. A *lot* of water. In fact, the entire area was inundated with green-hued fluid. I'd seen a program on TV once about the largest marshland on Earth, and the scenery before me was remarkably reminiscent of that region.

"A marshland in a dungeon," I muttered. "And it's enormous, to boot..."

"Grrr!" Fel growled, immediately indignant at the sight of his least favorite element. **"I was led to believe there would be a wilderness within! Did that fool of a priest lie to us?!"**

Well, I mean... "There are *some* plants and stuff, I guess. See the shrubs over there?" I pointed out.

"Hmph! That is hardly—"

"And besides," I continued, cutting Fel off, "the Warmaster who told us about this place hadn't even been inside to see for himself, had he? All the details he gave us were based off of rumors and hearsay, and he *told* us that, so it's not like he was lying, even if he *was* a little wrong."

Fel let out an irritated harrumph, and I sighed. "Well, we can always turn back if you're that upset! I wouldn't complain, that's for sure," I said. *In fact, nothing would make me happier than calling off this dungeon crawl before it even begins!*

"We will not turn back under any circumstances!" Fel barked.

"Well, then quit whining and deal with it!"

Just then, Gaudino stepped in to interrupt our little spat. "Sorry to cut you off, Mukohda, but we've got a problem! There's a fire boar headed our way!" he said.

I glanced over in the direction Gaudino had gestured and spotted what looked like an enormous boar, staring right at us with its teeth bared.

Then I blinked, did a double take, rubbed my eyes, and looked again. *Wait, wait, no, boars aren't supposed to have that kind of teeth! Why are they so sharp?!*

"Feodora! Gideon! Sigvard!" Gaudino called out, stepping right into his role as Ark's leader. Feodora nocked an arrow, taking aim at the fire boar, while Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard drew their weapons.

No sooner had Ark taken up their battle formation than the fire boar rushed toward us with an ear-piercing battle squeal. I had taken a step back behind Fel and Gon, just to be on the safe side, and was looking forward to seeing how

Gaudino's party would conduct themselves in battle...but, yeah, that didn't happen.

«Sui'll beat them!» my favorite slime squealed as it bounced forward and let an Acid Bullet fly with a mighty *pew!* The bullet slammed directly into—and *through*—the boar's forehead, but the big, bulky creature had quite a bit of momentum built up from its charge that kept carrying it forward until it finally collapsed just a few feet in front of Ark's formation.

Silence fell. Ark's members stared at the fire boar in blank incomprehension.

«Yippee! Sui won!» Sui shouted with glee, overjoyed by its victory.

Yeah, umm...sorry, Ark. Like, really, sorry. Sui isn't intentionally ruining the mood, it just doesn't know any better, honestly!

And so, our co-exploration of the dungeon with Ark kicked off with a bang. Unfortunately, the expedition's prospects were looking pretty grim already...in terms of awkwardness, anyway.



There we were, out in the marshland of the hotly anticipated dungeon's first floor...if this dungeon even *had* "floors" in the traditional sense at all, which I was still far from certain about. We were all currently riding on Sui, who had grown to a massive size to serve as our raft again.

We normally rode on Fel anytime we had a large, wide-open field level to get through, but he had straight up vetoed that option on account of the wetlands. We'd considered riding Gon instead, but the prospect of dismounting and mounting him again every single time a monster turned up just seemed like too much of a hassle, so we had ruled that option out as well. In the end, we had chosen Sui as our method of transportation by process of elimination. And while the rest of us were sailing through the massive marsh, team dragon—that is, Gon and Dora-chan—flew ahead to scout out the area and point out any monsters they could find from above.

As a side note, after that first incident, we had taken a moment to explain to Sui that kill stealing was very much *not* proper dungeon etiquette. This was far from the first time we'd had that conversation with the slime, of course, but it seemed that the excitement of a new dungeon had gotten the better of it. In any case, we had offered Ark the monster's drops—a pelt and a tusk—as an apology for my familiar's poor manners, and they'd been very understanding.

It wasn't the perfect start to the trip, but one way or another, our expedition

was finally underway! We hadn't found much so far, though. We had sighted a few birdlike creatures here and there that looked like waterfowl to me, but they had all flown away long before we could get close to them. Gon and Dora-chan hadn't reported back yet either, so I figured they were only seeing small creatures that weren't worth pursuing. As we carried on, however, I started noticing a fair number of creatures that looked an awful lot like capybaras. They were way bigger than the capybaras that I knew, but since team dragon hadn't mentioned them, I assumed that they weren't worth hunting.

«Hey! Think I found some half-decent monsters!» Dora-chan finally chimed in telepathically.

«A river lies ahead of you, and a fair number of small alligators reside in the vicinity,» Gon added.

«Got it! Wait for us, okay?» I sent back, and then I looked over at Fel and down at Sui. “You guys got all that, right?”

“Quite. Alligators, was it? I suppose they will have to suffice.”

«Gators! Sui'll beat them up!»

I turned to Ark next. “Apparently there's a river with a bunch of alligator monsters around it just up ahead,” I explained.

“All right,” Gaudino said. “Alligator monsters usually drop hides, teeth, and meat, so that seems worthwhile.”

“There are apparently a lot of them, so how about we split up into two teams and hunt separately?” I suggested.

“That sounds like a plan. We're in this together, sure, but it'll probably be easier to coordinate in battle if we're fighting with the teams we're used to.”

Oh, good. I knew he'd understand.

“You three are okay with that, right?” he then asked, looking over at Gideon, Sigvard, and Feodora, all of whom nodded in confirmation. They all looked determined and serious as could be—the very picture of a proper adventuring team, really...which is to say, nothing whatsoever like me and my crew.



We rendezvoused with Gon and Dora-chan a short distance away from the river, where I found the situation to be a bit more than I'd been bargaining for.

“Now that's a lot of gators,” I muttered to myself. Each of them was around five meters long, and there were so many both in and around the river that I immediately gave up on even trying to count them. *I'm sorry, Gon, but didn't*

you call them “small” alligators? What part of those things looks small to you? Ha ha haaa...

“Oh? Aren’t those red-tailed caimans?” Sigvard noted as he looked out over the river. He was familiar with them, it seemed, and now that he mentioned it, I noticed that they *did* have distinctively red tails.

Caimans, though? Really? I wasn’t exactly an expert, but I’d thought that caimans were supposed to be on the *smaller* side of the gator spectrum. *I suppose they are small, though—by this world’s standards. Considering the size of all the other ones I’ve encountered up until now, I probably should’ve seen that coming.*

“Red-tailed caimans, eh? Their meat *and* their hides fetch a pretty good price, don’t they?” Gaudino asked.

“Sure do,” Gideon confirmed. “We’ll be in for a major windfall if we manage to take down at least three of them.”

“No, we should aim higher than that,” Sigvard said. “It’s high time that all three of us replaced our armor, so we could use the spare funding.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Gideon admitted.

“Sounds like we’re going all-out this time, then,” Gaudino said. “We’ll go with the usual opener. Can you handle it, Feodora?”

“Of course,” Feodora said with a nod.

I couldn’t help but get a little worked up as I listened to Ark’s discussion. It felt like they were real, proper adventurers, and that thought put me in a childishly excited state of mind.

“All right, Mukohda, time for us to split up,” Gaudino said. “I’d say take care of yourself, but I’m pretty sure you’ve got that under control already.”

“Thanks, and you too,” I replied.

Ark’s adventurers gave us a wave, and then set off toward the riverside cluster of red-tailed caimans.

“Okay! Let’s get moving too,” I said.

“I hardly see the need to bother dealing with foes as petty as these,” Fel huffed.

«Oh, quit’cher griping!» Dora-chan snapped. «This is just the start. There’s a whole dungeon to explore after this!»

“Indeed,” Gon said with a nod. “I understand your position, to be sure, but this is only the beginning.”

“Right?” I agreed. “Plus, Gaudino just said something about their meat selling for a high price, so it’s gotta be pretty tasty. I bet I could make some

really good gator karaage, in a pinch.”

Suddenly, my familiars froze up. Then, a moment later...

«*Karaageee!*» Sui squealed as it barreled toward the red-tailed caimans like a massive, amorphous cannonball!

“What the—*Suiii?!*” I yelped. It was all I could do to cling to the slime’s body and do my best to not get flung off into the bog.

“If there is karaage in the offing, then this is no time to sit still. I shall join in the hunt!” Fel said, then gracefully leapt from Sui’s back and charged out ahead of it, racing toward the alligators.

«Hold on a sec,» Dora-chan said. «If we take out the ones in the river, won’t the meat they drop end up in the drink?»

“A fair point,” Gon admitted. “In that case, I will grab the river-bound gators and drop them onto the shore! You can finish them off once they’re on dry land, Dora.”

«You got it!»

Huh. Since when were those two so good at working together? Does being dragons just naturally put them on the same page, or something?

«Taaake this!» I felt Sui jiggle beneath me as a resounding *pew* rang out.

“Gah! *Suiii!*” I yelped. Because the slime was in its giant form, the Acid Bullet it had just expelled was much, much larger than usual. The shot slammed into one of the red-tailed caimans, practically blasting it in two. The monster let out a gurgle of shock, then vanished into thin air, leaving behind...

«Boo, no meat,» Sui whined as a gator hide fell to the ground.

“D-Don’t worry, it’s fine!” I said. “There are still plenty of gators to go around. I’m sure some of them will leave meat behind for us!”

«Hmm... Okay! Then Sui’ll beat up lots and lots of them! Take this, and this, and this!»

While Sui was occupied with gunning down one red-tailed caiman after another, I slid down from its back. “Oh, Sui,” I sighed, reflecting on what an adorable, innocent little slime it had been back when we had first met. Seeing it act this bloodthirsty made me feel more than a little wistful.

Fel, meanwhile, was further up ahead, tearing through every red-tailed caiman he could get his claws on in a truly horrific massacre. Gon and Dora-chan were working in perfect tandem as well—Gon had grown a little larger than before, and was lifting the monsters out of the river two at a time, dropping them onto the bank where Dora-chan used Ice magic to skewer them to death. It felt like I’d peeked into a red-tailed caiman slaughterhouse.

My familiars kept up their violent work for some time, hunting down the red-tailed caimans for every last piece of loot they could possibly secure. I never would have imagined that the word “karaage” could bring about *this* much carnage. It was chaos, pure and simple, and it didn’t take long at all for the last red-tailed caiman to be slain, leaving only a mountain of drops littering the riverside in their place.

I sighed heavily. “Well, we all know the dungeon routine at this point. Let’s pick up these drops! You guys help out too, okay?”

“But of course. They are to become our karaage, so we shall assist to the best of our ability.”

“Quite! We shan’t leave a single piece of meat behind!”

«That’s right!»

«Karaageee!»

I gave Fel and Dora-chan a magic bag each, and they split up to go collect drops, with Gon accompanying Dora-chan and Sui tagging along with Fel.

“Okay, can’t let them do all the work! Especially considering how much there is to get done. Jeez. Why do things always turn out like this?” I muttered to myself, then glanced over at my familiars. “Wait a minute—guys! Pick up *all* the drops, not just the meat!”

My gluttonous quartet, it seemed, had decided that the hides and teeth weren’t worth their time, and had been ignoring them entirely in favor of the gator meat until I scolded them.

“Come on, sheesh! It’d be a total waste to just leave them there,” I grumbled as I helped out with the task. I scooped up a lump of meat, a hide, some teeth, more meat, another hide...the work seemed endless. “Aggh, my back’s *killing* me,” I groaned, thumping on my lower back like a genuine senior citizen.

Just then, a voice rang out from behind me. “M-Mukohda...?”

I turned around to find that Ark’s adventurers had returned and were now standing there, gaping at the still massive quantity of drops that we had yet to collect.

“U-Uh, so, umm... Everyone got a little worked up, see,” I said, stammering out a feeble excuse.

“We killed *four* of them. Thought that was a real good note to start the expedition off on,” Gideon said with a faraway look in his eyes.

“Y-Yeah, uhh,” I began, then gave up. “So, it’s gonna take me a while to pick up all these drops. Can you wait for just a bit?”

I sent out a telepathic order to my familiars—also known as the perpetrators

of this incredibly awkward moment— instructing them to double-time it and get those drops picked up as fast as possible.

“Phew! F-Finally done,” I said when we’d finished gathering the vast majority of the gator materials. My relief, however, was short-lived.

“Hm? It would seem we missed one,” Fel commented. I followed his gaze and found a single red-tailed caiman, floating leisurely out on the river.

“So we did! I’ll go capture it,” Gon said.

Gon soared into the air, descended upon the gator, and grabbed it in his claws...but then, just as he was about to ascend once more, an earsplitting splash rang out as an enormous fish broke the surface! It wouldn’t have held a candle to Gon at his full size, but at around ten meters long, it was just about as big as his current, shrunken form. More importantly, it had jumped out of the river with a purpose, and clamped its jaws around the red-tailed caiman that Gon was currently grasping with one forelimb.

“Trying to steal my prey? Well, aren’t you an insolent one!” Gon growled as he reached down and wrapped his *other* forelimb’s claws around the fish’s head as well.

Gon flapped his wings, carrying him into the air along with the red-tailed caiman and the fish, which was now frantically flailing its tail. It was too late, though—in fact, its fate had been sealed the instant it decided to pick a fight with an all-powerful ancient dragon. The fish was completely incapable of freeing its head from Gon’s grasp, and by the time he arrived back at the riverside, his razor-sharp claws had already done it in.

“Look, my liege! I set out for a gator, and returned with a fish,” Gon said as he presented the massive corpse to me.

Right, okay...and what do you expect me to do with it? I thought, then glanced over at Ark, only to find that they’d once again been stunned into a dumbfounded silence.



Soon enough, the fish that Gon had brought back for me vanished, replaced by its drop items. I’d been so caught off guard that I had neglected to appraise the thing, but I figured it wasn’t that big of a deal. As for the drops themselves...

“A huge slab of white fish flesh, a magic stone, and a treasure chest, huh? Gon finished the thing off without breaking a sweat, but I guess it might’ve been a pretty high-ranking monster after all?” I muttered, then started appraising the

drops. First up was the slab of flesh.

【Emperor Dorado Flesh】

A cut of fish that is mildly flavored, but rich in umami. Exceptionally delicious, thanks in part to the soft, flaky texture it takes on when cooked.

“I guess this stuff’s supposed to be ‘soft, flaky, and exceptionally delicious,’” I explained to my familiars.

“Oh? And how would you go about cooking it?” Gon asked.

“I was thinking of using it in a hot pot.”

“A hot pot? Yes, that is compelling,” said Fel, who was already drooling.

«Ooh, yeah, I like the sound of that! Those’re always awesome,» Dora-chan agreed.

«Sui loves hot pots!» Sui said, immediately shifting into hot pot mode as well.

“What *is* a hot pot?” Gon asked.

Oh, right! I guess I haven’t made one of those since he joined up with us.

“It’s a style of cooking where you put a pot of broth out on the table and simmer a bunch of different ingredients in it,” I explained.

“So you keep simmering the food, even as you eat...?” Gon said, sounding a little perplexed. It seemed he was having a hard time imagining the process.

«Yeah, and the last thing you do is dump a buncha noodles or whatever into the leftover broth to finish it all off! It’s seriously awesome!» Dora-chan said.

«It’s really, really yummy!» Sui agreed.

“‘Noodles, or whatever’? ‘Finish it all off’?” Gon repeated, more confused than ever.

I guess this is just one of those things where you have to try it yourself to really get it. I’ll have to make a hot pot for him one of these days, I thought. I was ready to let the subject drop there, but my familiars were far from finished.

“Well then, it is settled. Our next meal shall be a hot pot.”

«I’m down for that!»

«Sui is too!»

“What? No, wait, I already made a ton of meals for this trip! I was gonna keep the cooking quick and easy while we were in here,” I protested.

“Quick and easy’?” Fel scoffed. **“Preposterous. We have obtained a fine ingredient, so it is only natural that we partake of it immediately.”**

Only natural, my foot! The fish isn’t going to vanish if we don’t eat it right away, Fel!

"I must admit, after everything I've heard, I find myself wanting to try a hot pot myself, my liege," Gon said.

Agh, I knew it! Those three have infected Gon! Now he's in hot pot mode too!

"I... I want it too!" a voice rang out from behind me.

"Feodora..." I sighed as I turned around. Her eyes were glimmering with anticipation, and it was completely obvious that she had overheard Fel and Gon.

"Dammit, Feodora, could you get any more shameless?!" Gaudino shouted. Feodora, of course, didn't even seem to hear him.

"Hey, Mukohda, do you have an Appraisal skill?" Gideon asked. "The way you were talking about that fish just now sure made it sound like you do."

Ugh! Gideon's question caught me totally unprepared, and I knew for a fact that I had failed to keep a straight face.

"You've got an Item Box too, and a big one at that..." Gideon continued.

"What are you, some sort of hero?"

He was getting dangerously close to the truth of the matter, and beads of cold sweat were starting to drip down my brow. *I wasn't a hero, technically, but I most certainly had been summoned from another world in the same way that heroes were.*

"Cut that out, Gideon!" Sigvard snapped with a scowl. "You should know better than to go prying into another man's skills!"

"That's right," Gaudino agreed. "It's not the adventurer way."

"I know, I know! I just thought he might actually be a hero and got curious, that's all," Gideon sighed. "Always wanted to meet one of those," he added under his breath.

"*Pff! Really?* You're into *heroes*? What, did you wanna be one when you grew up?" Sigvard said.

"Oh, sure, laugh it up!" Gideon shouted. "I had a picture book about heroes when I was a kid, and it got stuck in my head, okay?! And yes, that is why I became an adventurer! I'm not the only one either. Most folks in our line of work have some sorta story along those lines, as far as I can tell!"

"Ha ha ha!" Gaudino chuckled. "You're not wrong about that, but still, I never took you for the sort to chase fantasies for a living!"

Gideon's face turned beet red as Sigvard and Gaudino poked fun at him. I, meanwhile, let out a sigh of relief. *Looks like I managed to throw him off the trail. I've got a funny feeling that he still suspects I'm a hero on some level, though...*

"There is still ample time before we must stop for lunch. Let us carry on

with our hunt!" Fel barked.

