



Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill

Sukiyaki and the Blessings of Battle

Author: Ren Eguchi
Illustration: Masa

11



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THE GODDESSES'
GIRL-TALK GATHERING

Kisharle

"Oh,
my!"



Ninrir

"If that's the
sort of story
you want..."



Agni

"They what?!
What's he think
he's doing, acting
like some sorta
adult?!"



Rusalka

"I heard they
were spotted
getting friendly
with each other
by the eastern
gardens
recently."





Mukohda

I dual wielded
cans of pesticide,
unleashing death
by aerosol upon the
army of parasites.



Doray
PIXY
DORAGON

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 him all sorts of unwanted attention. 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.

Thanks to his familiars' incessant demands, Mukohda has finally agreed to lead his party into the Brixt dungeon, a notorious hellhole famed for being the hardest dungeon in the land. With Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui at his side, Mukohda should have very little to fear, but a warning from Demiurge, the God of All Creation, would seem to suggest otherwise. What dangers will he encounter in the dungeon's depths?



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

**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.

**Mukohda**

Human

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

**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.

◀ Proceed





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◀ Proceed



9 × Chapters

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Chapter 1: Next Stop, the Brixt Dungeon

The ominous warning that Demiurge had given me the night before weighed heavily on my mind as I made my way to Brixt's Adventurer's guild.

“Ugggh,” I moaned, “are we *seriously* doing this...?”

《Cease your complaining. We have come too far to turn back, however much you whine.》

《Right? ’Course we’re doing this, it’s the whole reason we came all the way out here!》

Fel, who was walking by my side, and Dora-chan, who was flapping along above us, were both exactly as excited for our next venture as I was dreading it. Even Sui was riled up—normally it would be riding (and probably napping) in the leather satchel I carried slung over my shoulder, but this time it was wobbling with glee on Fel’s back, mentally humming a happy dungeon song.

“I mean, we did come out here for the dungeon, yeah, but that was before the gods warned us about what’s down there,” I protested. I *had* decided to tell my familiars about Demiurge’s warning in the end, and informed them over breakfast. They reacted about how you’d expect.

《Why’s that a problem? I’ve been itchin’ for a good fight; works fine for me!》

《Dora-chan is entirely correct. The God of All Creation went so far as to tell us to call him for aid should the situation go awry. It seems our dearth of worthy opponents will finally end!》

Why would an explicit warning from a literal god make you more willing to do this?! What is wrong with you two lunatics?!

“Okay, no, you totally missed the point! When a god goes that far to warn you about something, it means it’s gonna be really, *really* nasty! I get that you’re all excited for the dungeon, and I’m resigning myself to at least setting foot in the thing, but we don’t have to go all the way to the bottom, right? Let’s go down through, like, the middle layer or so and turn back before we

hit the lower reaches, okay?"

『Why would we do such a thing? We will explore all the way to the final floor. You cannot claim to have traveled a dungeon if you turn back before the finish line, and if a worthy foe awaits us in the lower reaches, we have even less reason not to brave them. Long has it been since I last met a foe I could unleash my full strength upon—oh, how I have waited for this day to come! Bwa ha ha ha!』 Fel blasted my mind with a ferocious, booming laugh. He was as hyped up as I'd ever seen him.

『Seriously though, you're worrying too much,』 added Dora-chan with a confident smirk.『You've got me, Fel, and Sui around, and there ain't a monster out there the three of us can't handle! Right?』

Not right! There could be—and probably were—all sorts of horrifying baddies out there that the likes of us couldn't even imagine. Considering that, again, the *God of All Creation himself* seemed to think something down there was capable of giving us a hard time, the probability of me being right about that was looking higher and higher.

『Enough talk—this is a waste of time, and the Adventurer's guild awaits. You insisted we pay them a visit before we depart for the dungeon, did you not?』

“Yeah, that’s right. Pretty sure it’d be a major faux-pas to head straight into the dungeon without showing my face there at least once beforehand. I’ve heard rumors that they have maps of the place all the way down to the thirtieth floor too, so I’m hoping to get my hands on one of those.”

Our teleportation stone could take us anywhere from the first floor to the thirtieth, so having a map would give us the chance to talk it through and decide what floor we wanted to start from. Demiurge had also dropped a hint about something special for me on the twentieth floor, of course, so we’d have to go there no matter what else we settled on.

Man, I've got a really bad feeling about this one. Are we gonna be all right down there...?



“Oh, wow. Think that’s the biggest one yet...”

The Brixt Adventurer’s guild towered over me. Dolan and Aveling were dungeon cities too, but this one put even their guilds to shame, and it was

bustling with adventurers first thing in the morning.

Of course, the moment our party walked inside, the commotion came to a sudden stop as all eyes turned to us. I tried not to let the stares get to me as I awkwardly shuffled over to wait in line for the next available receptionist. It wasn't moving especially quickly, though, and it looked like we'd be in for a bit of a wait.

『How long do we intend to waste time here?』 Fel griped telepathically.

『Until it's our turn,』 I replied. 『Just look at this crowd—of course it'd take a while for them to get to us.』

『Right, sure, but we haven't even made it into the dungeon and Sui's already out like a light,』 noted Dora-chan.

I glanced over at Fel's back and found that the slime had indeed gone from singing about the dungeon to blearily sleep-talking about it. All that bouncing around with excitement must've tired it out.

『Sui...?』 I tried giving it a telepathic nudge, but didn't get a response.
『W-Well, we can just wake it up when we get to the dungeon. It's fine!』

『Man, could that slime get any more careless?』 said Dora-chan, rolling his eyes then turning to look out over the chaotic crowd that packed the guildhall. 『Anyway, are all these people gunning for the dungeon, or what?』

『Most likely. It's supposed to be super hard, sure, but the loot that drops from monsters and treasure chests tends to be really valuable, apparently. I guess that's why it's so popular in spite of the danger.』 Isaac, the master of the Adventurer's guild in Hirschfeld, had given me an idea of what to expect here.

『Valuable drops, you say? Would that mean magical items?』 Fel's ears perked up with interest.

『Sometimes, but from what I heard, it's mostly gems and precious metals. Those are always in demand no matter where you go, so you can make a pretty penny selling them off for sure. That's why a lot of profit-oriented adventurers make their way here the minute their rank is high enough to manage it.』

『Oh, is that all? Hmph.』

『What do you mean, 'is that all'? It's money! More money means buying more stuff from my Online Supermarket and making more donations to Ninrir's church, I'll have you know.』

『Hmm. Reasonable, I suppose. In that case, I will expect you to feed

us a veritable feast of otherworldly meat after we return from the dungeon, and make a sizable donation to the Goddess's temple as well.»

『A-After we make it through the dungeon.』 Whether or not we'd actually manage to make it through at all was the biggest worry on my mind, at that moment.

『Arright, let's make a mountain of dough!』 shouted Dora-chan, who was suddenly as motivated as I'd ever seen him thanks to the mention of otherworldly meat.

The three of us kept chatting telepathically to kill the time until suddenly I heard a new commotion cut through the already overpowering ambient noise.

“Okay, move it pal! Clear the way, I got places to be!” shouted a potbellied, middle-aged man who I could barely make out as he elbowed his way through the crowd—directly toward us. Sure enough, he stopped right in front of me.

“Hello, there! I presume you would be Mukohda and his familiars? Welcome to Brixt! Karelina’s guildmaster sent word you’d be making your way here, so we’ve been expecting you! My name is Tristan, and I serve as this town’s guildmaster. I assure you that we of the Brixt branch very much look forward to your patronage! Please, come with me—we have much to discuss!”

The chubby old guildmaster beamed with delight as he led us up to his office on the second floor. I was a little caught off-guard by how humble and polite he was, especially considering the sheer size of the guild he presided over. I could easily imagine him being the master of a Merchant’s guild branch, but an Adventurer’s guild? Not so much.

We stepped into Tristan’s office, and at his urging, I sat down across from him at a table. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui all took up positions behind me, willing and able to lounge around until my business was done. The office itself wasn’t all that different from the others I’d been in, in terms of design, but it was way larger than any I’d seen before and Fel could fit inside without the slightest trouble.

Speaking of Fel, he’d already started telepathically badgering me to speed things up, so I cut to the chase and started explaining our dungeon-crawling plans right away. I mentioned that I wanted to buy a map, while I was at it.

“I couldn’t be happier to hear it!” Tristan declared after I was finished, rubbing his hands together and smiling a big, toothy grin. “Please, by all

means, take the grand tour of Brix's dungeon! I assure you that my guild will be more than happy to purchase all the treasure you obtain on your venture that we can possibly afford!"

Then he leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "Thanks to the timely message from Karelina's guildmaster, we've prepared ample funding to accommodate your expected output well in advance. We'll be particularly interested in purchasing any gems or precious metals you happen to come across—they're considered a local specialty, and we've had a terrible time keeping them in stock for as long as I can remember!"