And so, we climbed onto Sui's back and set off through the marshlands once again. Oh, and incidentally, the treasure chest that the emperor dorado dropped ended up containing five golden scales the size of my palm, plus a small emerald and ruby.



"Now, Feodora!" Gaudino shouted.

At his command, Feodora drew and loosed an arrow in a single fluid motion, sending it whizzing toward Ark's current foe: a blue-headed otter. It was a C-ranked monster that looked quite a bit like an ordinary otter, with the exception of the patch of blue fur on its head. Oh, and also the fact that it was way bigger than the otters I knew, and significantly more vicious to boot.

The blue-headed otter let out a terrible screech as Feodora's arrow nailed it directly in its eye. "Your turn, Sigvard!" Gaudino yelled.

"On it! Graaah!" the dwarf bellowed as he sent his prized warhammer hurtling into the monster's head with a thunderous crash.

"Here we go, Gideon!" Gaudino said as he went on the attack.

"Right beside you!" Gideon shouted.

The two of them charged forward in unison, Gaudino swinging his bastard sword toward the blue-headed otter's neck while Gideon jammed his spear into its flank. Their combo attack finished it off in an instant and the monster disappeared, leaving behind a pelt to reward them.

"Oooh," I cooed in admiration as I gave them a round of applause. *Yes! Now that's what adventurers are supposed to look like!*

"What about this are you so pleased by?" Fel asked with an irritated frown. **"What is there to be gained by defeating such a piddling foe?"**

"More than you might expect," I countered. "That monster's pelt is supposed to be waterproof, which means it'll sell for a really good price!"

Gaudino had noticed the blue-headed otter off in the distance as we rode Sui across the bog, and had practically begged me to stop so that he and his party could hunt it down. Blue-headed otter pelts were highly sought after thanks to their waterproof nature, and were quite scarce as well, meaning they'd likely fetch quite a large sum of money. Hunting them also posed little to no danger for an A-ranked party like Ark, which made them an even more attractive target.

Ark's adventurers had climbed off of Sui and hustled over to take the blue-

headed otter down. I had asked Fel and Sui if they wanted to join in the hunt, but Fel had told me that **“I see no need to face a creature so feeble. Also, their meat is disgusting.”** That had turned Sui off the prospect as well. If their meat wasn’t tasty, it just wasn’t interested.

Well, I guess my party’s hunting standards are consistent: if it’s tasty, they’re in, and if not, they couldn’t care less. In the end, Fel and I had waited and watched the fight from atop Sui. Well, I watched them, anyway. Sui had nodded off almost immediately, and Fel seemed totally disinterested and closed his eyes as well.

I was the only one who found observing Ark’s fighting style worthwhile, and I watched with bated breath. They battled with perfect coordination, and it felt like I was watching a scene from a movie play out before my eyes! Part of me had always wished that I could fight like they did, but when I paused to consider whether I’d actually be able to pull it off...

“Yeah, nah. No way that’s ever happening,” I said with a shake of my head. I was a coward, and I knew it. Having a crew of powerful party members to travel with suited me way better. *Nothing beats peace of mind, after all,* I thought as I glanced over at Fel.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking about how lucky I am to be traveling with you guys,” I said.

“Wh-What brought this on?”

“I mean, when all’s said and done, the only reason why I can more or less keep my cool in a place like *this* is because you guys are so tough.” *Of course, I also wouldn’t be in a place like this to begin with if I’d never met them.*

“Hmm. It seems you know your place well, then. You should indeed be thankful,” Fel said.

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, I sure am,” I chuckled.



“Hm?”

“What?”

“It seems Gon and Dora have returned.”

I glanced in the direction Fel was looking and saw a black dot off in the distance. Gon and Dora-chan had flown off to scout out the dungeon on their own again, and it looked like they were on their way back.

“Hey, wait a second... Is it just me, or is Gon carrying something?” I observed as Gon drew closer. He seemed to be holding something long and narrow in one of his forelimbs.

«Hey! Figured it was just about lunchtime, so we headed back,» Dora-chan said as he touched down a few seconds ahead of Gon.

“What’s that thing that Gon’s carrying, Dora-chan?” I asked.

«Oh, that? Just a little souvenir for you.»

“A what now?” I asked, cocking my head. Before Dora-chan could answer, however, I looked back and let out a grunt of revulsion. Gon was finally close enough for me to clearly see what he was holding: a long, green snake, its body as thick as a tree trunk, still writhing in his grasp.

“We found a creature that would make reasonable prey, so I bought it back as a gift for you, my liege!” Gon said as he landed.

I just...stared at it. *Okay, but...what am I supposed to do with it now?*

I tried to keep a straight face as I appraised the snake.

【Green Hunter Anaconda】

An A-ranked monster. Their distinctive coloration serves as camouflage, allowing them to blend in with undergrowth and sneak up on their prey, which they then brutally devour. The color of their skin is prized by certain individuals of peculiar taste, and often fetches a high price. Their meat is simple in flavor, but delicious nevertheless.

“W-Well, I mean, I guess it’s supposed to taste good,” I said.

“Is that so? Well then, hurry up and finish it off,” said Fel, reacting the same way he always did to the prospect of a tasty meal.

“Finish it off? You mean, like, *me*?” I asked.

“Of course. Gon brought it here for that precise purpose. Did you not?”

“Quite, yes! I thought it would be the perfect opportunity for you to level yourself up.”

I would’ve really preferred if he hadn’t gone to the trouble, but considering the deed was done, it didn’t feel right to refuse. “F-For the record, if you wanted

to bring me a souvenir, you could've gone with drop items instead! I gave Dora-chan a magic bag for a reason, you know?"

«Huh? Oh, yeah, I brought back a ton of that stuff in here too,» Dora-chan said, gesturing at the magic bag around his neck.

Well, that's just great, but the point is that you could've also given me this snake's drops instead of the whole thing!

"We are wasting time."

"Okay, I get it! Don't rush me," I said. It really seemed like I didn't have a choice, so I brought my mithril spear out from my Item Box and faced the snake down.

"Fear not, my liege," Gon said. "I will hold down the snake's head, so you'll be in no danger! Go on. It should only take a single thrust through the cranium!"

"R-Right," I said, and then I took a deep breath. *Come on, Mukohda! Man up! You can do this!* "Hiyah!"

I felt like my legs were going to give out from beneath me, but still, I managed to send my spear plunging into the snake's skull. It fell still in an instant, then disappeared, leaving behind a lump of meat and a segment of green snakeskin. The job was done, and I let out a sigh of relief...but then I noticed that Ark's members had, in fact, just returned from their blue-headed otter hunt.

"Mukohda..." Gaudino said, before falling into an awkward silence. All four of them looked incredibly uncomfortable.

"Just so you know, Mukohda, you'll never be a fighter if you keep training like *that*," Sigvard commented. Gaudino and Gideon nodded in vigorous agreement, and for once, Feodora abandoned her aloof persona for long enough to join them.

Huh? Oh god. Just how much of that did they see? It's not what you think, guys! I don't make a habit of grinding experience like this, I swear!

Chapter 8: Mukohda the Bold

One lengthy conversation later, I'd managed to explain to the members of Ark that I *didn't* regularly kill helpless monsters for experience points, and that Gon had just happened to bring one back for me on the spur of the moment as a gift this one time. That resolved what could've been a really unfortunate misunderstanding...I hoped. *They do get it, right? Everything's fine now? Please, Ark, just believe me this one time!*

Anyway, I shook that unfortunate incident off and turned my attention to my next task: preparing lunch. We found a relatively dry patch of land to have our meal on, and Fel and Gon set up barriers as well, meaning we'd be safe and sound no matter what happened. That just left me to live up to the expectations of my gluttonous familiars—and Ark's gluttonous elf—who were all watching my every motion with an air of pure anticipation.

Yes, yes, I know what you want! I remember perfectly well that you asked me to use the emperor dorado in a hot pot. So much for bringing out something premade and having a relaxed lunchtime. Sheesh...

At that point, I paused to consider my options. The emperor dorado was a white-fleshed fish, which meant that it would work well in pretty much all of the hot pot recipes I knew. I'd be feeding Ark's members this time, so I decided to steer away from anything too out-there and prepare a more traditional style of dish. At the same time, though, a perfectly ordinary hot pot with a totally unremarkable stock felt like it might be a little too boilerplate.

Hmm... Guess I'll take a look at my Online Supermarket and see if that sparks any inspiration. I sheltered behind my magic stove, making very certain that the members of Ark wouldn't see me, and opened up my skill's menu, navigating to a page that listed the various hot pot stock bases that I used on the regular.

“Ooh, this one might be good!” I whispered to myself as I came across a vegetable stock base. It would make for a relatively lightly flavored hot pot, but vegetable stocks were tasty in their own right and worked well with both meat and fish. “All right, I’m convinced! I’ll make our hot pots with vegetable stock today!”

I went ahead and bought the stock base right away. I had most of the other ingredients I'd need on hand already, with the sole exception of mushrooms. Mushrooms gave hot pots a major umami boost, so I viewed them as an essential ingredient, and bought packages of shiitake and shimeji mushrooms as well. My order arrived instantly, and I opened up the cardboard box to pull out the ingredients—still hiding behind my magic stove, needless to say.

With that, I just had to put the hot pots together! I decided to make them with Chinese cabbage, green onions, and carrots, all of which Alban had grown for me in his garden. Alban came from a family of farmers, and apparently enjoyed working out in the fields. He'd been growing all sorts of things in his free time, and sharing the fruits of his labor with me. It was a great arrangement for me, especially considering that everything Alban grew was out-of-this-world delicious!

I started by cutting up Alban's top-notch Chinese cabbage, green onions, and carrots. I separated the cabbage's leaves from its core, then cut the leaves into roughly bite-size chunks and minced the core. Next, I sliced the green onions diagonally, and peeled the carrots before cutting them into half rounds. Normally I would've gone with whole rounds, but Alban's carrots were so enormous that cutting them in half was more or less mandatory. And they weren't unique in that regard, to be clear—all of the vegetables he grew were pretty huge.

After that came the mushrooms. I sliced the bottoms of the shiitakes' stems off and cut the mushrooms in half, and then I chopped off the base of the shimejis as well, separating them into individual stalks.

"Okay, that should do it for the veggies! Now to get the hot pots ready," I said to myself. I poured water into the pots, then added the vegetable stock base and brought the mixture to a simmer. At that point, all I had to do was toss in the ingredients and let them boil until they were cooked through!

I could tell that the soup was going to be delicious simply by watching it bubble away, but just to be sure, I decided to have a little taste. "Ohhh, this is *great*! I think this might be the best hot pot I've made so far, even! The broth isn't overpowering, but it's still got so much depth to it!"

The umami from Alban's special veggies and the mushrooms had merged with that of the emperor dorado, combining to create a truly exquisite soup. I stood there for a moment, savoring its flavor...and then noticed that my gluttonous quartet and their elven hanger-on were staring at me once again.

"Oh, don't look at me like that! I'll be serving it up in just a minute, okay? Shoo, shoo!" I scolded. They all scowled at me, but did as they were told.

Is it just me, or does the way Feodora joins forces with my familiars every time food enters the picture feel completely natural? That woman's appetite is seriously a force to be reckoned with.



“Yes, this fish truly is delicious!”

“So this is a hot pot? It’s as delectable as I was led to believe!”

«I know, right? Hot pots are hard to beat, and this fish is something else!»

«The fishy’s really, really, yummy!»

“It is, yeah, but don’t forget to eat your veggies too! Alban poured his heart and soul into growing them, and you can definitely tell. They’re crazy good!” I said. “Hey, I’m talking to you, Fel! Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you’re only eating the fish!”

“Must we go through this each and every time?” Fel grumbled with a disgusted scowl. **“Every meal, you tell me to eat vegetables, and every meal, I tell you I detest them.”**

“Yeah, and I tell *you* every meal that you need a balanced diet! Eating meat, meat, and more meat just isn’t good for you. If you wanna stay healthy, you have to eat your veggies too!”

“I am protected by the blessings of the gods! My health will not falter regardless of what I eat,” Fel said with a roll of his eyes.

I wasn’t convinced, though. “You can’t use your blessings as an excuse to have a terrible diet! I happen to think it’s important to eat a diverse range of foods,” I said.

«And the veggies are really yummy, Uncle Fel!» Sui chimed in.

“Right? Aren’t they?” I agreed. “I’m so glad you’re not a picky eater, Sui—unlike *someone* we know.”

«Hee hee! Sui loves meat and fish, but Sui doesn’t mind veggies!»

“Well, good for you!” I said. I wasn’t entirely sure if slimes could get sick in the first place, but eating indiscriminately like Sui did meant that it would definitely get the nutrients it needed, whatever those happened to be.

«I’m not exactly the biggest plant fan either, but I gotta admit, these are pretty darn good! If leaves always tasted like *this*, I could eat ‘em every day!» Dora-chan said as he munched away at his hot pot.

“I know what you mean,” I said with a nod. “Chinese cabbage is perfect for hot pots. It soaks up all the soup’s flavor and ends up tasting ridiculously good!”

"I never ate anything other than meat until we met, but I have yet to find a dish of yours that *isn't* delicious, regardless of what it's made from," Gon said.

Oh, Gon! You sure know how to butter a guy up! "Glad to hear it! Thanks!"

"Oh, no thanks necessary! I was only telling the truth."

At that point, Gon, Dora-chan, Sui, and I all turned our gazes toward Fel.

"Ugh... Wh-What?"

"If you don't clean your plate, I'm not giving you seconds," I casually said.

"Grrrrrr!" Fel growled with his most fearsome scowl yet, but it didn't even faze me. It had freaked me out when he made faces like that back when we first met, but I'd gotten so used to it lately that I didn't so much as flinch anymore. Ultimately, Fel succumbed to my persistence and ate his vegetables, still frowning all the while.

"Now, seconds! With no—or rather, with few vegetables!" he said the minute he'd polished off his first serving. It seemed he had realized that I wasn't going to listen if he asked for *no* veggies, and so he had hedged his bet by asking me to go light on them instead.

"Coming right up," I said. *Of course, I already put all the hot pots together and they all have the same amount of vegetables in them, so you'll just have to live with it!*

Fel started grumbling the moment he saw the veggies in his second hot pot, but I ignored him entirely. Instead of listening to him whine, I decided to sit down with Ark's adventurers, who were gathered up around their own hot pot.

"How's the food, everyone?" I asked.

"Oh, Mukohda," Gideon said. "It's fantastic! I've never had a 'hot pot' before, but this is *really* good!"

"Agreed," Gaudino said. "It's nice to be able to eat this many vegetables as well. Adventurers like us don't exactly get much variety in our diets, so this is a welcome change of pace."

"I usually favor meat, myself, but this fish isn't bad at all," Sigvard added.

The three of them had stopped eating while they were talking to me, but of course, Feodora the Gluttonous didn't even slow down for so much as a single second.

"Oh, come on, Feodora! You planning on eating the whole thing yourself?!" Gideon snapped.

"Seriously, save some for the rest of us!" Gaudino said.

"Especially the fish! I haven't had my fill of it yet!" Sigvard said.

At that, Feodora finally glanced up at her party members. "First come, first

served,” she said, and then she went right back to eating again. Gideon, Gaudino, and Sigvard seemed to realize that nothing was going to dissuade her from gorging herself until the food was all gone, and quickly dug into the hot pot while they still could.

Her appetite really is incredible, huh? I can't believe she can even fit all that food inside her, considering how slim she is. I found myself a little exasperated by her bottomless pit of a stomach, but there was one thing I still had to tell her before she drained the pot. “Be sure to save the soup! I’ll be using it to make something special once you’ve finished everything else,” I said.

Man, though. I thought I might be able to sit down and eat a calm, quiet meal with Ark, but they’re just as bad as my familiars! I was extremely glad that I had thought to set aside a portion for myself back when I finished the dish, and now I brought it out to enjoy on my own off to the side. The rice gruel I made afterward using the leftover soup and a beaten egg was a huge hit too, of course, and everyone walked away from lunch completely satisfied.



After lunch, we got right back to exploring the dungeon. We spent quite some time riding along on Sui without sighting any monsters of note until suddenly, the grassy wetlands ahead of us erupted in flame.

“Whoa! What the heck was *that*?” I yelled.

“That would be Dora’s pseudo-dragon fire,” Fel said as he gazed out at the raging inferno.

“Huh? Does that mean he found something out there?”

“Ants, I would assume.”

“Wait, *ants*?”

“Look. You can see the tower-like pillars of stone in the distance, can you not?”

“Oh, yeah, I see those. They’re not just big rocks?” I asked. I’d noticed them before Fel had pointed them out, actually, but I’d assumed—incorrectly, it seemed—that they were just natural rock formations.

“They are anthills,” said Fel.

“*Anthills*?!” I exclaimed.

Before I had time to get over my shock at that revelation, Dora-chan flew back to us. «Had a buncha white ants out ahead, but I already took care of ‘em,» he said.

Gon arrived just a moment later and touched down on Sui's back. "I told him that I could wipe them out in an instant with my dragon breath, but Dora insisted that he would handle the task," he explained.

«Well, I can't let you take *all* the glory, now can I?» Dora-chan countered.

I, meanwhile, was trying my best to keep a straight face. *Gon, please, you should know better than anyone how powerful your breath is! You'll take all of us out right along with whatever you're trying to burn if you start throwing that around at the drop of a hat, so please, don't!*

Before long, we arrived at the area where Dora-chan had unleashed his fire breath. Now that I was up close, I could see that the anthills were burned to a blackened crisp, and that there were around ten white, meter-long ant-like monsters in the vicinity, also burned but still just barely twitching away. The boulder-like anthills themselves, by the way, looked to be about the size of a ten-story building up close.

"Wait, aren't those killer termites?" Gaudino commented, his brow furrowed.

"Do you know about those things?" I asked.

"Yeah, I do. Had a run-in with them right after I became an adventurer..."

Gaudino explained that he'd seen killer termites once back when he had still just been getting started in the adventuring business. A village had reported to the Adventurer's guild that their fields had been overrun by white, ant-like monsters that were devouring their crops, and requested that a party be sent to exterminate them.

Individual ant monsters were very low-ranking prey, but if you saw even one of them, you could be certain that there would be a whole nest of them somewhere nearby. That meant that the job would take a fairly accomplished group of adventurers to handle, so the guild had decided to entrust it to a relatively fresh-faced party that had recently climbed up to B-rank in an extraordinarily short amount of time.