The guildmaster explained that the jewels and metals found in the dungeon were massively popular among the nobility all across the land, and flew off the shelves as quickly as they could be procured. The demand was so great, in fact, that from the sound of things I'd even be able to sell all the gems that had been collecting dust in my Item Box since I found them in Dolan and Aveling's dungeons. I was more than a little impressed by the fact that he'd prepared an ample stock of funding in anticipation of my arrival, incidentally.

With the important ground covered and my familiars' urgings getting less and less patient by the minute, I decided to cut the conversation short there and get a move on to the dungeon. Tristan was considerate enough to personally guide us all the way to its entrance, and even handed over a map of the dungeon free of charge.

The walk from the guild to the dungeon—which was located outside of the city walls—took about fifteen minutes in total, and Tristan gave me a crash-course on the dungeon en route. Judging by all the information I got from him, a quick look at the dungeon map, and Demiurge's advice to be especially thorough in my exploration of the twentieth floor, I decided that it'd be best to use our teleportation stone and check out the twentieth floor before anything else. A quick telepathic chat with Fel and the others later, and we were all on the same page.

According to Tristan, everything up to the twenty-second floor, from the layout of the dungeon to the sorts of monsters that appeared, had been fairly exhaustively researched and noted on the map. Things were a little sketchier from the twenty-third to thirtieth floors. The map was full of unexplored regions, and some of the foes we'd face were described simply as "monsters."

However well explored the twentieth floor supposedly was, though, I couldn't imagine that Demiurge had been off base with his advice. Surely there had to be something that had escaped notice up until now? My best guess was that there was a hidden room waiting for us somewhere down there.

When I showed Fel the map and its descriptions of the monsters on the twenty-first floor and lower, he scowled. **『Pathetic. I have no interest in wasting my time on mere fodder.』**

『Agreed,』 added Dora-chan and Sui. I decided to ignore them.

The plan was to give the twentieth floor a solid once-over, before teleporting first up to the entrance and then down all the way to the thirtieth floor to start our exploration in earnest from there. Our teleportation stone was one of the multi-use varieties, so we didn't have to worry about it breaking. I was really grateful to all the adventurers in Ark for letting us have it.

『The twentieth floor is patrolled by gargoyles? Hardly worthy foes, but we cannot disregard a missive from the gods. We shall search out every last nook and cranny on the floor.』

『Yeah, knowing there's something there that's not on the map makes the whole thing sound kinda fun!』

『Sui's gonna search all over!』

『Sounds great, but this dungeon's a lot bigger than the ones in Dolan and Aveling,』 I cautioned. 『It might take a pretty long time to cover the whole thing.』

『Heh! All the better, then.』

『Right? Let's see how quick we can track this thing down!』

『Sui'll find it for sure!』

『Yeah, yeah. Might as well make use of the map, though, since we have it and all. Let's start by doing a lap around the floor—for all we know, we might run into whatever we're looking for just like that.』

We soon arrived at the dungeon. Tristan invoked his authority as the guildmaster to let us jump the queue, guiding us into a room beside the entrance that was intended for use by parties with teleportation stones. Inside the room was a pretty large magical circle—around five meters in diameter, or so—with some sort of cylindrical pedestal standing in the center. All I had to do to teleport was hold the stone by the pedestal and say the floor number I

wanted to go to out loud.

Moments before we teleported away, Tristan turned to face us. “I’m expecting great things from you!” he declared with a smile as broad as could be.

I hope you’re right about that, but I can’t stop worrying about those lower reaches... Guess I should be worrying about the twentieth floor before anything else, though.

Chapter 2: Sui Does All the Work (And Then Some)

In the blink of an eye, I found myself standing in a dimly lit room atop another magical circle. The mossy stone walls emitted the very specific sort of not too bright, not too dim light that was characteristic of dungeons. In fact, the whole place just *screamed* “dungeon” in the classical RPG sense of the word.

In that respect, the place felt at least a little reminiscent of Aveling’s dungeon. From what I’d heard, though, this dungeon’s floors were all at least twice the size of Aveling’s equivalents. I couldn’t expect them to be *too* similar.

《Get on,》 said Fel. 《We shall search this floor in short order, then descend immediately.》

《Sounds like a plan!》 Dora-chan agreed. 《This floor’s fulla, what was it? Gargoyles? Buncha weaklings that don’t even drop meat! No point in killing those things at all.》

“What do you mean, ‘no point’? They’re supposed to drop gems when you beat them!”