"They were only two or three years older than me, but everyone was saying how they'd be hitting A-rank before we knew it. Some folks even said that it was only a matter of time before they reached S-rank. I looked up to them, myself, as well," Gaudino explained. The details all seemed to be coming back to him as he told his story. He'd waited to hear about the B-ranked party's victory...but then a week passed by without anyone hearing so much as a word from them.

"The guild had a lot riding on that party's future, so they put out a quest to go check up on them. That's how I and the party I was working with at the time got involved. Let me tell you, I've never regretted taking a quest more..."

When Gaudino and his party arrived at the village, they found it completely abandoned. That struck them as strange, of course, but they still decided to investigate further and proceeded into the forest that lay beyond the fields the monsters had ravaged. It wasn't long before they found what they could only describe as a tower-like anthill that loomed over the area, surrounded by an incredible number of dead, whiteish, ant-like creatures.

"A bunch of ants...and the chewed-up corpses of the whole damn party of B-rankers," Gaudino said, his expression grim.

A few of the white ant monsters were alive, and were still eating the dismembered bodies of the ill-fated adventurers. Gaudino could still remember how it felt to finish off those last stragglers, swinging his sword like a man possessed.

"We were just kids—fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds, fresh off the farm—and a sight like *that* was too much for us to handle. We were a party of four going into that quest, but after it was over, I was the only one who could bring myself to keep working as an adventurer."

Sometime later, Gaudino had learned that what he thought were white ants were really a species of monster known as killer termites. Killer termites were far more vicious and voracious than your typical ant monsters, and had a significantly higher ranking as a result. That said, the last time they'd been spotted in the area was about thirty years beforehand.

"You *could* put a share of the blame on the guild for lumping them in with your ordinary ant monsters, but on the other hand, they only got the info they'd need to make that call long after it was too late. There was nothing they could do," Gaudino said with a shake of his head. That, it seemed, was when he'd picked up the habit of studying illustrated field guides for monster species every opportunity he got.

I've always known that adventuring's a harsh profession, but having to see something like that as a teenager? No wonder most of them quit! If anything, Gaudino deserves a hell of a lot of credit for not dropping out of the field after that.

"Anyway, that's enough old war stories. Point is, I have a history with killer termites, and seeing them get blown away that easily's, well, a lot to take in."

"I mean, my familiars are just that strong, I guess," I said, pretty much immediately running out of things to say. "So, should we move along?"

"Hold your horses!" Gaudino said. "It looks like they dropped a ton of mandibles. Aren't you going to collect them?"

I hadn't even noticed until Gaudino pointed them out, but there really were quite a few pointy, light-brown objects strewn about the area. I shook my head, though. "Nah, picking all of them up would be a pain. Doesn't seem worth the effort."

Gaudino looked at me like I'd just told him that up is down and left is right. "Just so you know, killer termite mandibles are worth an awful lot! People process them to turn them into knives. They can hold one hell of an edge, and if you polish them enough, they take on a luster that makes them good materials for art pieces as well."

Huh? Seriously?

【Killer Termite Mandible】

Light, sturdy, and well-suited to serving as a material for making knife blades. Takes on a luster when polished that makes it useful for artistic purposes as well.

*Well, okay then! That's pretty much word for word. "Okay, taking *all* of them still doesn't seem worth it, but I might as well gather up a sack's worth," I conceded.*

"What about the rest?" Gaudino asked.

"I'll just leave them, I guess. Oh, unless you guys want them?"

"You wouldn't mind?!" Gaudino asked, jumping at the offer without hesitation. Gideon, Sigvard, and Feodora, who'd all stayed silent throughout the exchange, fixed their gazes on me as well.

You're putting an awful lot of pressure on me here, guys! «Umm, hey, Dora-chan? Mind if I share the materials from the termites you beat with the other party?» I asked.

«Yeah, sure, whatever. It's not like we can eat 'em,» Dora-chan replied.

"Go ahead! They're all yours," I said to Ark's members, who thanked me profusely and leapt off Sui's back to go and pick up their spoils.

"Guess I'd better help too," I said, then climbed to the ground as well. Before I could go join in the collection effort, though, Sui shrank down to its normal size behind me.

«Hey, Master? Can Sui go explore this anthill?» Sui asked.

"What, like, alone?"

«Yeah!»

"Nooo way, nuh-uh! That'd be way too dangerous!"

«Awww, but Sui really, really wants to! Pleeease? Sui's been carrying

everyone around all day, and hasn't gotten to pew-pew *anything!* Sui's *booored!*»

"Ugh! When you put it that way... Ah, I know!" I said, then turned to Fel. "Hey, Fel, you're bored too, right? Why don't you go check out one of these termite mounds with Sui?"

Fel raised a skeptical eyebrow. "**Take a closer look at the mound, particularly its entrances. Do they look large enough for me to comfortably fit within? Would you have me crawl through its passages?**"

"I, uh—"

"I'm afraid I'd have trouble shrinking *that* small as well," Gon said, preempting my suggestion before I could even make it. To be fair, if it was too small for Fel I should've been able to guess it'd be too small for him too.

«Okay, okay, I see where this is going! I'll tag along.»

"You will, Dora-chan?"

«Yaaay! Then let's go!»

«Hell yeah! We'll be back in a bit, guys.»

«Sui'll be back soon, Master!»

And just like that, the two of them headed off into the termite mound before I could get a word in edgewise.

"Oh, Sui," I sighed.

"Why must your groans always be so irritating?" Fel asked as he rolled his eyes.

"I mean, it's Sui! It's still a kid! Aren't you worried about it?!"

"Sui has Dora to accompany it, and there is no cause for concern. It would take a foe no less powerful than a dragon to endanger the two of them."

"W-Wait, seriously? Still, though, I dunno..."

"What is there left to question? Even if it were on its own, Sui would have nothing to fear from the likes of ants."

"Why are you so confident about that?! You *do* get what I mean when I say that Sui's a kid, right?!"

"It may be a child, but you are far too protective of it! Sui is the only slime I have ever seen fit to acknowledge as strong!"

"I don't care *what* you acknowledge! Ahh, Suiii! hurry up and come back already," I moaned. I'd totally forgotten about picking up killer termite mandibles, at that point.

"Fel...? Is this behavior typical of my liege?" asked Gon.

Fel sighed. “**Much to my irritation, yes.**”

“Surely he must know that given Sui’s strength, it’s only a matter of time before it becomes an emperor slime?”

“He has kept Sui by his side since its birth, and still believes it to be a mere child. If only he would learn to be less overprotective, at the very least...”

Hey, Fel, Gon? I can totally still hear you, you know? And what’s wrong with being a little protective, anyway?! Ahh, why aren’t you back yet, Sui?

I spent some time pacing restlessly back and forth in front of the tunnel that Sui and Dora-chan had disappeared into, only breaking out of my brooding when I heard Gaudino grunt nearby. He’d returned with a very hefty-looking sack, which he had just slung onto the ground. Gideon, Sigvard, and Feodora were back as well, each carrying a sack that looked just as jam-packed.

“Thanks again, Mukohda,” Gaudino said, followed by the rest of his party. I could tell from their expressions alone that they’d picked up a pretty good haul.

“Huh? Weren’t you going to gather some up too, though?” Gideon asked, cocking his head as he realized that I didn’t have a sack of my own.

“Oh! Well, actually,” I began, then explained how Dora-chan and Sui had gone into the termite mound, leaving me way too worried to think about gathering monster parts.

“Huh?” Gaudino blinked. “They’re his *familiars*, aren’t they?” he whispered, turning to the rest of his party.

“Isn’t exploring dangerous places ahead of you what they’re here for to begin with?” Gideon whispered back.

“I’d say so, yeah,” Sigvard agreed.

“That’s how it works,” Feodora said.

Yeah, no, those standards don’t really apply to me! “I happen to consider my familiars my party members *and* my family, more or less! Especially Sui! It’s still just a kid, for crying out loud!”

“O-Oh. That so...?” Gaudino said.

Why are you cringing like that?! Listen to me, pleeeease!

“**Look. They return,**” Fel said. I spun around in a flash to look at the termite mound.

«We’re back!»

«We did it, Master!»

“Dora-chan! Suiii!”

My two smaller familiars popped out from the mound, and I immediately

pulled the slime into a big hug, rubbing my cheek up against it.

«Hee hee! Master, that tickles!»

“You have no idea how worried I was, honestly!”

«Oh, that’s right! We brought you a present, Master!»

Sui stretched out a tentacle, in which it held a marble-sized magic stone and some sort of whitish rock. The latter was ovular, around five centimeters long, and remarkably lustrous.

«A big ’ol termite that we took out dropped ’em,» Dora-chan explained.

“Oh, really? Well, thanks, you two!” I said, though, in truth, I was more thankful that they had returned safely than anything else.



Once we were finished with the killer termites, Sui grew to a massive size once more and we climbed aboard to move along. I’d appraised the whiteish stone that Dora-chan and Sui gave me, by the way, and learned that it was a white opal. I figured that it would make for a nice memento of the trip, and decided to ask Lambert to have it worked into a little accessory that I could wear, or something of the like.

A short distance away from the termite mounds, we ran into a group of what looked like ten-meter long anteaters, plodding their way through the dungeon. It only felt fitting that where there were monstrous ants, there would be monstrous anteaters, and the sight reminded me of a documentary I’d seen on TV once that had shown anteaters living in wetlands. In any case, Fel had grimaced and explained that **“Those creatures’ meat tastes truly foul,”** so we decided to leave them alone. I would’ve been a little grossed out to eat an anteater, honestly, so I certainly wasn’t complaining.

Anyway, moving right along, we ended up on a lengthy streak of one monster that my familiars judged to be not worth their time after another. Nothing that turned up stoked their hunter’s instincts, and we proceeded along uninterrupted until night fell and we decided to bed down for the evening. Even though we were deep underground, field levels in dungeons followed a day and night cycle just like the surface world, which had always sorta boggled my mind. Anyway, we found a relatively dry, grassy patch of ground, and stopped to set up our campsite.

I had cooked the hot pots we’d had for lunch from scratch, so I decided to bring out something premade for dinner. My gluttonous quartet started raising a

fuss about how they wanted to eat alligator karaage, but needless to say I shot that idea down right away and served up dungeon beef bowls instead. My familiars grumbled about not getting their way, of course, but they also wolfed down their bowls and asked for seconds at a record-breaking pace.

Ark's members took quite a liking to the beef bowls as well, and when I told them where the beef had come from, they started seriously discussing the possibility of traveling to the meat dungeon themselves. Feodora the elven glutton, meanwhile, was apparently okay with anything as long as there was good food involved, and spent the discussion demolishing her beef bowl, eyes sparkling with the glee of a true gourmand all the while. Then she asked for more additional helpings than any reasonable person would ever consider eating in a single meal, to no one's surprise.

We spent a little while relaxing after dinner was done, and were getting ready to bed down when I learned that Ark did things slightly differently than my party made a habit of.

"Are you *sure* you want to bother keeping watch?" I asked.

"Just for good measure," Gaudino said.

"Okay, but you should know, Fel and Gon already put up barriers! Unless something *really* crazy happens, we'll be totally fine."

"Just think of it as us indulging a deep-seated adventuring habit, and try not to let it bother you."

I made extra sure to ask Fel and Gon to put their barriers around all of us, you guys included, but if you say so...

"You heard the man. Let them waste their effort," huffed Fel, who'd been listening in on our conversation.

"One has to wonder what sort of enemy they expect to encounter if they don't believe that the barriers of an ancient dragon and a Fenrir will ward it off," Gon grumbled sarcastically.

I understood why the two of them found Ark's decision irritating, but at the same time, I could definitely see where the adventurers were coming from as well. They had probably never camped out without having someone on watch. Heck, doing so would probably be suicide, by their standards. I assumed that was the conventional way of thinking for adventurers, most likely.

"Enough of this. Bring out our bedding," Fel said.

Oh, right, beds. Eh, it's not like the members of Ark don't already know I have an Item Box, and if I don't bring our bedding out tonight, I'll be stuck sleeping on the ground for the rest of this trip. They probably won't think it's too

weird if I pull out a few futons, I reasoned, and then I extracted everyone's bedding from my Item Box. My familiars had apparently been waiting eagerly for me to do so, and lay down right away.

"Okay, we're turning in now," I called out to Gaudino.

"Got it. Sleep tight," he replied. The other three gave us a wave as well.

I plopped down on our bedding, leaned back against Fel's belly, and closed my eyes. The dungeon must've tired me out more than I'd realized, because before I knew it, I'd fallen into a deep slumber.



Slap, slap.

«...ster...ungr...»

Slap-slap, slap-slap.

"Mnhh..."

The sticky sensation of a tentacle lightly slapping my cheek roused me, and I slowly forced my eyes open.

«Master, Sui's hungry!» Sui said. The slime was perched on my chest, still poking away at my cheek.

"Morning, Sui," I mumbled.

«Good morning, Master! Sui's hungry!»

"Right, okay. Just a sec." I picked Sui up, set it down off to the side, and stretched. "Mnhh... Ahh, that's better. Hey, Sui, I wanna wash my face before breakfast. Can you make some water?"

«Okaaay! Here!» Sui said, then brought a basketball-sized orb of water into being. I splashed some of it onto my face to wash off, then dried myself with a towel that I kept in my Item Box.

"All right, nice and refreshed! Thanks, Sui. I'll get to work on breakfast right away," I said as I stood up...then jumped as the ghastly face of an extremely dispirited-looking Gideon entered my field of vision. "Gah! Gideon?!"

"Oh, hey, Mukohda. Morning..." Gideon groaned.

"J-Jeez, you look *terrible*! What happened? Did you even sleep at all?" I said, noting the dark bags under his eyes.

"Don't worry 'bout it. Everything's fine. Just an exhausting night, that's all," Gideon said in a voice that made it sound like he might fall asleep at any second.

Is he just tired out from keeping watch? I'd heard somewhere that eating pork could help you recover from fatigue faster, and decided to serve some tonjiru—a

pork and miso soup—for breakfast. I'd made some in advance, thankfully, and got to work preparing for our meal right away.

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When Ark's members gathered around for breakfast, I was concerned to find that they all looked about as tired as Gideon did. Gaudino and Sigvard were both acting just as subdued as he was, and although Feodora barely ever talked even on a good day, the bags under her eyes made it clear that not even her carefree spirit had gotten her through *whatever* had happened unscathed.

"H-Hey, are you guys okay?" I asked. They just nodded, as if to inform me they were fine in the least convincing way possible. Just one look at them was enough to tell they were completely drained. *Seriously, what happened? Is keeping watch always that tiring? I don't know how this stuff works, but I told them we'd be fine without a guard!*

"Here! Have some of this, and hopefully you'll feel better," I said as I served up our breakfast: tonjiru made with dungeon pork and plenty of Alban's veggies, a side dish made from whitebait piled onto grated daikon (also from Alban's garden), and rice balls seasoned with a packaged mixture that included wakame and sesame seeds. I'd heard that whitebait, sesame seeds, and wakame were good for recovering from fatigue as well, so they'd all seemed like solid choices.

Ark's members ate in silence. Even Feodora, who would normally have been ogling my familiars' meat-packed meal, was uncharacteristically restrained—and the gluttonous quartet were having *roast beef bowls* made using high-grade dungeon beef this morning! On any other day, Feodora would've been salivating a river over a dish that fancy! *Seriously, what happened to those four?*

Interlude: Ark's Perspective

"Well, that was grating on the nerves in more ways than one," Gaudino muttered. The other members of his party nodded in agreement.

"A hell spider came *right* up next to me while I was on watch. Nearly screamed my lungs out when I finally noticed it," Gideon listlessly droned. Hell spiders were no larger than the palm of one's hand, but they were also hyper-aggressive and lethally venomous monsters. A single bite would cause their victims to spew blood from every orifice and die a horrible, writhing, excruciating death.

“Oh, you too? I saw some of those as well—*five* of them, all at once... Seems the barriers kept them from coming too close, but damned if I could bring myself to ignore them,” Sigvard said. His usual dwarven bravado was nowhere to be seen, and exhaustion was weighing heavily on his expression.

“I got vampire bats,” said Feodora, whose already fair complexion was now downright ghostly.

Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard gaped at her. “Seriously?” Gaudino muttered under his breath.

Vampire bats measured two meters long from head to foot. They were enormous, as far as bat monsters went, and paralyzed their prey with a powerful venom before sucking out every last drop of their blood. The desiccated corpses of their victims were a terrible sight to witness indeed.

Hell spiders and vampire bats were both A-ranked monsters, and since the only useful materials to be obtained from them were magic stones, they were despised by adventurers everywhere. The standard practice was to not bother risking one’s life battling them. If a party happened across one, they would run away, and ideally, no one would go anywhere near their territory in the first place.

Ark’s adventurers let out a heavy, synchronized sigh.

“And there Mukohda was, sleeping away the whole time. I gotta admit, the guy might be bolder than I gave him credit for,” Gaudino muttered as he and his companions turned to look at their remarkable traveling companion.

Chapter 9: Turtle Hot Pot's Back on the Menu

We spent a whole week riding Sui across the wetlands, stopping every once in a while at Ark's request or to let Fel and Sui get some exercise by taking on monsters in the vicinity, but otherwise making steady progress.

Incidentally, Ark's primary target throughout the trip ended up being a sort of parrot-like monster with brightly colored feathers. Their feathers were so bright, in fact, that they put Earth parrots to shame, and it seemed that they could be worked into dresses, accessories, fans, and the like, all of which were tremendously popular among the wealthy. Some people even taxidermied whole birds as display pieces. The one issue keeping the market from being flooded with them was that they only lived in certain very specific locales that only high-ranked adventurers could ever hope to reach. Needless to say, that also meant that they sold for quite a high price.

With flying monsters as Ark's primary target, this was the perfect opportunity for Feodora's bowmanship to really shine. She took down a half dozen vividly colored parrot monsters on her own. This was, of course, a dungeon, so they couldn't get their hands on *all* of the resources a surface monster would've provided, but the creatures *did* consistently drop feathers, at the very least. That meant that they were still very profitable monsters to hunt, and Ark's members were clearly pleased as could be to get the chance to take down so many of them.

I eventually decided to get in on the action as well, and had Dora-chan and Sui take down about ten parrot monsters or so, then gather up the feathers they dropped. I figured they'd make perfect souvenirs for everyone back in Karelina, especially if I had them made into quill pens, or something along those lines.

Fel and Sui, meanwhile, spent some of their time hunting down black anacondas (a type of monster we'd already encountered in the Aveling dungeon) and massive, brown-colored bull monsters called yales. They'd chosen to prey on those monsters in particular because—surprise, surprise—they were both tasty. Yales were supposedly particularly delicious, so whenever we encountered a herd of them, my familiars would slaughter every last one they could get their

claws on, securing us an incredible quantity of beef. The fact that dungeon monsters dropped ready-to-cook chunks of meat was a blessing, in my case—it meant that I wouldn't have to have their corpses butchered before I could cook with them.

Gon and Dora-chan would occasionally pause to take out any monsters that caught their eye while they were scouting as well. Dora-chan had a magic bag with him, and when he eventually gave it back to me I found a remarkable assortment of drops inside. He'd picked up pelts, teeth, and a ton of different sorts of meat, including—much to my surprise—big bite turtle meat. Dora-chan had remembered eating them in the Aveling dungeon, apparently, so when he ran into a group of them in a swamp, he'd taken the time to do them all in.

That turtle meat had caught Fel and Sui's attention, so we made a side trip to the swamp where Dora-chan had obtained it. There, my familiars spent a period of time diligently taking out every single big bite turtle they could find. The sight of them joyfully charging from one turtle to the next, hunting with such excited vigor you'd think they were trying to exterminate the whole species, was really something to behold—and, in Ark's case, something to be sort of horrified by. I tried to explain that the turtles tasted *really* good, but unfortunately, that just earned me four looks of shock, followed by even more open revulsion than they'd expressed before. Even Feodora, the bottomless pit, looked disgusted.

I just don't get it. I mean, come on, turtle hot pot's so good! In any case, we obtained plenty of meat from the big bite turtles, as well as the higher-ranked form of the monsters—which were apparently called giant bite turtles—leaving me and my familiars thoroughly satisfied. *I'll just have to feed Ark' a turtle hot pot one of these days. Let's see them act grossed out once they've given it a try!*

I did, of course, have to wonder: if giant turtles like them naturally inhabited wetlands like the ones we were traveling through, then how on earth did they survive in a place like the Aveling dungeon, which was all stone corridors with no water to be found? Eventually, though, I decided that thinking about it was pointless. After all, everything about dungeons was just one big mystery, plain and simple.

Anyway, after days on end spent traveling aimlessly through the wetlands, Fel and Gon finally informed me that we'd almost reached our destination. In other words, it wouldn't be much longer before we encountered the floor's boss, and we decided to stop and get a solid night's rest before we plunged into that encounter.



It was still a little early for it, but I decided to get dinner started right away.

“Why bother waiting when we could have dealt with the boss today?” Fel grumbled as I cooked.

“Because unlike you, the rest of us have to *prepare* for that sort of fight,” I replied. I had to prepare my nerves for it, in particular. Every time we ended up in a dungeon, I found myself scared stiff imagining what sort of horrible bosses we’d end up encountering. “Plus, we’ve got company this time, and that means we have to be extra careful, just in case.”

“Hmph! No matter what foe stands against us, it will be no match for our might. We will end the battle before it has even begun.”

“Maybe you’re right, but that doesn’t mean we have to rush! Why not take our time?”

“Because nothing on this floor has posed a challenge! I would have us move on as soon as we are able.”

“Okay, so I guess that means you don’t want dinner after all?”

“Do not speak nonsense! That is an entirely separate matter!”

“Then quit griping.”

Fel kept muttering to himself for some time—mostly about how outrageous it was to bring meals into a totally unrelated conversation—but I pretended I couldn’t hear him.

«Is dinner ready, Master?» Sui asked. Unlike Fel, it and Dora-chan were willing and eager to stop and eat early. In fact, they were downright giddy with anticipation.

“Not yet! It’ll be a while longer,” I said.

«Aww, can’t Master finish sooner?»

“We’re lucky I can make this at all! I thought the big bite turtle meat from the Aveling dungeon would last us a while, but nope, we’ve used up most of it already. We’re really lucky we got our hands on more.”

That’s right—I’d decided to go for it and make turtle hot pot for dinner. We’d obtained an incredible amount of turtle meat in the Aveling dungeon, but it had been no match for my party’s appetites, so it hadn’t lasted long at all. As a result, this was the first time in quite a while that I’d been able to make the recipe. Turtle hot pot was supposed to be a very energizing dish, so it seemed like the perfect meal to serve before a boss fight.

«Hah hah! Yeah, Fel and Sui sure did eat through our last batch of turtle

meat in a flash. They're such gluttons, I swear!»

“Oh, like you’re one to talk, Dora-chan! You’re just as bad as they are!”

«Oof! Way to call me out.»

You seriously thought I wouldn’t? You might not eat as much as Fel or Sui, but you still eat enough that it’s a mystery how you can even fit it all into that tiny body of yours!

“Anyway,” I said, “I’m really glad you noticed those turtles.”

«Heh heh!» Dora-chan chuckled proudly. «Yeah, I haven’t forgotten how good they were the last time we had ‘em! The second I saw one of those things poke its head out of the swamp, I knew exactly what I was looking at.»

“Well, you’re the star of tonight’s dinner thanks to that!” I said.

«You’re a star, Dora-chan!» Sui echoed.

«You know it!» said Dora-chan, who was clearly enjoying all the praise.

“Hmm. Are those turtles truly *that* delicious? They look repulsive, at a glance,” Gon said. While Dora-chan, Sui, and I were getting excited about our dinner, he was giving me and the dish I was cooking a very skeptical sidelong glance.

Gon was always going on and on about how everything that I made was delicious, but it seemed that having seen the turtles while they were still living and breathing, he just couldn’t believe they’d live up to the hype. Considering what they looked like, I couldn’t exactly blame him, but oh, if only he knew!

“You can appraise stuff, right, Gon? Why not give that a try and see for yourself?” I suggested.

“What? Surely you can’t mean...” Gon muttered. I felt safe in assuming that he’d done as I said, judging by how his rather intimidating elongated reptilian eyes opened wide with shock. “Well! My mistake, then! But really, who would have ever thought a creature like *that* could be a delicacy?”

Yeah, I get you. Whoever made the first turtle hot pot was either a hero, a lunatic, or both.

“I, too, have appraised them in the past and learned of their supposed merits,” Fel said. **“Upon trying one, I found its meat to be unremarkable. However, when they are cooked using his methods, they become something far greater.”**

“I see! Impressive as ever, my liege!”

“Oh, c’mon,” I chuckled. They were starting to make me feel a little bashful. The members of Ark, however, were way on the opposite end of the spectrum, watching me cook from a safe distance away.

“H-Hey, I think he’s seriously planning on eating those things,” Gideon said, rather fearfully.

“Mukohda’s food is incredible, but I don’t know if even *he* could make something good out of those,” Gaudino said.

“I’ll eat just about anything, but *those* horrible things are a step too far even for me,” Sigvard said.

“Me too,” Feodora muttered with a repulsed grimace.

“You know I can hear you guys, right?” I called out. “Sheesh... Keep up that complaining, and I might decide not to feed you tonight after all!” *And trust me, you’d really be missing out! I’m surrounded by picky eaters, I swear.*

In spite of all the distractions, it wasn’t much longer until I finished up the hot pots. “Mmh, these look good!” I said as I inspected my handiwork.

“They are finally finished?!”

«Hot pooots!»

«All right, let’s chow down!»

“Yes, I’m very excited!”

My familiars had been waiting eagerly for their meal, and were clearly more than ready to get started. “I know, I know! I’m gonna dish it up now, so just give me a minute!” I said, then ladled the hot pot into my familiars’ big bowls and passed them out.

“Yes, this is indeed as delicious as ever!”

«Yeah, *this* is the stuff! I swear, this flavor’s outta this world!»

«It’s sooo yummy!»

Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui all let out exclamations of glee as they dug in. Gon, meanwhile, was a little more tentative, but only at first. “Mmh. Yes... Yes, this *is* delicious! It seems you truly can’t judge a book by its cover!” he muttered to himself as he ate.

That’s exactly right, Gon. Sometimes you just can’t judge things by their appearances! Although, I guess I have to admit that I would never eat bugs or stuff like that, no matter how tasty my appraisal claimed they were.

Anyway, now it was time for us humans to have our meal. “I made turtle hot pot tonight! Enjoy,” I said as I set the steaming pot down before Ark’s members. They stared at it, expressions strained, and gulped.

That wasn’t an “oh, wow, that looks so delicious” gulp, was it? I can tell! People can be so rude sometimes, I swear.

“A hot pot?” Gaudino muttered. “So it’s the same sort of dish as the one we had the other day?”

“That’s right,” I confirmed. “This dish is just as good as that one was, I promise. Actually, some people would probably say this one’s even better! It’s not just a matter of it tasting good either. It’s really nourishing, it energizes you, *and* it’s full of collagen, which means it’ll make your skin as smooth as it’s ever been, come tomorrow morning!”

Feodora’s eyes lit up in a flash. “As smooth as it’s ever been...?” she quietly repeated, giving the turtle hot pot an intense stare.

I guess elves care about that sort of thing too, even though they’re gorgeous by default. Well, I know she’s old enough to have grandkids, so maybe she’s at an age where she has to start worrying about her skin? “Yup! Smooth as could be,” I said with a nod.

Feodora gave the turtle hot pot one last wide-eyed stare before scooping a portion of it into her bowl. She took a moment to steel her resolve, bit into a piece of turtle meat—well, technically, big bite turtle meat—and froze.

“H-Hey, how is it?” Gaudino asked. He, Gideon, and Sigvard all leaned forward as they waited to hear what she thought of the meat.

“Don’t force yourselves. I’ll eat yours for you,” Feodora said. Then she finished off her first bowl faster than the eye could follow, and went for seconds without saying a word. Feodora was back in her usual form, and had clearly judged the hot pot to be delicious.

“Oh, *no* you don’t! ‘I’ll eat yours’ doesn’t answer the question, dammit, and I know what it means when you start eating that quickly! That stuff’s *good*, isn’t it?!” Gideon shouted at the top of his lungs.

“This is no time to dawdle. I’m having some too!” Sigvard declared as he scooped out a helping for himself.

“Slow down, would you, Feodora? At least try to leave some for us!” Gaudino shouted.

“Y-Yeah, what he said! We’re eating this too, y’know!” Gideon agreed. Feodora was eating so fast that it really did look like she intended to polish off the whole pot. Gaudino and Gideon couldn’t afford to hesitate for a single moment. And of course, once they actually *tried* the dish...

“I-Is this *really* big bite turtle meat?”

“O-Oh, gods, it’s so *good*!”

“How could something that looks so awful taste this *incredible*?!”

Bwa ha ha ha ha! I told you! I told you over and over that it was good, and now you know how right I was!

“Seconds, now!”

“I’ll have more as well!”

«Same here!»

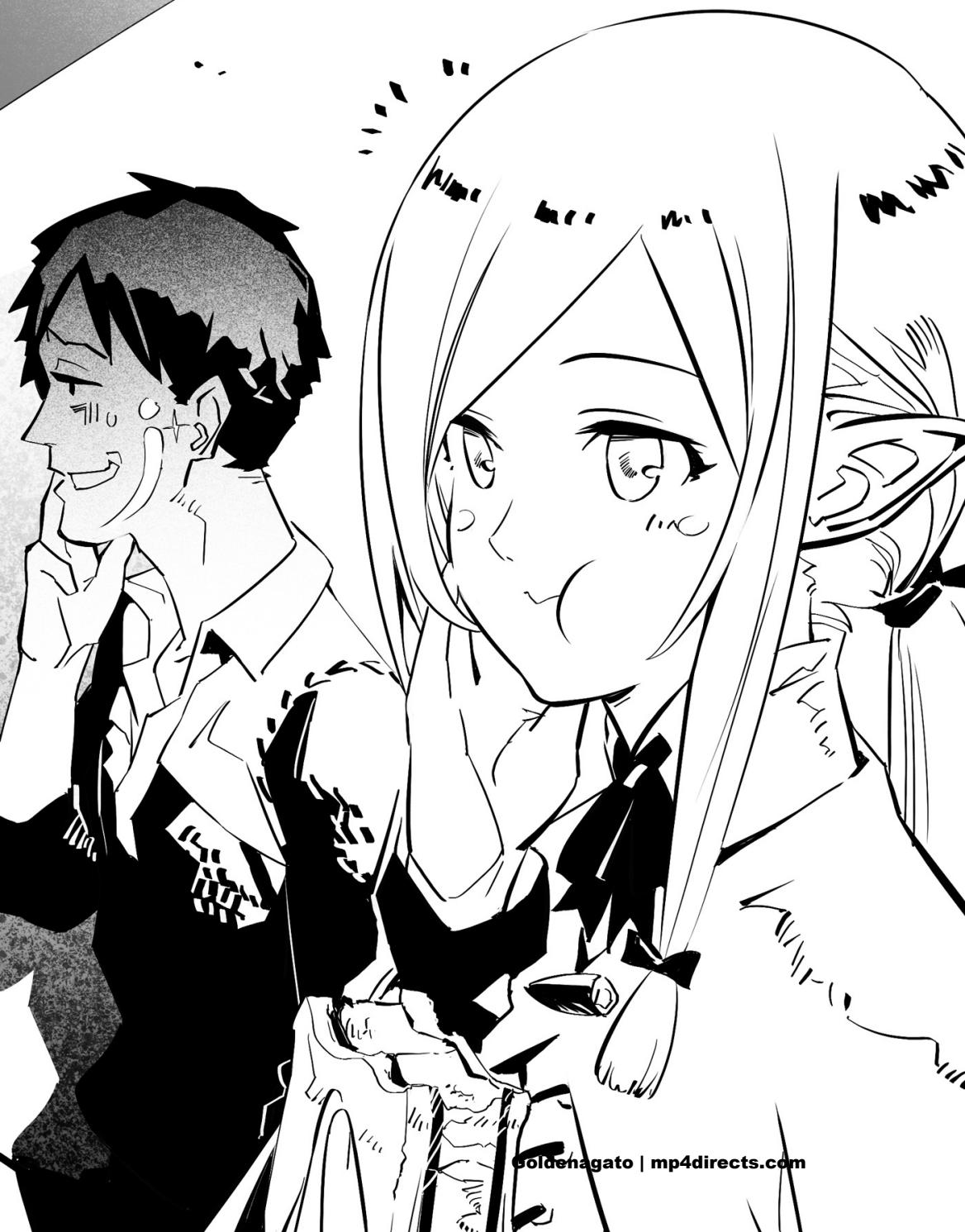
«Sui too!»

“Gotcha! Coming right up!” I said, leaving Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard to sit there in stunned astonishment as I went to deliver my familiars their second helpings.



Perhaps thanks to the turtle hot pots I’d served, my familiars were as energetic as I’d ever seen them the following morning. They practically inhaled the dungeon pork cutlet sandwiches I pulled out of my premade stock for breakfast. Ark’s adventurers were in high spirits as well, and asked to be served the same food as the gluttonous quartet for once.

Feodora kept happily poking and prodding her cheeks as she ate her cutlet sandwich. The turtle hot pot had done wonders for her skin, as promised—and, for that matter, for Gaudino’s, Gideon’s, and Sigvard’s as well. The juxtaposition of a trio of gruff, travel-worn men with flawless complexions almost made me chuckle...until I remembered that *I’d* eaten the same meal they had, and probably looked just mismatched as they did. I gave my cheek a poke, found that it was as soft as could be, and swore off turtle hot pots on the spot, for at least the immediate future.



We finished breakfast, mounted Sui, and moved along. If Fel and Gon were correct, we were a stone's throw away from the end of the floor, so this time Gon and Dora-chan rode along with the rest of us. Before long, Fel called for Sui to stop.

"Th-That must be it," I said as I peered out ahead of us.

The stairs to the next floor should have been nearby, but before we found those, there was sure to be a boss ready to try and stop us. I quickly spotted a cluster of big mossy boulders leaning up against each other to form the entrance to a cave, and in front of that entrance a pair of yellow-furred, black-speckled beasts were prowling around. Assuming I was judging the size of the boulders correctly, each of the creatures had to be about three meters long.

"Are those...jaguars?" I asked.

"**Yes,**" Fel confirmed. "**They are monsters known as assassin jaguars. They are remarkably swift, but otherwise unimpressive.**"

"Yes, they *are* rather nimble," Gon agreed. "Of course, they'd fall to a single blast of my flames regardless."

That's not really a good standard to judge stuff by, Gon! I mean, that's true for pretty much everything except Fel!

"H-Hey, did he just say those are *assassin* jaguars?" Gideon asked. "Doesn't that sound, y'know, *really* bad?"

"If I'm remembering right, assassin jaguars are S-ranked monsters," Gaudino said. "I remember seeing 'em in a book I found in the Valcarce Adventurer's guild."

"Valcarce? That'd mean they're from the Great Peralez Woodlands, wouldn't it?" Sigvard asked.

"Right," Gaudino confirmed.

"They say countless unspeakable horrors stalk those woods. If *that's* where those monsters live, then we're sure as hell no match for them," Sigvard said.

"Least of all two at once," Gaudino said.

Ark's adventurers all looked downright petrified as they discussed the boss. *Looks like they're S-ranks after all, then,* I thought. I'd more or less figured that out the moment Fel complimented their speed, however backhanded that compliment was.

Come to think of it, it took us ten days to get this far, so an average group of adventurers probably would've taken months traveling the same path. And the first floor boss is a pair of S-ranked monsters, on top of that? Just how freakishly hard of a dungeon have we found our way into?

“So, uh, looks like there’s two of them. Still feeling confident?” I said, glancing at Fel.

“Hmph! Do you truly need to ask?”

“As I said, one burst of my breath would—”

“No, no, let’s hold off on the fire breath, Gon. You’ll burn us to a crisp too.”

Heck, we’re talking about an ancient dragon’s fire breath. It might take out the whole dungeon, for all I know!