From what I’d been told, gargoyles had about a one in five chance of leaving something behind after they died. They were supposed to look more like big moving statues than traditional monsters, and were as slow as you’d expect considering their appearance, but also incredibly resistant to both physical and magical attacks. I’d heard that even mid-ranking adventurers struggled to take them down.

《Sure,》 the pixie dragon said back, 《but they also said the gems’re super tiny, right?》

“Well, yeah. But gems are gems, tiny or not. We can still sell them, and apparently they fetch a decent price. I guess we don’t have to go that far out of our way to gather a ton of them, though.” I was already swimming in wealth thanks to my familiars, after all. “By the way, you said I should get on

your back, Fel? Are you planning on sprinting around the floor, or something? Will you really be able to find whatever hidden thing we're looking for if we're moving that fast?"

Needless to say, Fel's top speed was terrifically fast. I had a hard time imagining we'd be able to see *anything* at that pace, much less something hidden well enough to evade detection for who knows how long.

『**Hmph! Of course I will. I can sense even the smallest facets of the surrounding area. It will pose no trouble,**』 Fel declared with a confident smirk. I knew him well enough to know that I'd probably be fine leaving it up to him.

『Heeey, Master, let's hurry up and go! Sui wants to beat lots and lots of baddies!』 Sui was so excited it was bouncing all the way up to my chest.

『**Hah! In that case, you should ride upon my back as well,**』 offered Fel. 『**We shall leave it to you to deal with any monsters in our path.**』

『Okay, Uncle Fel! Sui's gonna work super hard!』

『Yeah, great! You got this, Sui!』 added Dora-chan.

『Yeah!』

In other words, Fel and Dora-chan couldn't be bothered to deal with the gargoyles and shoved all the work onto Sui. I thought about calling them out for a second, but considering how excited Sui was to "Beat aaall the bad guys," in its own words, I decided to keep quiet.

『**Now then—let us away! Get on!**』 commanded Fel. I heaved myself onto his back, and Sui bounced all the way up to his head.

"Oh, right—hey, Sui! Make sure not to attack anything other than the gargoyles! They're monsters that look like they're made out of stone. Be really, *really* careful not to hit any adventurers, okay?"

『Okaay!』

『Arright, finally! It's spelunking time!』

With an enthusiastic shout from Dora-chan, we set forth into Brixt's dungeon.



Pew! Pew! Peeew!

Sui's Acid Bullets splashed directly into the hideous face of a gargoyle, melting a hole all the way through to the back of its skull. The monster

toppled backward, dead as a doornail.

“Gaaah, sorry! I’m so sorry!” I yelled at the party of adventurers who’d been engaged in a heated battle with the creature until we’d plowed onto the scene. They stared at us in dumbfounded silence as we moved on as quickly as we’d arrived. “Dang it, Sui, what did I *just* tell you?!”

There were plenty of other parties exploring the twentieth floor at the same time as us. The corridors of Brix’s dungeon were wider than I was used to, thankfully, so even when we ran into a battle between several adventurers and a gargoyle, we could slip past them without stopping, or jump over them in the worst case. It wasn’t how *I* would’ve chosen to explore the place, but Fel outright refused to stop each and every time we ran into trouble.

At least we’re not doing too much interfering and killstealing. I hope. We might be toeing the line, but we’re not quite crossing it. Gotta say, though, I didn’t expect Sui to be this motivated...

《Sui,》 I transmitted telepathically, 《you remember what I told you earlier? You can’t attack any monsters that adventurers are already fighting!》

《But why, Master? Isn’t beating up bad monsters a good thing?》

《Beating up monsters is great, yeah, but still. If somebody’s already fighting them, you can’t interfere unless they ask you to help them. If you jump into the fight when they don’t need the help, they’ll say you’re stealing their prey!》

《Hmmmph!》

I’d explained it several times at that point, but Sui still didn’t seem convinced. The rule had applied back in Dolan’s dungeon, Aveling’s dungeon, and the meat dungeon, of course, but in all three of those cases we’d waited until we’d descended to the more sparsely populated levels of the dungeon before we started exploring in earnest. We hadn’t run into very many other parties at all, so we had been free to take on any monsters that came our way.

I couldn’t read Sui’s mind, but I could more or less sum up its thought process. It was probably thinking something along the lines of “If you find a monster, of course you should beat it up! What’s wrong with that?!”

And it wasn’t wrong, per se, but when other adventurers entered the picture, we had to consider all sorts of complicated stuff like who had the right to claim the items the monsters dropped. I’d heard that it was pretty common for fights to break out over that sort of thing, especially in

dungeons.

I wanted to avoid that sort of trouble at all costs, so I made it a rule that we wouldn't interfere with any fights unless the adventurers involved were injured and in obvious trouble or directly asked us for help. Sui, however, was too much of a child to be understanding about that sort of consideration.

『Ah! Another rock monster! Take this!』 Pew! Pew! Peeew!

『Gaaah, adventurers! What about the adventurers?!』

『Get a grip! This one wasn't fighting anyone else. It's fine,』 chided Dora-chan, much to my relief.『But man, I gotta say, the way Sui's going at those things is some nasty work! One Acid Bullet to the face and bam, nothing left but gargoyle slag.』

I'd been thinking the same thing, actually. At first, I thought it was just coincidence, but it had happened too many times for me to believe that anymore; Sui was definitely aiming for their faces deliberately. It had taken down every single gargoyle we'd run into so far in the exact same way.

『Umm, well, Uncle Fel said that if Sui doesn't know what a monster's squishy parts are, Sui should just aim for the head and break it! He said that you can beat most monsters by breaking their heads.』

『Oooh?』 replied Dora-chan, sounding a little impressed.『Yeah, now that I think about it, that's pretty much true. Guess Fel's a half-decent teacher sometimes after all!』

『‘Sometimes’? Hold your tongue, Dora. I teach nothing but the most useful and meaningful of lessons.』

『Felllllll,』 I mentally wailed,『I told you to quit teaching Sui that crap!』

『What do you mean, ‘crap’?! Learning to aim for the head is of vital importance!』

『Yeah, gotta second that one. Ya hafta know these things if you wanna be sure your enemy ends up in the ground instead of you.』

There was no hope of Fel or Dora-chan understanding my perspective. They were a couple of bloodthirsty berserkers; I shouldn't have expected anything else. *Ugggh, my cute little Sui's getting turned into a barbarian before my eyes...*

『Oooh, another one!』

『Wait, stop!』 I shrieked.『Are there any adventurers around?!』

『Yup, I see some,』 said Dora-chan.『Looks like they're in a bad spot, though.』

《Indeed. They are surrounded.》

I peered ahead of us, and sure enough, I spotted a group of adventurers further down the corridor. They'd gotten themselves pinned between two groups of gargoyles—around five monsters in total. The adventurers had nowhere to run, and the gargoyles were slowly but surely closing in on them.

Before the situation devolved further, though, one of the adventurers noticed us and shouted, "Hey, you! We need some help here! Please!"

"Sic 'em, Sui!"

《Okaaay!》

Pew, pew, pew! Pew, pew, pew, peeew!

Every one of Sui's shots flew true. From its position atop Fel's head, Sui used Acid Bullets to nail the gargoyles' faces with pinpoint accuracy, boring straight through their heads. Barely an instant later the whole pack lay dead on the dungeon floor, where the adventurer's jaws quickly joined them.

One of their party members had at least enough composure left to call out to us, though. "Hey, thanks! You saved our hides!"

"Just glad we made it in time!" I replied, only for Fel to sail past them without even bothering to slow down. "Huh? Uhh, Fel?"

《We have ample ground left to cover if we wish to explore this whole floor, and no time to waste on annoyances like these. We will move on!》

As we sped down the hallway, I heard the adventurers behind us call out in a panic. "H-Hey, wait! What about the drops?!"

"All yours!" I shouted over my shoulder. The rest of the party had recovered as well at that point, and I heard them all shouting *something*, but we were already too far away and I couldn't make it out. Steamrolling through their encounter without so much as stopping for a chat wasn't exactly polite (not that I had much say in the matter—Fel wasn't gonna slow down no matter what I said), but we *had* saved their lives and let them claim all the loot, so I figured they probably weren't complaining. Well, I *hoped* they weren't complaining.

That wasn't the last time Sui pulled us into that sort of trouble over the course of our lap around the twentieth floor. I kept telling it to hold its fire if there were adventurers around, but nothing I said worked. *Sui is listening to me, right...?*



After spending who knows how long rushing around all over the twentieth floor, Fel came to a sudden stop.

“What’s up?” I asked.

『This is strange...』 he replied, vaguely.

“What? What’s strange?”