I hadn’t really understood how much danger we’d been in back when Gon used his fire breath in the Brixt dungeon, but in retrospect, just the thought of it made me weak in the knees. He’d managed to annihilate a black dragon without damaging the dungeon itself, but there was no guarantee whatsoever that that was how it would always turn out. After all, an ancient dragon’s fire breath seemed like it had to be one of the most purely powerful attacks this world had to offer. Who even knew how much damage something like that could cause?

“It will never cease to baffle me how dragons believe their breath can solve any and all problems that come their way,” Fel said with a shake of his head.

“Hmph!” Gon snorted. “A dragon’s breath is their most powerful attack! It’s only natural we’d use it regularly.”

“Perhaps, but your thickheaded devotion to it is mystifying nonetheless.”

“Grrr!”

Once Fel and Gon started glaring daggers at each other, I decided it was time to step in. “Come on, you two! Get along!” I said.

“I’ve no objections to getting along, my liege, but *Fel* insulted me for no reason!”

“I did nothing but state the truth.”

“Oh, for the—*enough!* We have more important things to be dealing with right now, like *those!*” I shouted, gesturing at the assassin jaguars. *Seriously, this is no time to be squabbling!*

While I sighed with exasperation at our party’s profoundly immature senior citizens, Dora-chan perched himself on Gon’s head. «Hey, what was that you were saying about dragons being devoted to their breath attacks? You forgot *I’m* a dragon or something, Fel?» he asked.

“Hm?” Fel grunted.

«My game’s *magic*, remember? That, and being speedy as all get out!»

“Yes, well, you are altogether unlike certain eternally obstinate dragons I could name.”

«You know it! So, yeah, I'mma go take those two out,» Dora-chan declared, then started fluttering off toward the assassin jaguars.

«Ahh!» Sui yelped. «That's not fair, Dora-chan! Sui wants to fight tooo!»

Sui lurched toward the boss monsters, and Fel, Gon, Ark's members, and I, who were all still on top of it, leapt off as quickly as we could manage. Sui and Dora-chan advanced on the assassin jaguars, which began to move toward them as well once they got close enough.

“Are you sure you want to leave this to them?” I asked Fel and Gon. “Actually, are you sure Dora-chan and Sui can take those things in the first place?”

“Those creatures are hardly strong enough to catch my interest, and I see no need to insist on fighting them. Also, Dora and Sui will be in no danger.”

“Yes, Fel’s right. There’s no need for us to join in, this time.”

“Yeah, okay, but I’m still kinda worried. I’d really like it if you two would head over and be there in case something goes wrong!”

Fel sighed. **“It is high time you came to appreciate how strong Dora and Sui have become,”** he said.

It’s not that I don’t understand that—I just can’t help but worry! “But—”

“Be silent and watch.”

Before I could get another word in, the battle began. One of the assassin jaguars made the first move, leaping toward Dora-chan and raking at him with its claws.

“Is that thing using magic?” I asked. I’d noticed that every time the assassin jaguar swung its clawed forelimbs, the grass in front of the strike rippled unnaturally.

“Indeed. Wind magic, specifically.”

“Is that sort of like your Rending Claws?” I asked.

“My attack is far more refined...but yes, I suppose it does bear a resemblance,” Fel admitted.

A resemblance, huh? I guess it’s like a downgraded version of Rending Claws, then. In any case, Dora-chan was more than agile enough to match the attack’s speed, weaving between each blade-like burst of air with ease. The assassin jaguar soon seemed to realize that it wasn’t getting anywhere just attacking with its forelimbs, and tried to bite him with its razor-sharp fangs instead.

«What, did you think dodging's all I can do? You're gonna regret that!» Dora-chan shouted, then conjured a pointed pillar of ice directly beneath the creature. The pillar thrust upward, impaling the assassin jaguar with a mighty *shwick!* The jaguar let out a blood-curdling screech, twitching violently as it breathed its last.

Meanwhile, on Sui's side of the battlefield, the second assassin jaguar was staring down the slime, which had returned to its usual size. Sui took the initiative, firing off a series of Acid Bullets, but the jaguar dodged them entirely.

«Grr! Why can't Sui hit it?!» Sui whined with a few frustrated bounces that I assumed were its equivalent of stomping its foot. «Mnh. Okay, then, Sui'll try this!»

Sui extended two lengthy tentacles in an effort to catch the assassin jaguar in its grasp. The jaguar, of course, had no interest in letting itself get caught that easily and kept on the move. Sui and the dungeon boss engaged in an extended back and forth, sometimes attacking, sometimes defending, until finally...

«Ah ha! Sui got it!» Sui shouted. It had brought a *third* tentacle into play, which it had managed to wrap around the assassin jaguar's tail. The jaguar let out a panicked yelp and started flailing, trying to dislodge the tentacle, but Sui held fast. «Hee hee! You can't make Sui let go that easy!» Sui giggled.

Seeming to realize that it wasn't going to thrash its way loose anytime soon, the assassin jaguar changed gears and tried biting into Sui's tentacle instead. It dug its teeth into the slime, wrenching its head back and forth as it tried to tear it to shreds...but that was *Sui's* tentacle, and one of the slime species' most distinctive traits was that ripping into them didn't really do them much harm. The parts the jaguar managed to bite through merged back together an instant later.

«That's not gonna work on Sui!» Sui playfully shouted. While the jaguar was trying to bite through the tentacle on its tail, Sui had wrapped its other two tentacles around the monster's midsection and neck. It pulled the creature closer and closer, until finally, it was close enough for Sui to take the jaguar's head into its body entirely.

The assassin jaguar, suddenly unable to breathe, flailed more violently than ever. Within a minute or two, though, its movements began to slow, and five minutes later, the creature fell entirely motionless. It disappeared soon afterward, leaving behind a magic stone and a yellow, black-spotted pelt.

«Yipeee! Sui won!» Sui shouted as it bounced triumphantly around the monster's drops.

«Oh, you took yours down too, Sui? Nice one!» Dora-chan said.

«Hee hee hee!»

«Looks like yours dropped a magic stone and a pelt, eh? Same as mine.»

«They didn't leave any meat at all.»

«Meh, wasn't exactly expecting 'em to in the first place, considering how they looked. That's life.»

Dora-chan and Sui were chatting happily in the aftermath of their battle, while I stood back and felt my expression spasm as I watched them. “Hey, guys...? When did Sui learn how to fight like *that*?“ I asked.

“I know not. I do, however, know that I would sooner not be subjected to it myself,” said Fel, whose expression appeared just as strained as I knew mine was.

“I heartily agree,” Gon said, looking equally horrified.

It just suffocated that thing... Well, rest in peace, assassin jaguar, I thought, paying my silent respects to the brutally slain boss monster. *Anyway, if even big shots like Fel and Gon think that was terrifying, then it looks like Sui really is a force to be reckoned with.*

Ark’s adventurers, meanwhile, had fallen as silent as the grave. None of them looked like they could totally believe what they’d just seen.

“So it’s not just the Fenrir and the ancient dragon, I guess,” Gaudino said.

“Even the little dragon and the slime can take down an S-ranked monster on their own. If this is a joke, it’s *not* funny,” Gideon muttered.

“Remind me to never, ever piss Mukohda off,” Sigvard said.

“I’ll be good from now on,” Feodora added.

Excuse me, you four! Come back to reality and quit muttering like that, please! Also, I told you that Dora-chan and Sui were tough, didn’t I? And what do you mean, never piss me off? It’s not like I’m gonna sic my familiars on you if you make me mad, I swear!

Gossip: Putting the Magic Refrigerator to Use

“Hmm...”

As Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui napped in our living room in Karelina, I sat off to the side, mulling over a matter that had been on my mind recently.

“**What is it?**” Fel asked as he cracked a single eyelid.

“Well, nothing major,” I began, then started explaining what I’d been preoccupied by.

A short while beforehand, when we raided the bandit king’s treasure hoard, I’d obtained a magic refrigerator. I’d been really excited at the time, and had thought that I’d use it for all sorts of stuff, but in truth I’d barely done anything with it at all so far. Having constant access to my Online Supermarket meant that I could buy ingredients in small quantities and use them on the spot, and even when I *did* have more ingredients than I could use in one sitting, my Item Box did a better job of preserving them than any fridge ever would.

In complete honesty, all I’d used the magic fridge for so far was marinating meat and making pickles, and even in those cases, I always transferred them to my Item Box after they were sufficiently flavored. I had this incredible magic tool on hand, and I *wanted* to make decent use of it, but I just didn’t know what I could do...

“I mean, the whole point of a refrigerator’s to keep food at a cool enough temperature that it doesn’t spoil quickly, right? So when I really think about it, doesn’t having an Item Box that *stops* time for everything inside it mean that I barely even need a fridge at all?” I mused. It could cool down drinks and stuff, sure, but when I bought those from my Online Supermarket, they came prechilled unless I bought them by the case. “I guess it’s nice for desserts? Like, the yogurt jelly I made a while back was super easy thanks to the fridge, but on the other hand, desserts *really* aren’t my specialty.” I could make jelly easily enough, but, I mean, who *couldn’t*? And for that matter, who would even want to eat enough jelly to justify making it all the time?

“**If you have no need for it, then do not use it. What reason is there to agonize over such a simple matter?**” Fel asked.

“You’re not wrong, I guess, but it just feels like a waste,” I explained. “But actually, now that I’m thinking about chilled desserts... Hmm...”

I paused for a moment to try and come up with any non-jelly desserts that I might be able to make on my own.

«Desserts? Sweets?!» yelped Sui the sweet-tooth, reacting immediately to the slightest mention of a treat in store. «Are you making dessert, Master? Oooh, oooh, what kind?!» it asked as it bounced up onto my lap, pelting me with questions it didn’t give me the time to answer. Its telepathic messages *also* had the side effect of waking up Gon and Dora-chan.

«Whazzat? Dessert? I wouldn’t say no to some sweets,» Dora-chan said with a yawn as he sat up.

“Nor would I. Everything you make is worth eating, my liege,” Gon agreed.

«Hey, Master, Masteeer, what’re you making?»

“Ah, I mean... Look, Sui, I...” I began, but trailed off. I just couldn’t say it. After all this, I couldn’t let my favorite slime down by telling it I wasn’t *actually* planning on making dessert. Now I *had* to come up with something chilled that I was sure I could make!

Hmm...w-wait! Of course! I’ll copy the recipe I made back when I was a student and worked part-time at a café: I’ll make a no-bake cheesecake!



“Okay, let’s get started!” I said, hyping myself up for the task ahead.

I’d relocated to the kitchen to prepare our dinner and dessert for the night. Dinner would be premade mincemeat cutlet sandwiches. I’d made the cutlets out of a mixture of dungeon beef and pork, and the bread came from one of the rustic, hand-made loaves that Theresa had baked for me, which I’d toasted and buttered. That toast, plus some cabbage and a fresh, juicy mincemeat cutlet with a bit of Worcestershire sauce on top made for a simple but delicious sandwich that I was confident couldn’t be beat...unless you put some cheese in them as well, which I also prepared as an option, of course.

My main task, however, was to make the no-bake cheesecake I’d be serving for dessert, and to that end, I opened up my Online Supermarket’s menu to stock up on ingredients. *Let’s see—cream cheese, plain yogurt, whipping cream,* I thought to myself, adding each item to my shopping cart as they came to mind. Then I checked out, gathered up the remaining ingredients I already had in stock, and started cooking!

“All right, first up’s the crust,” I said to myself. I brought out a kettle of hot water that I kept in my Item Box in case I ever wanted to make coffee or tea, poured it into a bowl, and then put another bowl with some unsalted butter inside on top of it, allowing the heat of the water to gently melt the butter down. Next, I put some cookies in a plastic bag, brought out a rolling pin, and started pulverizing them as thoroughly as I could.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

“Err... Hey, Sui. Need something?” I asked. I had a spectator, it seemed. Sui was peering through the door to the kitchen, watching my every movement.

«Umm, well, Sui was wondering how you were making dessert today.»

I guess when you love sweets as much as Sui, it's only natural you'd be interested in learning how they're made. “Wanna help?” I offered.

«Yeah!»

And so Sui joined the party! Together, we set out to make a no-bake cheesecake.

“Okay, then first up, do you see the cookies in this bag? I need you to finish bashing them into powder with this rolling pin for me. Oh, but hit them *lightly*, okay?” I cautioned. Knowing Sui, it would’ve burst the plastic bag right open if it started swinging with its full strength.

«Okaaay!» Sui said.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Whaaam!

«Are they powdery enough now, Master?»

“Yeah, that’s perfect! Great work.”

I poured the melted butter into the plastic bag, then massaged it and the cookie crumbs together. Once the butter was totally incorporated into the crumbs, I lined a few pans with parchment paper and poured the crumbs into them. I leveled the crumbs across the pans’ bottoms, then put them into my magic refrigerator to chill.

Next up, I took the cream cheese (which I’d left out of the fridge to let it come up to room temperature), put it in a bowl, and started whisking to soften it up. “Hey, Sui, do you wanna take over whisking for me?”

«Okaaay!» Sui said, then whipped the cream cheese up in a flash.

“Okay, stop!” I said. “Yeah, that’s definitely soft enough. Next, you add in some sugar...and okay, you can start whisking again!”

«Okaaay!»

“The goal’s to dissolve the sugar into the cream cheese, so keep whisking until it looks less gritty.”

«All right!»

Whisk, whisk, whisk!

«Master, it's not gritty anymore!»

“All right! In that case, now we add the yogurt and the lemon juice... There, you can start whisking again!”

«Okaaay!»

Once everything was totally incorporated into the mixture, I moved on to the heavy cream. I poured it into a separate bowl and started whisking. It would be done once it reached the soft peak stage. “Okay, Sui, can you whip this next?”

«All right!»

Sui took the whisk and started whipping away at the heavy cream, finishing it in seconds flat.

“That should be good!” I said.

With that, it was time to put the batter together. I added some gelatin that I’d dissolved in warm water to the cream cheese mixture little by little, stirring after every addition, and then gently folded in the whipped cream until everything was incorporated. Next, I pulled the now chilled crusts out from my magic fridge, poured the batter into the pans, and smoothed out their tops.

“Okay, Sui, now we just have to put these into the fridge and let them set!” I said as I slid the first pan back into the magic refrigerator. I figured my familiars would each want a whole cheesecake, so I’d made five in total. Thankfully, they could just barely all fit in the fridge at once. I had no intention of eating an entire cheesecake in one sitting, of course, but I knew that somebody else would polish off my leftovers, so I figured it wouldn’t be an issue.

The recipe I’d learned at my part-time job was about as basic as a cheesecake could get, but then again, it would have to be, considering I was capable of making it without a hitch. That said, it had been a pretty popular item on their menu, and in retrospect, I figured that its simplicity might have been part of what appealed to the customers. It took no risks, which meant it couldn’t go wrong.

Oh, but then again, that place also topped its cheesecakes with a seasonal fruit sauce. That was probably part of why it was so popular too. Their cheesecake recipe was perfectly delicious in its own right, but I’d learned how to make the fruit sauces while I worked there, so I figured I might as well throw one of them together as well.

“Okay, Sui, we’ll make a fruit sauce to put on the cheesecake next,” I said.

«Okaaay!» Sui squealed.

“What sorts of fruit do I have on hand, though...? Oh, violetberries! I forgot I

still had some!"

«Ahh! The ones we found in the dungeon!»

“Yeah, those! They should make a great sauce!”

I roughly chopped up the violetberries and combined them with some sugar and lemon juice in a saucepan, which I then heated over a low flame. As the berries released their juices, the sugar melted into them and the mixture started to turn slightly viscous, at which point I pulled it off the stovetop. All I had to do then was chill the sauce, and it would be ready to serve!

«Master, Masteeer, are the cakes done yet?» asked Sui.

“Nah, it’ll be a while longer,” I replied.

«Oh, okay. How much longer?»

“Pretty long, sorry! And even when they’re ready, we won’t be eating them just yet.”

«Why nooot?»

“Because they’re our dessert, remember? That means we’ll be having them *after* dinner. You’ll just have to sit tight until then!”

«Oooh, okay. In that case, Sui’ll wait until after dinner!»

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Finally, dinner was over, and the moment Sui had been anxiously waiting for arrived. I cut the pure-white cheesecakes into slices, and then drizzled the vibrantly purple violetberry sauce over them.

“Okay, dessert time! Sui and I made cheesecake for everyone,” I announced.

«Yaaay!» Sui squealed. «Sui worked really hard to help make them!»

“Oh, did you now?”

“They certainly look well-made!”

«Yeah, looks like you did a pretty decent job on these!»

Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan all dug in without hesitation.

«Hey, how is it? How is it?» Sui asked, giggling with excited anticipation.

“Hmm. Yes, this is thoroughly decent.”

“Truly! I appreciate how it’s sweet, but not overwhelmingly so.”

«Yeah, this stuff’s just plain good.»

«Yippee!» Sui squealed with an elated bounce.

I tried a bite of the cheesecake as well. “Yeah, this *did* turn out nicely! You should try it too, Sui!”

«Okay!» Sui said, and then it engulfed a slice of the cake. «It’s sooo

yummy!» the slime cooed. Just watching it enjoy its cake made me feel almost as happy as it clearly did.

<*Grr... I want to try it too...*>

Oh? How strange! For a second there, I almost thought I could hear a voice that I definitely shouldn't be hearing right now!

<*Ugh! U-Umm... Just pretend you didn't hear anything!*>

It seemed that a certain someone's love of sweets was so powerful, she couldn't help but let a comment slip out. *Heh heh heh.* "Hey, Sui," I said, "would you mind if we share a bit of this cake with one of the goddesses?"

«Mnh? Sure, okay!»

"Okay, then, here. You can make the offering to her! Just set it down on the table," I said as I handed Sui a plate with a piece of cheesecake on it.

«Sui helped make this! Here you go, Miss Goddess!» Sui said, then placed the plate on the table. A moment later, it vanished in a faint flash of light.

«Ah! Master, the cake disappeared!»

"Ha ha, yup! That means the goddess has it now."

«Ooooh, okay! Sui wonders if she'll say it's good?»

<*Delicious! You've got some real skills, slime!*>

«Yaaay! The goddess said Sui's cake was tasty!»

"Good for you, Sui!"



Extra: The Food Stall Tour of Doom

One day, we found ourselves crossing the border of Leonhardt and making our way to a forest in the nearby cluster of small nations to get a quest done. It seemed that forest was home to a particular sort of medicinal herb, which we'd been asked to collect.

It took a little effort, but we eventually managed to locate our quarry and wrap the quest up. Our success was solely thanks to the info we'd been given about where the herb could be found, though. Without that tip, I had a feeling the task would've turned into a miserable ordeal. My familiars were ready and willing to go monster-slaying when the need arose, so *those* jobs went by nice and quick, but not so much for mundane gathering excursions...though they *were* happy to bring down the monsters that assailed us on the way to our destination, to be fair.

In any case, the job was done and we were on our way home. The border nations were known to be in a more or less constant state of war with each other, and I was a little worried that wandering around in that region would be unsafe, but thanks to Fel and Gon being with me, the trip had ended up being as peaceful and uneventful as could be. As a result, I felt comfortable enough to stop in a large town we passed by en route. I didn't make it out to those parts very often, after all, and figured it would be a good chance to get a taste of a foreign culture.

The town's name was Radouane, and if you counted the farming settlements that surrounded it, it was the fourth-largest city in the whole region. After everything I'd heard about how dangerous the area was, I was expecting it to be something of a ghost town, but much to my surprise, Radouane was bustling with life. The feel of the town reminded me of a middle eastern marketplace that I'd seen on TV once, back in my old world.

Radouane was populated by all sorts of people—humans, beastmen, dwarves, and even a few elves—but one thing they all had in common was their sturdy, sun-baked appearance. The incessant skirmishes in the area probably had something to do with that, I imagined. It stood to reason that people who lived in that sort of region would be pretty tough.

While I was speculating about what life was like in Radouane, I was also

walking around exploring its streets. I wasn't exactly *planning* on shopping, but if I stumbled across something that caught my eye as I took in the local scenery, I figured I might as well pick it up. The town itself was the real draw, though. I was captivated by the sights and sounds, so utterly different from Karelina and the other towns in Leonhardt. Dora-chan and Sui clearly felt the same way, though Fel and Gon—our resident elders—were keeping their cool. I figured they'd probably been here before, though I *did* note that they were both keeping a sharp eye out, just in case anything tasty-looking caught their attention.

«**Hm? There—let us stop at that stall,**» Fel said, changing course before I could even reply.

“Hey, wait!” I called out as I followed after him. I found myself standing in front of a food stall that was grilling sizable chunks of meat. Fel’s nose, apparently, had led him to it. The tantalizing odor of sizzling meat was accompanied by the smell of some sort of spice I couldn’t quite pin down, which made sense, considering where we were. Whatever it was, it was piquing my appetite like nothing else.

I watched the person who was manning the stall talk to a customer for a moment, then slice several thin strips of meat off a large chunk that was on the grill, wrap them in some sort of leaf, and hand them over. “Huh,” I said. “Kinda reminds me of doner kebabs.”

«**It reminds you of what?**» Fel asked, then shook his head. «**Regardless, I can tell that meat is worth eating. I will have some.**»

«It smells unusual,» Gon added, «but not unpleasant, to be sure!»

«Yeah, agreed! Never smelled anything quite like it before, but whatever those spices are, they seem like they’d go real well with meat,» Dora-chan said.

«Sui wants to try it too!» said the party’s slime.

Everyone’s gazes turned to me.

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you,” I sighed. *Yep, I knew where this was going the second he pointed the stall out. You guys never get tired of these places, do you?* “Hey, can I get four extra-large orders? Oh, and one normal-sized order too,” I said, stepping up to the stall.

“‘S-’Scuse me?” the stallkeeper replied. It turned out they didn’t really do extra-large portions, usually, but I asked him to just make our orders as large as he possibly could, then brought our food over to a little eating area where they had set up a table and some stools. Actually eating at the table was, well, off the table, so we set up just a little ways away to try our food.

«**Hmm. The cut of meat does not impress, but the seasoning is**

delicious,» Fel said.

«Indeed!» Gon agreed. «And although the meat has a certain gaminess to it, the spices suit that aspect of its flavor quite well.»

«Yeah,» Dora-chan said, «you've got a point there! Meat like this kinda needs a certain sort of flavor to work, and this really has it.»

«It's not like the food Master cooks at all, but this is yummy too!» Sui said.

Leave it to the gluttonous quartet to be super particular about flavors. They were pretty spot on, though—the meat really was a little gamey, but the spices seasoned it so nicely that it not only didn't bother me, it actually added something to the dish. *Looks like otherworldly kebabs are pretty darn good!*

As I took a moment to enjoy my food, Gon spoke up again. «Now then, my liege, let's visit a stall that I have had my eye on!»

“Huh?! But I only just started eating!” I protested...but then I glanced at the leaves everyone's food had come in.

«This could hardly even be considered an appetizer.»

«I know, right?»

«Sui already ate it!»

The leaves—which, for the record, had been both on the larger side *and* piled high with otherworldly kebab meat—were now empty and licked clean. *Yeah, guess I should've seen that coming! In my familiars' world, a dish like that might as well be a single mouthful. Come on, guys...*

“You know, you'd probably enjoy your food a lot more if you slowed down enough to actually *taste* it,” I sighed.

«Preposterous. I taste everything I eat.»

«Yes, indeed!»

«Right? Like, why wouldn't we?»

«Sui tastes all of it!»

“Well, guess I'll have to take your word for it.”

«More importantly, my liege, let us move along and sample the next stall's fare!» Gon said, but I just couldn't finish my portion off in an instant like they did.

“Hey, Sui, want the rest of mine?” I said, offering the slime my leaf.

«Oooh, yay!» Sui replied, then plucked the remainder of my portion from my hand with a tentacle.

«Very good! Now then, if my nose is leading me true, we'll want to sample the food from a stall just a short walk away in this direction,» Gon said. We

followed along after him, and eventually arrived at a stall selling...

“Meat again. Of course,” I said. Specifically, it was offering meat that was spiced and grilled on skewers.

«**Oh? Yes, this does seem appealing.»**

«No kidding! Check out the grill marks on those babies! They smell pretty decent too!»

«They look really yummy!»

«Indeed! Impressive, aren’t they?»

Excuse me, Gon? Why’re you acting like you’re the one who cooked that stuff?

«Now then, my liege—if you would!»

“I know, I know!”

Once again, I bought a pretty massive amount of food for everyone, and once again, we only got a short distance away from the stall before my familiars started scarfing it all down. They spent a moment talking about its merits, and then we were off to the next stall, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Another food stall followed shortly after that one, and then another, and another, and another...

«**Hmn. We have eaten quite a lot, have we not?»**

«Yes, indeed. I, for one, am sated!»

«Phew! Yeah, I’m pretty stuffed over here.»

«Sui could still eat more!»

We had ended up wandering here and there all across town, sampling food from every stall that caught my familiars’ attention.

“Hey, guys...? You know we’ve done literally *nothing* other than eat at food stalls all day, right?” I feebly protested.

«**And what of it?»** Fel asked. «**The food was delicious, was it not?»**

«True! And it was fun indeed to encounter so many new flavors.»

«You said it! Don’t get me wrong, the stuff we usually eat beats out everything we tried today, but some of it was just so crazy different from what we normally have! It wasn’t all *great*, but you gotta shake things up every once in a while!»

«Sui likes food like this too, sometimes!»

“I mean, I get it! Food stalls in foreign countries are great. What’s *not* great is scarfing down your food, and then making a beeline straight to the next stall! I wanted to take my time, savor the food, and see the sights! I didn’t get *any* shopping done either!”

«Surely the food was exotic enough to satisfy those needs?»

«Well said! Flavors from a foreign land are truly worth experiencing.»

«For sure. It's always great when you end up trying something really spicy, or something that doesn't taste like anything you've ever had before!»

«Some of it was *really* spicy! Sui usually doesn't like it when food's spicy, but it had so many other flavors too! It was so weird!»

According to a guy who was running one of the stalls we'd stopped at, tons of spices were grown in Radouane's vicinity. As a result, many spices that were ridiculously expensive in other places were cheap and readily available enough for people to cook with them on the regular here.

“Okay, but that’s all *food!* I’m talking about *other* stuff, like the city’s atmosphere, and its famous tourist attractions, and all that,” I explained, but I clearly wasn’t getting through to them at all. The gluttonous quartet prioritized food above all else, and the concept of enjoying the atmosphere of a foreign town was totally beyond them. I sighed. “Y’know what? It’s fine, whatever. We still have some time before night falls, though, so let me get a *little* shopping in, at least.”

I’d wanted to use the rare opportunity this visit to a town in the border region presented to soak in the exotic feel of an unfamiliar country, but instead, I’d been roped into an all-day food stall tour of doom. Such was the fate of anyone who wound up traveling with the gluttonous quartet. *Woe is me.*

Afterword

Hello! Ren Eguchi speaking. Thank you very much for buying *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill Volume 14: Cream Croquettes and the Downfall of Heresy!*

It feels like this series reached its fourteenth volume in a flash, and I'm both incredibly happy and grateful that it's still being published after such a long time! I would never have made it this far if it weren't for all my readers, and I am incredibly thankful for all of you.

In volume 14, Mukohda and his party set out to punish the heretical Church of Rubanov, acting under the orders of the God of All Creation himself. They also end up deciding to take on a virtually untouched and entirely unknown dungeon! It's a pretty eventful volume, all around, and I hope that everyone enjoys it.

In addition, this series' anime adaptation began its broadcast in January, and recently ended without a hitch! Did everyone watch it? I certainly did, and I enjoyed every minute of it! The cooking scenes in particular were absolutely incredible, with the quality of the animation earning a ton of attention. They were just *that* good! All I can say is that the good people at Studio MAPPA have done it again, and in the process, they tortured all of their viewers with some of the most exquisitely rendered food porn to ever grace our TVs (lol). The show was also able to feature a number of real-world brand names, thanks to the cooperation of several different companies, which added a sense of realism that greatly elevated the whole experience. The anime's been very well-received thanks to everyone's efforts, and I couldn't be happier to see how much people enjoyed it!

Something else that made me happy: hearing from lots of viewers who watched the anime with their families. This story doesn't feature flashy battle scenes, and doesn't have the sort of heroines that most people would consider essential for a light novel. I've heard people say that "It's barely a light novel at all," and that "It's boring because there aren't any heroines in it," but I've come to realize that my series is fine the way it is. I made it this way partially because that's the story I want to write, of course, but also because I've always hoped

that this story would appeal to people of all ages. As such, hearing from everyone who watched it with their families made me happier than anything.

Words can hardly express how grateful I am toward Studio MAPPA and everyone else involved in making the anime. Thank you all so much, from the bottom of my heart. I would also like to offer my gratitude to the companies that cooperated with the production: Aeon Retail Co., Ebara Foods Industry Inc., Kao Corp., Kagome Co., Suntory Holdings Ltd., Heinz Co., and LOTTE Co. I really appreciate you collaborating with us!

To Masa-sensei, who's been doing the illustrations for this series since the very beginning; Akagishi K-sensei, who's drawing the main comic adaptation; Momo Futaba-sensei, who's handling the spin-off comic; my editor "I;" and all the other good people at Overlap: I can't thank you enough for all your help and support!

I hope you'll continue enjoying the laid-back, heartwarming adventures of *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill* in all the formats it's available in, and I hope to see you again in volume fifteen!

Bonus Short Stories

Canned Tuna

One rainy afternoon, I was sorting through my item box while enjoying a cup of rather minty tea that I'd bought recently. My familiars were napping, though in Fel's case, "sulking" was probably a more accurate description. We were *supposed* to go hunting on that day, at their (and especially Fel's) insistence, but when Gon and Dora-chan saw how dreary it was outside, they'd lost all interest in the excursion.

I'd jumped on that bandwagon without a second thought, of course, and although Sui had been almost as excited to go hunting as Fel was, I managed to talk it into putting the trip off and saved myself from the miserable fate of going hunting in weather like that. The rain had been coming and going at random since first thing in the morning, and I could think of few things less enjoyable than getting intermittently drizzled on while plodding along after my familiars as they hunted monsters.

Anyway, with our hunting trip on a rain check, I suddenly had a free afternoon that I decided to spend taking inventory of my Item Box. Its storage capacity was effectively infinite, which meant that I didn't have much of a reason to *not* throw any random thing I happened to pick up into it. If I didn't sort through it every once in a while and do some spring cleaning, I'd end up finding stuff in there that I didn't even *remember* obtaining.

That was doubly true for ingredients. My Item Box stopped time for everything inside it, which meant that I never had to worry about anything spoiling. That was a good thing, don't get me wrong, but it also put me in the bad habit of letting all sorts of crap pile up in there, where I'd forget about it before I knew it. That being said, I'd already done a corner-to-corner check of my Item Box two months beforehand, so I wasn't really expecting anything surprising to be left inside...

...Wait, no, there is something. Huh. For some inexplicable reason, there was a single can of tuna sitting in my Item Box. My familiars tended to scoff at fish-centric dishes, so I could confidently say it wasn't left over from one of *their* meals. I pulled it out and gave it some thought. "What did I buy this for...?"

Ah! I remember now! I used canned tuna when I premade a bunch of breakfast dishes for myself! Specifically, I'd used it along with some green bell peppers I'd received from Alban to make a side-dish. I'd had one extra can at the time, and it had been sitting in my Item Box ever since.

I guess it's nice that I remembered and all, but how am I supposed to use this? For another breakfast dish, I guess? I'd just run out of pickles and had been thinking of making a nice, refreshing side dish for my breakfasts, which seemed like the perfect use for a spare can of tuna. I had some time on my hands too, so I hustled right off to the kitchen to get to work.

"Okay, time to cook! What exactly am I going to need, though?" I was planning on making something relatively light and vibrant, and even though cucumbers were sort of a boring choice for pickle-adjacent dishes, they were a classic for a reason. "Yeah, okay—something vinegary that uses tuna and cucumbers... Oh, I know! I'll make ponzu-pickled smashed cucumbers!"

The recipe was incredibly simple, and since you more or less just threw all the ingredients into a freezer bag, there'd be basically no washing up to do after I was done. *All right, let's get to work!*

First, I washed some cucumbers Alban had given me, removed their prickly little spines, sliced off their ends, and put them into a plastic bag. Some of the cucumbers he'd grown were really huge, and I cut those in half, just to make them fit properly. Then I just gave 'em a few solid smacks with a rolling pin! Once I'd smashed the cucumbers enough to split them open, I started using my hands instead, breaking them up into smaller, bite-sized pieces. Breaking them apart with blunt force in that manner makes it easier for the other flavors to soak into the cucumber, but slicing them thinly with a knife works just fine too, of course.

Next, I lightly salted the cucumber pieces, gave them a bit of a massage, and set them aside for ten minutes or so to let the salt draw out some of their moisture. Once that was done, I drained the oil from the canned tuna and added the fish to the bag along with the cucumber! Last but not least, I threw in some ponzu and sesame oil, mixed it all together, and squeezed as much air out of the bag as possible before sealing it up.

"All right, that should do it! Just gotta pop it into the fridge now." Letting the mixture chill for a while would give the flavors time to intermingle and make the dish even tastier. I decided to hold off on trying them until the next morning, when I'd have a helping with my breakfast.



“Today, at long last, we shall go hunting!”

“The rains have passed, so I am in full agreement!”

«Hell yeah! It’s nice and sunny out! Couldn’t ask for better hunting weather! I’m so in!»

«Hunting tiiime!»

“I know, I know! Just hold your horses until we’re done eating, at the very least!”

The next morning, we were greeted by a perfectly blue and cloudless sky. It couldn’t have cut a sharper contrast with the prior day’s gloom, and the fair weather had my familiars jabbering on and on about the day’s hunt, even while we were eating breakfast. They’d even requested a hearty, meat-filled meal the moment they woke up and checked on the weather, to keep them energized during the excursion.

As if you guys even need it in the first place! You eat meat every meal regardless. I did acquiesce in the end, though, and whipped up some nice, simple pork bowls for them to stuff their faces with. They did just that, with incredible enthusiasm that would’ve spoken of their excitement for the hunting trip if it weren’t for the fact that they basically always ate that way.

“Eat well,” Fel said. **“We will need ample vitality for the day’s hunt!”**

“Hm? Do you have a target in mind, then?” Gon asked.

“Of a sort. I have recalled a destination that will prove worthwhile. Look forward to it,” Fel replied, then followed the answer up with a deep, ominous chuckle.

Oh, god. Where’s he planning on taking us to this time?

«Somewhere worthwhile, eh? That’s high praise coming from you, Fel! All right! Gimme seconds!»

«Sui wants seconds too!»

“I shall partake as well, of course.”

“And one for me!”

“Coming right up,” I said. *I guess I should just be glad that everyone’s in such a good mood...but ugggh. There’s no getting out of this hunting trip, is there? I guess we did get rained out yesterday, and we also spent a bit of time relaxing before then, so I can’t complain that much,* I thought to myself as I brought out a second round of pork bowls for everyone, which my familiars devoured. The gluttonous quartet’s appetites were as unflagging as ever.

They're really going at it today, actually. They were eating a breakfast-and-a-half's worth of food, compared to their usual standard. I, on the other hand, felt a stomachache coming on just *watching* them chow down on a dish as heavy as pork bowls first thing in the morning. Fortunately, I had the smashed cucumbers I'd made the night before to distract me.

"Ahh, now *that's* refreshing," I said as I took my first bite. The salty acidity of the ponzu and the aromatic depth of the sesame oil had soaked into the cucumber pieces, and the umami that the tuna added made it an incredibly delicious dish.

This is so much better than you'd expect, considering how easy the recipe is, I reflected as I slowly savored the pickle, then followed it up with a bite of the mustard green and dried sardine rice ball I had also made for my morning meal. *Yup, this is great too!* Finally, I slurped up a mouthful of the simple tofu and wakame miso soup I'd made.

"No doubt about it. *This* is my kind of breakfast food," I said to myself as I shot my familiars and their pork bowls a sidelong glance.

The Birth of a Revolutionary

Where once there was a church, now only a pitiful pile of rubble remained.

The Church of Rubanov's main temple used to loom over Ulises, the capital of the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov. Once, it was far and away the city's most extravagant building, but now it was a wreck. As I gazed upon its broken remains, I felt a powerful sense of vindication. I had always, always, *always* known that something was *wrong* with that church.