『We have been everywhere there is to go on this floor. Are you *certain* this is the one the God of All Creation told you to explore?』

“Of course I am! He said to search all over the twentieth floor.” I was positive that I wasn’t misremembering Demiurge’s advice.

『Oh, I see what’s going on!』 Dora-chan piped up.『You have no idea what you’re even looking for, do you, Fel? Bet you don’t feel so high and mighty now, mister ‘I can sense even the smallest facets of the surrounding area’!』

“Pff! H-Hey, don’t be like that, Dora-chan!” Dora-chan’s impression of Fel was hilariously on-point, and I just barely managed to stifle a laugh.

『Grrrh—I... I know perfectly well what it is I search for! I just happened by pure chance—by pure chance, I say!—to overlook my quarry!』 Fel insisted with a scowl. I got how he was feeling, honestly. After being that smug about how he’d find it in no time, of course it’d be galling to not manage to turn it up.

『Heeey, Uncle Fel, are we done already? Sui wants to beat up more of those rock monsters!』 Sui, totally oblivious to the awkward atmosphere, sent off a perfectly carefree telepathic message from atop Fel’s head.

Guess reading the mood’s still a little too hard for a slime its age.

『Grr... I hunger! It is time for us to eat—my senses are dulled when I am famished!』

“Ha ha, y-yeah, I’m pretty hungry too, now that you mention it! Let’s stop for lunch.”

『G-Good idea, yeah. I could use a bite.』

『Oooh, food? Sui’s hungry too! Yaaay, lunch!』

“All right, let’s make for a safe zone! Let’s see here...” I retrieved the map that Tristan had given me from my Item Box and was about to check it for a safe place to eat when Fel cut me off.

『There is one just a short distance ahead of us,』 he said, gesturing forward.

『Sweet!』 exclaimed Dora-chan.『Let’s eat there, then!』

And so, our party set off for the dungeon crawl's first safe area stop.



The safe area we arrived at was set up around a small pool filled with fresh water bubbling out from a spring. Three parties of adventurers were already resting around it, every one of them full of nothing but big, grizzled men. We found an empty plot of ground and set up camp.

I took a moment to breathe a quick sigh of relief, then telepathically called Sui over to me for a chat. I hadn't had the time for an in-depth conversation about its behavior while we were dashing about the dungeon on Fel's back, and I felt that I had to make sure it understood what it had done wrong or else it'd keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

『What is it, Master?』

『Sui, you remember how I told you not to attack any monsters that other adventurers were already fighting? And then when we actually found some, you attacked them anyway?』

『Yeah, 'cause the monsters were bad guys! Beating up bad guys is good, right?』 Sui sat before me, wobbling from side to side as it tried to justify its actions.

『I mean, yes, that's true. I mean, it's *usually* true, but, like... Okay, think about it this way: what if you were fighting your hardest, trying to beat up a bad monster, when suddenly some random adventurer you've never even met before charges in and chops its head off. How would that make you feel?』

『Hmm... Sui wouldn't feel very good about that.』

『No, you wouldn't. You were trying your best, so what right did that jerk have to barge in and steal your kill?』

『Yeah...』

『Okay, now think back on what you just did when we were exploring. Wasn't that the exact same thing?』 At that point, Sui seemed to finally understand what I was trying to say and squished itself down dejectedly.

『Sui did something bad... Sui is soooorry, Master!』

『It's fine. As long as you understand, and don't do it again. You're a good slime, so you'll be careful from now on, right?』

『Yeah! Sui'll be super careful!』

Thankfully, Sui was a really understanding kid as long as you took the

time to carefully explain yourself in a way it could understand. *I don't think we'll be having any more fight-crashing problems from now on.*



『Are you finished yet? Then hurry up and cook!』

『Yeah, we're starvin' to death over here!』

Fel and Dora-chan had both been considerate enough to wait until after I was finished talking with Sui to start griping at me. 『Okay, okay! There's other adventurers around, though, so we'll have to stick with something premade.』

『So long as there is meat in it, I could hardly care less.』

『You said it!』

Right, right, you're carnivores, I get it. Not like I made anything that doesn't have meat in it to begin with.

I was thinking back on the meals I'd prepared in advance, when suddenly a voice rang out from behind me.

“Uhh, s’cuse me. You got a minute?”

“Hmm?”

I turned to find a big, rugged-looking adventurer standing behind me. I guessed that he was somewhere around thirty years old or so, and a pair of similarly-built beastmen with dog ears and tails stood next to him. Their faces sort of resembled each other’s, so I assumed they were brothers. The final member of their party was a lanky man in a robe who could only be some sort of mage.

“I just wanted to say that you saved our lives. Thank you,” said the rugged man who had addressed me first. The beastmen and the mage echoed the sentiment.

“You ran off before we could say thanks, and it’s been bugging us ever since! Glad we got the chance,” said one of the beastmen.

“Right?!?” chimed in the other one. “You just took off without even picking up your drops!”

That’s when I finally put the pieces together: they were the adventurers we’d saved earlier who’d been surrounded by gargoyles.

“You have no idea how screwed we’d have been if you hadn’t come along,” said the mage. “Seriously, we’d have been dead meat if it weren’t for you!” The others nodded in agreement.

“I know you told us to keep the drops, but it just wouldn’t sit right with me to take loot from a guy we owe our lives to. This is yours,” said the rugged man, holding out a small dark-blue gemstone.

“What? No, I couldn’t! Keep it for yourself, please.”

“But it’s *your* drop...”

The four of them looked extremely nonplussed. It’s true that they were the only group to actually ask us for help, but they were far from the only group whose battle we’d ended prematurely. I would’ve felt really weird about taking their drops while all the other parties got to keep theirs.

“Let me fill you in on our whole situation before you decide anything,” I said, and went on to explain how we’d been on an inadvertent rampage across the floor, with Sui jumping into anyone and everyone’s fights indiscriminately. “You guys aside, we pretty much stole prey from everyone else on the floor, and I feel sorta bad about it... So anyway, long story short, I decided to give up my claim on any items that drop on this floor.”

“Hmm,” said the rugged adventurer, “I get the picture now. In that case, we’d be happy to keep this for ourselves.”

“Perfect! Please do.”

The other two parties of adventurers in the safe area had been listening in on our conversation and looked visibly relieved the moment he agreed to keep the drop.

“Umm,” I mumbled awkwardly, turning to them. “Don’t tell me—did you guys...?”

“Yup,” said a member of one of the parties. “Had our mark snatched right out from under us by that slime.”

“Same over here,” called out an adventurer in the other party.

Agggh, I knew it! Sui was going around pew-pewing the heads off every gargoyle it spotted, regardless of whether or not there were adventurers around, so I wasn’t exactly surprised by this new development.

First things first: I went over to each of the two groups and apologized profusely for our breach of dungeon etiquette. I also took the opportunity to tell them that anything the gargoyles had dropped was theirs. Thankfully, they all turned out to be really understanding. Nobody even chewed me out, in the end.

“Glad it worked out this time,” said the rugged adventurer once I was finished, “but some folks out there wouldn’t let you get away with a stunt like that half this easy. Best watch yourself from now on.”

“The warning’s appreciated, but believe me, I’m *well* aware. I had a nice, long chat about this issue with Sui—that’s my familiar, the slime. We won’t

be doing it again.” Sui was sitting right next to me, and I gave it an affectionate pat. 《Hear that? We won’t be doing it again, right?》

Sui wobbled happily. 《Right! Sui’ll be careful from now on!》

Nice! Sounds like we’re in good shape. Or at least, I hoped we were.

《Hey.》

A telepathic message pulled me out of my thoughts, followed by a sudden weight landing on my shoulder. I turned my head to find Dora-chan sitting on said shoulder, and Fel sitting directly behind me, staring me right in the face.

《Have you forgotten about our food?》

《Yeah, I’m seriously about to die of hunger over here!》

“Right, right, my bad. Wait just a minute, I’ll have it ready in no time.” I quickly pulled out a stockpot and a basket full of bread rolls.

“Something wrong?” asked the adventurer, noting my rush.

“Nah, I just promised my familiars I’d make a meal for them, and it looks like they’re out of patience.” The adventurers’ gazes all turned to Fel and Dora-chan, who were still looming over me.

“Your familiars, eh? That’s a Fenrir, isn’t it?” he asked bluntly.

“Huh? It’s, uh...”

“Knew it.” My noncommittal muttering had had the opposite of its intended effect. “No need to hide it. Word’s been going ’round these parts about an adventurer who keeps a Fenrir as his familiar.”

“Yeah,” chimed in another of the adventurers. “And there was a rumor floating around a while back that he’d be taking on this very dungeon before too long!”

“Not to mention that all the rumors talked about how he has a mini-dragon and some sorta weird slime along with the Fenrir. You’re one famous guy,” added a third.