When I was seven years old, my brother—an unfailingly kind and gentle boy of twelve—was summoned into the Church of Rubanov's service. He'd never said that he wanted to be a priest, or anything of the sort, and yet the church's people insisted that he "had the makings of a holy man" and dragged him off, paying no heed to his protests.

Our parents were ecstatic about my brother's recruitment. They considered it an honor, but I was miserable to have lost my sibling, and with so little warning. I found myself resenting my parents' blind acceptance of the situation, and came to loathe them, the "honor" they so valued, and, eventually, the very kingdom I lived in. I despised its willingness to let the Church of Rubanov get away with whatever tyranny it saw fit to inflict upon us. And so, the moment I reached adulthood, I left my home and my oh-so-devout parents to seek my own fortune.

I chose to become an adventurer and strove to achieve independence as quickly as I could manage it. I wanted to raise my rank as fast as possible so that I might bid this rotten nation goodbye, and I worked myself to the bone to accomplish that goal, pushing through all sorts of hardships. However...the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov was a land lacking in aspiring adventurers like me.

Unable to find a party for myself, but still dedicated to leaving my homeland behind, I took to attending each and every lesson and training course the guild offered. At long last, I grew competent enough with a sword to take on horn rabbits and goblins single-handedly, and accepted my first quest: a mission to collect medicinal herbs from the fields outside of town. It was on that day, as I returned to the guild with a sack full of herbs, that a voice rang out in my head like a bolt from the blue.

The source of the voice declared himself to be Demiurge, the God of All Creation, and went on to claim that there was no such god as Rubanov to begin with. He interrogated the pope and denied the Church's most central teaching: that Rubanov was the omniscient and almighty God of Humanity. He claimed that the gods drew no distinction between the mortal races, and that the Church of Rubanov was a religion founded for the sake of amassing wealth and led by a crew of miserly money-grubbers.

The street I was walking through was crowded with people, and I heard a number of them cry out.

“Rubanov’s not real?!”

“But Rubanov is the God of Humanity! It was His hand that guided us to greatness, was it not?”

“The Church of Rubanov was founded for the sake of *money*?!”

It seemed, clearly, that I was not the only one hearing the God of All Creation's missive. If Demiurge was nowhere nearby, yet was capable of transmitting his voice to so many people all at once, it seemed safe to say that he was not overstating his divine nature. That, in turn, meant that it was safe to say the God of All Creation spoke true. What need would a god have to lie, after all?

That said, I couldn't have cared less about Rubanov not existing. I never believed him in the first place. My parents would have called me a heretic, demanded that I repent, and beat me severely if I'd ever let that fact slip out, so I had always kept it to myself, but I was a non-believer from the start.

The Church's upper echelons being staffed by money-grubbers was no surprise either. Why else would commoners like us spend our days in miserable poverty while the clergy walked around in gilded robes and extravagant jewelry?

Not to mention that the higher in the ranks a member of the church rose, the more conspicuously corpulent they tended to become. They had the terrible taste of the nouveau riche, and anyone with sense would know exactly where the money to enable that aesthetic came from.

That, however, didn't bother me much. The Holy Kingdom's citizens were all too eager to give up their earnings to the Church, and that was their decision to make. What caught *my* attention was the part where Demiurge spoke of how the Church "forced your fellow men to surrender their sons and daughters to you when they suited your fancy, toying with them until they ceased to amuse you, then selling them off as slaves."

I was your average, run-of-the-mill commoner, but my brother was different. *He* was a lad handsome enough to have been known all around the neighborhood for his striking looks. Was *that* why the Church had claimed him? To use him as a plaything? How could that be? Worse still, Demiurge had gone on to say that not only were they sold as slaves, they were sold to the Geisler Empire. The Empire's brutality and inhumanity was well known, even here in the Holy Capital, and Demiurge had gone out of the way to note that those who had been sold to the Empire had been put to the sword.

What, then, of my brother? Had he not entered the priesthood after all? I'd been told that he had—my parents had begged the Church for information on what had become of him, and the answer they had gotten was that he'd been sent to a town in the northern reaches of the country to finish his training. My parents were all too pleased to boast about how he'd be a full-fledged priest as soon as his studies concluded, and I'd always been relieved to know that, even though he'd been all but abducted, at least he was still alive.

Was he, though, in truth? What had happened to him? I was so anxious, so starved for answers, that I found myself pushing my way through the crowd before I knew it, making my way toward the ruined temple.

"Hey!" I shouted at a group of priests who were gathered up by the wreckage, looking out over it in shock and horror. "The Church of Rubanov took my brother from our family nine years ago! We were told he was in the final stages of his training to become a priest, and had been sent to a village up north, but that God of All Creation claims you've been selling the children you take in as slaves! Where's my brother?! What have you done to him?! Answer me, dammit!"

"M-My child was taken as well!" another voice in the crowd rang out.
"Wasn't he supposed to become a priest?!"

“They told us that my niece had what it took to join the clergy, and dragged her away!”

“Th-That’s what happened to my youngest brother too!”

I was far from the only one present who’d had a family member taken from him, and before I knew it, all of us were thronging around the priests.

“Wh-What do you want from us?! How are we supposed to know?!” one of the priests cried.

“I-It was the higher ups! They’re to blame!”

“That’s right! We don’t know a thing! How could we?!”

“We’re just underlings; we don’t make the decisions! This has nothing to do with us!”

The priests shouted desperately, pallid and panicky as they disavowed the Church’s actions. Their attitudes instantly told me that Demiurge had spoken true, and a seething fury began to well up within me.

“The God of All Creation was telling the truth! You sold my brother to the Empire, you *monsters*!” I screamed. Before I even realized what I was doing, I’d picked up a stone from the ground and hurled it at the priests with all my might. “Rubanov’s ‘omniscient and almighty’?! ‘The God of Humanity’?! My *ass* he is! He doesn’t even exist at all, does he?! Admit it, you sons of bitches! *Admit it!*” I screamed as I threw another stone.

“S-Stop that!”

“Somebody, make that man stop!”

“What are the paladins doing?! Grab him already, you fools!”

I paid the priests’ wails no mind. “Shut your mouths, you pompous, arrogant *fakes*! All my life, you bastards have told me that the Church of Rubanov would save me so long as I believed! Where’s that salvation now, damn it all?! How’s a band of *kidnappers* and *slavers* supposed to save anyone?!” I screamed. I couldn’t stop myself from flinging stones and words with equal vigor. “And that’s not all! We commoners struggle just to get by, but what about *you* people?! Look at yourselves! Look at the clothes you wear! You strut about in those golden-threaded abominations while *we* wear the same old rags for *years* on end, taking care of them because we know we can’t replace them! You’ve grown fat and complacent off the coin you’ve stolen from *us*!”

“W-We were blessed by Robanov himself, and granted the divine mission to spread his teachings!” one of the priests shouted back.

“And why am I supposed to care?! As if I ever believed you! Rubanov’s not real! You heard that as well as I did!”

“S-Silence, you heretic!”

“Y-Yes, that’s right!” another priest chimed in. “That man is a heretic and a blasphemer! Seize him at once!” he called out to the people around me...none of whom moved a muscle. They’d heard the voice of a true god, and by Demiurge’s revelation, all the things they’d turned a blind eye to for so long were finally brought into sharp perspective.

“To hell with the Church of Rubanov! You’ve been living large off the money you stole from us, and you’ve done *nothing* in return! You’re thieves, kidnappers, and human traffickers!” I shouted as I threw another stone as hard as I could.

“That’s right... How many times have they come by our houses to collect tithes?” said a member of the crowd.

“They take so much, we can hardly feed ourselves!”

“It’s always money, money, money with those people! *They’re* the reason why my children have to go to bed hungry!”

“And when they’ve bled us dry and we don’t have a coin left to give them, they have the gall to call us heretics!”

“We’ve always paid our tithes, but when I took my grandmother in for a checkup after she fell ill, they demanded an outrageous sum to even see her! She *died* because we couldn’t pay their damn fees!”

Voces started ringing out one after another, each more enraged than the last. The priests trembled with fear, shouting that we were heretics and would pay for our blasphemy, only to finally flee from us.

I used to want nothing more than to leave this miserable country behind...but after everything I’d heard, I reconsidered. After all, if I left, who would avenge my brother? The Church of Rubanov was a blight upon the world, a blight that had to be eradicated...and the way I saw it, there was no better place to start the purge than here, in their own Holy Capital.

Who Brought Down the Most?

It was bright and early in the morning, and my familiars were in a fantastic mood. We’d recently finished up a quest that the guildmaster had asked us to handle, securing us a long-awaited moment of free time, and my familiars had insisted that we go hunting yesterday...only for the excursion to get rained out.

The issue wasn’t that Fel and the others couldn’t hunt in the rain so much as it was that interesting monsters were less likely to wander out of their dens

during a downpour, not to mention that dreary weather made it harder to get excited about any sort of excursion outside. In the end, we'd canceled the trip by a majority vote. Fel was the only one who'd objected, and he spent the rest of the day grumbling about how we'd let a little rain thwart our plans.

In any case, our hunting trip had been postponed until the weather cleared up, and lo and behold, the next morning greeted us with a perfectly cloudless blue sky, much to my familiars' delight. They'd jumped right into hunting mode, ranting about how they were going to track down enough meat that they'd be eating it for days—as if they didn't *already* eat meat three meals a day—and scarfed down their extra-large stir-fried pork bowls with wild enthusiasm.

The moment our breakfast was finished, my familiars herded me out the door. They were about to rush off to the hunting grounds at top speed, but I just barely managed to stop them and direct us toward the Adventurer's guild first. I knew for a fact that the guildmaster would never let me hear the end of it if we went out hunting without reporting in beforehand, after all.

"So, where exactly were you thinking of going today?" I asked as we waited for the guildmaster, who a staff member had gone off to fetch. Fel had mentioned that he'd remembered a good hunting ground for us to go to, but he hadn't given me the details yet.

"A valley located a ways to the west of here," Fel replied. **"I believe the humans call it Termus Valley?"**

"Termus Valley?" Gon cocked his head. "Ah, *that* place! I believe it was actually—"

"Oh, it's you lot. What're you getting up to today?" the guildmaster asked as he arrived partway through Gon's sentence.

"Good morning," I said. "My familiars were asking me to take them out hunting today, actually, so..."

"What, *again?*" the guildmaster sighed. "Least you bothered clueing us in this time, I guess."

Yeah, because I knew you'd blow a gasket if I didn't.

"Can't deny that we turn a tidy profit off your hunts either," he added.

Ha ha, yeah, I guess you would! My party never wants to hold onto anything other than the meat, so it just works out that way naturally.

"Where're you going this time, then?" asked the guildmaster.

"To, umm... I think Fel said it was called 'Termus Valley'?"

"What valley? Where's that?"

Sounds like the guildmaster hasn't heard of it either, then.

“My liege, I believe Fel was mistaken,” Gon chimed in. “The valley in question is called *Terminus* Valley, not *Termus* Valley.”

“Hear that, Fel?” I said.

“Terminus Valley? Perhaps that was its name, but I could hardly care less one way or the other. It is our destination regardless of what it is called.”

“Well, you heard him,” I said, turning back to the guildmaster.

“Terminus Valley? Terminus, Terminus...wait. *Terminus Valley*?!” The Guildmaster bellowed, going from a mutter to a screech in seconds flat.

“Whoa! What’s wrong?!?” I yelled back.

“Terminus Valley! Terminus as in *terminal*, as in the end of all things! As in if you go there, you sure as hell aren’t coming back!”

“Wait, like...the *adjective* terminal?! That’s what it was named after?!”

“You didn’t know?! Terminus Valley’s full of wyverns! *Everyone* knows that! Take one down, and a hundred more descend on you and rip you to shreds!”

“They *what*?!”

“Not even S-rankers go to *that* hellhole unless they absolutely have to!”

“*Gaaah*?!” *Waaait, wait, wait, wait!* They’re trying to drag me to a place like that?!”

«Hey, hear that, Sui? He said there’s wyverns there!» Dora-chan commented.

«Oooh, wyverns! Sui knows those! They’re the ones that zip around in the sky! Sui pew-pewed a bunch of them before!»

«Oh, did you?» Gon chimed in.

«Yeah! Uncle Fel taught Sui how to beat them, and Sui took down a whole bunch!»

«Oh ho? And what technique was it that Fel taught you?»

«Umm, well, they fly around in the sky, so you have to hit their heads or their wings! But the heads are really small, so sometimes you can’t hit them. That’s why you hit the wings instead! Then they fall, and you can beat them up on the ground!»

«Ahh, yes, a wyvern’s head and wings *are* certainly its most vulnerable areas! They would indeed be the right targets for you and Fel, seeing as you can’t fly.»

«I mean, I *can* fly and I’d still probably wanna go for those bits,» Dora-chan noted. «You could take ‘em down in one shot that way! Yeah, think I’ll

try that too.»

Why did the conversation get so violent the second wyverns came up?! That's not something you guys should be excited about. Seriously...

“Right, okay. Hunting trip’s off,” I said. The subject of wyverns had brought back some *really* unpleasant memories. The last time we’d had a run-in with wyverns, they’d come *right* at me. That was terrifying enough on its own, and imagining the same thing happening again, except with hundreds of them in the picture? Even if the wyverns didn’t kill me, the heart attack sure would!

“What nonsense are you speaking? Of course the trip is not off,” Fel said.

“Quite right! I don’t know what you’re worried about, my liege, but I assure you that a flight of wyverns is nowhere near dangerous enough to pose a threat to us,” Gon agreed.

«Y’know, I’ve never actually gone hunting for wyverns myself. I’m so down for this!» Dora-chan said.

«Sui too, Sui too! After all, wyvern meat’s super yummy!» our slime chimed in.

“Yes, Sui is correct. Wyvern meat is rather appealing, and the stock that Sui and I claimed some time ago is long since depleted, is it not?”

“I mean, *yeah*,” I reluctantly admitted.

“Then we have no choice but to go on the hunt. We will be able to obtain far more meat at today’s destination than we did during our last encounter with wyverns, as well.”

“Wait, just how many of those things are you planning on taking down?!”

“Not enough to eradicate them. Were we to do that, we would destroy the hunting ground as well. We will bring down half of the wyverns we find there, though, at the very least.”

Half of them? When there are supposed to be hundreds in that valley...? And hold on, Fel, you’re already planning for our next trip there? I’ve been traveling with you for a pretty long time now, and that’s enough to even freak me out! Those poor wyverns, seriously...

I spent a moment just standing there, cringing at Fel, until the guildmaster’s voice brought me back to reality. “Well, guess that’s that,” he said.

“Indeed,” Gon agreed. “I will persuade my liege to go along with the plan, I assure you.”

“I know you don’t have anything to worry about, but watch yourselves. Anyway, sounds like we’re in for a busy day! I’d better let Johan know we’ve got wyverns coming in,” the guildmaster said, then headed off into the back of

the guild.

“Huh?” I blinked. “Wait, why’d he leave?! We weren’t done talking, were we?!”

“We were,” Gon said. “I wrapped up the exchange while you were speechless, my liege. I promised him that we would bring all the wyverns we hunt down back here to be butchered, and he agreed to inform the towns on our flight path of our excursion. The butchering fee will be waived for the wyverns we bring to the guild, and in exchange, we will sell them all the materials they request, including a small quantity of the meat. I trust that none of you have any objections?” he asked, turning to the rest of my familiars.

“I do not like the idea of surrendering meat to them, but as long as it is only a small quantity, I am willing to let it go.”

«Yeah, works for me. Not like we care about the bits we can’t eat anyway, right?»

«Sui doesn’t mind as long as we get some meat!»

“There you have it! The matter is settled with no outstanding issues. Let us be off!”

“Yeah!” my familiars cried in unison.

“No!” I wailed, alone. “You can’t seriously want to go to a wyvern-infested nightmare valley, right?! We’re calling this off!”

“No we’re not!” my familiars replied, once again in perfect sync.

“Noooooo!”



As usual, I found myself swept off to adventure by my familiars before I even knew what was happening.

Well, here we are. An honest to goodness wyvern nest. “Yeah, there sure are a lot of them,” I mumbled in disbelief.

“Why are you so taken aback? That goes without saying. It is the whole reason we came here to begin with.”

“You’ll enjoy this more if you simply resign yourself to it, my liege.”

«Arright! Now *that’s* what I call a hunting ground!»

«Oh, woow, there’s so many! Sui’s gonna beat up the most!»

“I take that as a challenge, Sui. I shall be the one to bring down the most foes!”

“Oh, I think not! *I’m* the most powerful of all of us, after all.”

«You guys aren't serious, are you? You know this is the sorta situation where being small and adaptable gives you an edge, right? I've got this one in the bag!»

“It is a contest, then. We shall each vie to slay the most wyverns.”

«Ooh, I like it—and I'm gonna win it, too!»

«Sui's gonna get first place!»

“Gra ha ha ha! I won't be letting youngsters like you defeat me that easily!”

“Then let us begin! Oh, and your duty will be to collect and tally the wyverns that each of us defeat,” Fel said to me as an afterthought.

“Huh? Wait, you can't just decide that on your own! You expect me to wander down into a full-on flight of wyverns and *count* the ones you kill?!”

“We will raise a sturdy barrier, my liege! You will have nothing to fear,” Gon said.

“Indeed. Barriers conjured by the two of us could only be broken by one who equals us in strength.”

“Well said! We'll be counting on your counting, my liege!”

«Okay, let's get out there!»

«Sui'll be back soon, Master!»

“What, no! Wait!” I shouted, but my familiars, naturally, did no such thing, racing off toward the wyvern-infested valley without a moment's hesitation.

“Oh, for the—why *me*?!”

By the time I had very timidly made my own way toward the valley, the hunt was well underway.

“Have at you!” Fel shouted, then conjured up several dozen boulders using his Earth magic. He launched them into the air with a roar, bringing fourteen wyverns crashing to the ground, assuming I counted right.

“Off to a slow start, I see! Let me show you how it's done,” Gon jabbed. He was using all four of his limbs to pluck the wyverns from the air and dash them against the ground, one after another.

«C'mon, c'mon, c'mon! If you wanna get me, then *get me!*» Dora-chan taunted. He was using the tactics that Sui had taught him, zipping nimbly through the thronging flight of wyverns as he used Ice, Fire, and Wind magic to smash their heads and perforate their wings.

«Sui's gonna pew-pew *all* of you! Take this, and this, and this!» Sui yelled as it sent Acid Bullets flying at the wyverns with the precision of a trained sniper.

Watching my familiars gleefully bringing down the wyverns—which I still

couldn't see as anything other than straight-up pteranodons—was exasperating, to say the least. "They're really going all out today," I muttered, though honestly, my familiars went all out *every* time we went hunting.

As I shook my head at the excess of it all, Fel shot me a message. «**Hey! You do intend to collect our prey, I trust?**»

«Yes, yes, I know! I'll do it now,» I replied. *Sheesh... Why do I have to have this chore shoved off onto me, anyway? Isn't collecting your own catches part of a hunter's job?*

In spite of my griping, I got to work picking up all the fallen wyvern corpses. "That makes twenty-four! That's gotta be enough for us, right?" I said to myself, though I knew that it was hopeless. Fel and the others would never let me hear the end of it if I didn't pick up each and every wyvern they took down, so I heaved a sigh and got back to work. Just as I reached out to put the twenty-fifth wyvern corpse in my Item Box, however...

"Screee!"

"G-Gaaaah!"

...an enormous maw filled with razor-sharp teeth bore down on me! I shrieked, fell over backward, and threw up my arms to protect my face.

Whump!

A moment passed, and I timidly lowered my arms and opened my eyes. The wyvern was still there, gnawing in vain at the barrier between us, but it seemed that Fel and Gon really had made it tough enough to keep the likes of a wyvern from breaking through. Oh, and now that I was taking a closer look at said wyvern, I noticed that its wings were injured.

"Shooting them down's all well and good, but you have to finish them off too, guys!" I grumbled as I tried to ignore the horrid, moan-like grunts the wyvern made as it tried and failed to chew through the barrier. I sighed. "What am I supposed to do now?"

My familiars were all totally lost in their hunt, and clearly weren't interested in stopping to listen to me.

"I guess it's up to me to finish it off, then," I said as I brought out the mithril spear that Sui had made for me...then hesitated. "Maybe I'd better go with a magic sword, actually. Just for safety's sake."

I put the mithril spear back into my Item Box and pulled out Gram instead. Out of all the magic swords I'd obtained, it was the one that felt most natural in my hands.

"Sorry about this! Hiyah!" I shouted as I swung Gram directly at the

wyvern's neck.

Shwick!

The blade sliced through without the slightest hint of resistance, and a moment later the wyvern's head dropped to the ground. I carefully set about collecting its body, when suddenly...

"Scree! Screee!"

"Gah! Again?!"

To make a long story short, my familiars weren't doing a great job of finishing off their wyverns that day. My magic sword was about to get an unprecedented workout.

"Dang it, guys, if you're gonna hunt then at least finish the job!"

Shwick!

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Ugggh, it's finally over. What did I do to deserve this, anyway?

"Did you gather up all of our spoils? And who brought down the most of them?"

"I'm sure it was me, wasn't it, my liege?"

«Naaah, you kidding? It's gotta be me!»

«It was Sui, right, Master?»

I looked away. My familiars loomed.

"Who was it?" they asked in unison.

"Nobody! Nobody got the most! Or, really, I got the most, if we're talking in terms of actual kills! Finish your prey off after you bring it down, damn it!"

Cooking From the Back of the Box: Baked Cheesecake

"All right, I think it's time to make some sweets!" I said as I stood up from my seat. We'd finished lunch some time beforehand, and I'd been taking it easy for a moment before I jumped into my next task. "Oh, Sui?"

That morning, Sui had asked me what we'd be having for our daily snack time. The slime had been practically beside itself with excitement to help me cook something, and even though I'd been planning on taking the easy route and buying some cakes from my Online Supermarket's bakery section or from Fumiya, I'd quickly scrapped that idea and agreed to go along with Sui's wishes instead. How was I supposed to say no to my cute little slime? Of course, when

the time actually came...

“Yup, sure enough. Sui’s out like a light.”

Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui had all curled up in a corner of the living room and were now sound asleep. Dora-chan was leaning up against Gon, while Sui had bedded down in Fel’s fluff.

“Ha ha. Well, aren’t they a happy little family!” I chuckled to myself. It really did look like Fel and Gon were two parents napping with their kids, in the most heartwarming way possible. “Yeah, no way I can wake them up when they’re sleeping that soundly,” I muttered as I watched Sui slumber away.

Guess I’ll be making our sweets alone today after all. Sui can help me out tomorrow instead, I concluded, then tip-toed off to the kitchen on my own.



My first task, of course, was deciding what to make. I spent a moment rooting through my Item Box, until my hand fell on the perfect source of inspiration. “Ah ha!” I said as I pulled out a box of pancake mix, then looked at the recipe printed on its back.

“Ooh, baked cheesecake? That sounds kinda tough...and can you even *make* those out of pancake mix?” I muttered, but upon actually giving the recipe a readthrough, I found that I might have been mistaken. “Hmm, hmm. Interesting!”

Yeah, I think I could actually pull this off! It doesn’t even take that many ingredients. “I’ll need pancake mix, cream cheese, sugar, plain yogurt, eggs, and lemon juice!” I already had the pancake mix, sugar, and eggs, plus plenty of bottled lemon juice left over from a previous recipe. “Looks like I’ll only have to buy the cream cheese and yogurt.”

Once I had my list of ingredients sorted, I headed right over to my Online Supermarket’s menu, picked out a package of cream cheese and a tub of yogurt, and bought them on the spot.

“Okay! That handles the ingredients,” I said. I double-checked the recipe, just to be safe, then got right to work. First, I let the cream cheese come up to room temperature, then plopped it into a bowl. Next, I had to beat it with a hand mixer until it turned soft and became even creamier in consistency.

Bvrrrrrr!

“Okay, that should do it!”

When the cream cheese was soft enough, I added the sugar and beat it again.

Once the sugar was incorporated and the mixture no longer felt gritty to the touch, I could move on to the next step.

“There we go! Next up’s the eggs, I think,” I said, then added them in stages, mixing thoroughly between each egg. “And now I throw in the yogurt and lemon juice!” I added the yogurt first, mixed it in, and then poured in the juice before blending everything together again. “Last but not least, I add the pancake mix and fold it in with a rubber spatula!”

With that, the cheesecake batter was ready to go! Now I just had to cook it. I lined cake tins with parchment paper, poured the batter in, and then tapped the pans against the countertop a few times to pop any large air bubbles before sliding them into the already preheated oven.

“Y’know, that was a lot easier than I thought it’d be! But I guess I shouldn’t be saying that until it’s actually out of the oven,” I said to myself.

Some time later...

“Okay, looks like it’s done!” I said. I’d probed the center of a cheesecake with a bamboo skewer, and since the skewer came out clean, I felt safe assuming the cakes were finished. “It looks pretty good too!”

Now I just had to cool them down. Some time later, when the cheesecakes were chilled enough to demold...

“Oooh,” I cooed as I peeled the parchment paper off one of the cakes. It looked so similar to the baked cheesecakes they sold in stores, I was almost a little moved. “How’s it taste, though?” I took a bite, and felt my eyes widen. “This is *great!*”

It was the first time I’d ever made a baked cheesecake, and my effort had been a truly rousing success. It was soft, moist, and out-of-this-world delicious. I’d always been more of a no-bake cheesecake person, but this one was good enough to make me seriously reconsider that allegiance. It was so good, in fact, that I finished the slice that I’d cut for myself before I knew it.

“Man, that was good... Wait, gah! If my familiars catch me now, they’re gonna start complaining about me hoarding good food for myself! I’d better bring their portions out right away.”

I brought the baked cheesecakes out to the living room, where I was surprised to find everyone still asleep for once. I gave each of them a pat and said “Hey, guys, it’s snack time!” which managed to rouse them in an instant.

Fel let out a big yawn. **“A fine nap that was,”** he said.

“Yes, a moment of rest after lunch is a fine thing indeed,” Gon agreed.

«I smell something cooking...something sweet! What’re we having this

time?» Dora-chan asked.

“I made baked cheesecakes! They turned out pretty well too,” I replied.

At that point, Sui bounced over to me. It, unlike my other familiars, did *not* seem pleased. «Aww, but Sui said that Sui would help cook today!»

“I know, I’m sorry! You were just sleeping so deeply, I couldn’t bring myself to wake you up. You can help tomorrow, okay?”

«Okaaay. No take backs!»

“Hm! Yes, this does satisfy.”

“It’s quite rich, but not as cloying as I feared it might be!”

«Right? I think I like this sorta cake!»

«It’s really yummy!»

The baked cheesecake was drawing pretty solid reviews from my familiars. I was just shocked that you could make so many different sweets by reading the back of pancake mix boxes, myself! Needless to say, everyone gobbled up a whole cake each, then asked for seconds, which seemed like the right moment to shake things up a little.

“Here, try it with some of this on top! It’s good, trust me,” I said, offering a very simple strawberry sauce that I’d made out of jam while the cheesecakes were baking. All it took was strawberry jam, water, sugar, and a little lemon juice, which you cooked together until the mixture thickened. I tried a bit of the sauce on another piece of cheesecake as well, even though part of me thought I was going a little too hard on the sweets. I told myself it was fine every once in a while, though, and the sauce really *did* add something to the dish.

“Is this sauce made from the red fruits you have cooked with before?”

Fel asked.

“Strawberries, yeah,” I confirmed.

“Hmm. Yes, this is decent. I believe the sauce improves the experience.”

“It’s delicious this way as well, yes, but I think I preferred the cake on its own.”

«I could go either way, myself. Gotta love options, though! Means it’ll never get boring!»

«Sui likes both of them too! Let’s make something even yellower tomorrow, Master!»

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, sure. Let’s do that!”

Mukohda's Cooking Class: Still More Eggs

Once again, Aija and Theresa had asked me to teach them how to cook a new egg dish. I wasn't even surprised, at that point. Teaching them how to cook with eggs was just another part of my routine. It was pretty satisfying to see how happy everyone was about being able to eat all sorts of egg dishes, to be fair, so it wasn't like it was a thankless task or anything.

Last time, I'd taught them how to make poached eggs, which had been so well received that they were now vying for fried eggs' seat as the number-one egg dish in my estate's popularity rankings. They'd been a hit, for sure, and they did a good enough job of capturing the true essence of what makes eggs delicious to become as much of a staple as fried eggs were.

That said, I couldn't help but be concerned when I heard Aija and Theresa report back about how successful the poached eggs had been. After all, that meant that they'd want to learn even more simple dishes that would let an egg's natural deliciousness come through, right? What else could I even teach them, at this point? I mulled over the question for quite some time, only for an answer to hit me in the middle of breakfast. *Oh, of course!* I thought as I chewed a piece of rolled omelet. *I haven't taught them how to make these yet!*

Rolled omelets were quite simple, but also truly delicious. I considered them one of the most fundamental egg dishes, even! They were also commonly seasoned to be a little sweet, which I was a big fan of. That settled it in my mind: I'd teach everyone how to make rolled omelets this lesson!

Selja ended up participating as well this time around. She loved eggs so much that she wanted to learn how to make all sorts of dishes with them herself, and had pestered her mother into letting her come along. I'd always had the impression that she was shy and not particularly assertive, so it was a bit of a surprise to hear that she was being that demanding. Not in a bad way by any means, though—I was actually glad to hear that she could ask for the things she wanted so directly these days! After all, it doesn't hurt to indulge kids' whims every once in a while.

With rolled omelets on the menu, it was time for me to splurge a little. Preparing rolled omelets required a particular sort of rectangular frying pan, and I bought enough of the best pans my Online Supermarket had to offer to have one for each of my students to use. They were technically superior to the one that I used myself, actually. Something about buying cookery for other people made it easier to resist the urge to penny-pinching. Then again, I'd never had any

complaints about my current pan, so I was fine with continuing to use it.

With that, my preparations were complete! I called Aija, Theresa, and Selja into my kitchen and began the lesson.



“Okay, let’s get started!”

Aija and Theresa were both brimming with motivation at the thought of learning a new egg recipe. Selja was right there with them, her eyes wide with excitement as we started the lesson.

“I’ll be teaching you a dish called rolled omelets today. I’ve been getting the sense that your families both prefer egg-forward dishes, and this recipe falls right into that category! It’s a little special too,” I explained as I pulled the three frying pans I’d bought out of my Item Box. “You need a pan like this in order to make them properly!”

“It’s...rectangular?” Aija said.

“I’ve never seen a frying pan like it,” Theresa noted.

All three of my students looked mystified, and I nodded. “That’s right: a rectangular frying pan! It’ll probably be easiest if I just show you how it works. Watch and learn!”

With that, I kicked off my usual teaching method: preparing the dish myself while I narrated the steps. “First, you crack the eggs into a bowl,” I explained, then showed them how you mixed the eggs together, taking care not to make them froth up.

The seasonings—soy sauce and sugar—went in next. “I like my rolled omelets on the sweet side, so I use a little more sugar than you might want to. You can season yours to taste!”

I’d supplied them with soy sauce and sugar in the past, so I knew they’d have some of both on hand. Of course, I also knew that people tended to cook with the seasonings they were most familiar with, and I’d gotten the impression they had an awful lot of soy sauce that was sitting around unused. This seemed like a great opportunity to use some up and get them accustomed to the sauce at the same time. It was super versatile once you got in the habit, after all!

“If you go a little heavy on the seasoning, these omelets make for a really great side dish. They’re awesome with a bowl of rice,” I told them. I was starting to crave some rice myself, and decided to make some strongly seasoned rolled omelets to store away as part of my stock of breakfast food.

“Rice... That’s the white grain you gave us, right?” Aija asked. That seemed to jog Theresa’s memory as well. I *had* taught them how to cook rice at some point in the past, and had given them a stock of it as well, but perhaps unsurprisingly, they and their families had an overwhelming preference for bread.

“Yeah, I know that bread’s sort of a staple for you, and you’d usually pick it over rice,” I admitted. “Dishes flavored with soy sauce go really well with rice, though! Like, you remember how good that barbecued meat I’ve made before was, right? The sauce I put on that uses soy sauce as its base. That’s why it pairs with rice so perfectly.”

“Now that you mention it...”

“I see...”

“Barbecue and rice *were* really good together...”

Whether or not you cooked the meat on an actual grill, and whether you thoroughly marinated it beforehand or just slathered it in a bunch of prepackaged sauce and called it good, barbecue and rice were a combination that simply couldn’t be beat. That was one dish that could convince them to stuff themselves with rice for sure, staple food or not.

“Well, anyway, what you pair the omelets with is really just a matter of preference. You can experiment a little and see what works best for you! Oh, but let me tell you in advance, if you season them pretty strongly, they work way better than you’d think as a snack to have with a beer!”

“Oh? I’ll have to try that,” Aija said.

“That’s good to know for sure,” Theresa agreed. I’d almost forgotten that both of them had a taste for alcohol.

“So anyway, back to the recipe! Once all the seasonings are mixed in, it’s time for the square pan to come into play,” I said.

I oiled my pan and started heating it up on the stovetop. For this recipe, it was particularly important to make sure that every inch of the frying pan’s surface was covered in oil. I liked to use a small piece of paper towel to spread the oil around evenly, which made the process a lot simpler.

Next, I poured about a third of the beaten eggs into the frying pan, spreading it out in a thin layer. Once that layer was mostly solidified, I carefully rolled it up, starting at the far edge and working toward me. Once it was totally rolled up, I pushed it back to the pan’s far end, re-oiled the now unoccupied portion of the pan, and poured in another third of the beaten eggs, lifting up the partially-formed roll a little so that the new layer of egg could seep in beneath it. Then I

just repeated the process, letting the eggs get nice and firm, rolling them up, and pouring in the remainder of the mixture, until finally...

“Okay! That should do it,” I said. It was far from a perfect rolled omelet, but it hadn’t been a disaster by any means either. I transferred the finished rolled omelet to a cutting board and sliced it into bite-sized pieces. “Okay, it’s done! Go ahead and give it a try.”

Aija, Theresa, and Selja each speared a piece of the omelet with their forks, then popped them into their mouths.

“Oh, this is delicious! And the seasoning isn’t overpowering at all!” Aija said.

“You’re right! It’s so perfectly, subtly sweet,” Theresa added.

“It’s really good,” Selja said as she gave the other half of the piece on her fork a look of almost tragic longing.

“Yeah, I can tell you like it! Go ahead, have some more,” I said, offering her the rest of the rolled omelet I’d made.

Selja gave me a wide-eyed look, then glanced over at her mother as if to ask if it was all right.

“Go ahead, then,” Aija said. That was all the permission Selja needed, and she dug in with glee.

“So, yeah, that’s all there is to it,” I said. “Why don’t you all try making one yourselves?”

It was time for the students to take the wheel and cook their own omelets. Rolling them up was harder than it looked, though, and I heard more than a few grumbles of frustration as the eggs split apart.

I guess it’s gonna take a while before they get the knack for it. “It’s okay if it falls apart a little! As long as it all stays together at the end, it’s fine, and you’ll get better at making them all nice and neat with practice. It just takes a bit of time!”

Astonishingly, Selja ended up being the first of my students to get the hang of the technique and produce a well-shaped omelet. “I guess Selja’s in charge of making these, then,” Theresa commented, prompting a proud but somewhat bashful smile from the little girl.

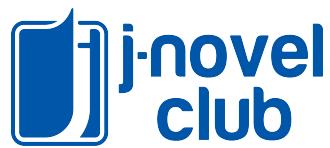
“Oh, and you can change up the recipe in a bunch of different ways too,” I noted. “The method I taught you today is just the basic version. You can adjust the seasoning ratio, like I said before, or even use totally different ones! The cheese and ham I give you guys would go great in them as well. Ground beef too, if you precook it.”

“I see!”

“We’ll have to try all sorts of different versions.”

“You can put cheese in them? That sounds so good!”

All three of them seemed as pleased as could be to hear how versatile the technique was. Their stock of egg recipes had just expanded considerably, but before they went home, they told me that they thought they’d have to get better at the basic version of the dish before branching out too much. In any case, it wouldn’t be long before I learned that rolled omelets had become a favored beer snack among my employees.



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