Oh, wow—word’s spread all the way to the next country over about me? And they even knew about Dora-chan and Sui?! Them figuring out Fel’s identity wasn’t a surprise, though. I’d heard that most of the adventurers who delved into the top twenty floors of this dungeon were around C-rank, and adventurers of that caliber tended to identify him as a Fenrir fairly consistently.

“So, what’s the Fenrir eat? Gotta be raw meat, right?” asked one of the adventurers. They all leaned forward, keen to hear the details of a legendary beast’s day-to-day diet.

“Nah, he doesn’t—” I began, only to be cut off by Fel himself.

“Raw meat? Hardly. Such food is beneath me.”

“Holy shit, it *talked!*” cried one of the adventurers.

“So it’s true—Fenrir really *can* speak, just like humans!”

“Umm, we all eat the same meals, actually,” I explained, trying to take the conversation down to a calmer notch. “We’re having this today.”

The adventurers watched as I prepared our meal. The stockpot I’d pulled out was full of Bolognese sauce. It was a really versatile dish, so I’d made a ton of it in preparation for our trip. I actually had another full pot of the stuff still tucked away in my Item Box. All I had to do was slice open one of the rolls I’d had specially made at the Rosendahl orphanage like a hot dog bun, scoop a healthy serving of sauce into it, and presto—a Bolognese dog was ready to be served!

I plated up three heaping piles of Bolognese dogs and set them out for my familiars. No sooner had I declared, “Okay, guys, lunch is ready!” than they started wolfing the meal down with voracious enthusiasm.

“Yes, these are delicious indeed!” said Fel, easily loud enough for the nearby adventurers to hear. Their gazes were all locked onto my familiars as they enjoyed their meal.

《Master, Sui wants more!》

《Seconds over here too, thanks!》

“And for me as well, of course.”

“Yeah, yeah, coming right up.”

Around the time I finished serving up seconds for my familiars, I started hearing murmurs coming from the other adventuring parties.

“Look at ‘em! I swear their dungeon food’s better than the stuff I eat in town...”

A number of voices joined in to agree. “How’s a *slime* living larger than I am?” wondered one of them. The atmosphere in the safe area was about as bright and cheery as that of a typical funeral.

Sorry, guys, but we have some special circumstances going on in this party! And besides, aren’t you all at least C-rank? You should have some decent savings by now, right? Why’re you subjecting yourself to a diet of dried meat andhardtack when you have the money to splurge every once in a while?

“Stare as you will, but I will not relinquish so much as a bite,” said

Fel, baring his sauce-stained fangs at the all-but-drooling adventurers.

“H-Hey, *Fel*...”

“Hmph! I will not allow my provisions to be squandered on the likes of them.”

“It’s fine, seriously, I have tons! We can spare just a little, right?” The adventurers looked so pathetically let down, I couldn’t help but take pity on them and share some of our food. They thanked me profusely—a little *too* profusely, even, in the case of the rugged guy...



We finished our meal and departed from the safe area. According to Fel, there was just one part of the floor that we hadn’t completely covered yet. If we didn’t find whatever Demiurge had sent us to look for there, we’d have to do another circuit around the entire level. With no other choice, we set off for that one remaining location: the boss room.

Fel claimed that he couldn’t sense anything particularly unusual about the boss room on this floor, but Fel also had a way of letting little details slip by him thanks to his excess of confidence, so I wasn’t convinced he hadn’t missed something that *I’d* consider *very* unusual. Still, it seemed worth at least looking into the room before we went off on a potential wild goose chase.

A party of adventurers was already waiting by the boss room when we arrived. That’s where we hit our first real obstacle so far: a line. After the monsters in boss rooms were defeated, it took a set period of time for more monsters to repopulate the room. My map explained that each floor in this dungeon had a different cooldown time, and most of them were on the longer end of the spectrum. The twentieth floor, for instance, had a cooldown time of roughly two hours.

The map also explained another peculiarity of the dungeon: most boss rooms didn’t actually have doors, and it was perfectly possible to see into them, even while another party was fighting within. That wasn’t to say that you could come and go as you pleased, though—as soon as a battle began within the room, an invisible barrier would prevent anyone not already inside from entering.

One party was inside when we arrived, fighting for their lives, and another

was waiting to go next. Even assuming the first group was about to wrap their encounter up, there'd still be a two-hour cooldown after they finished, and even if the *next* group won the day almost instantly we'd still have *another* two hours to wait on top of that.

In short: even discounting the time the actual fights took, we were looking at a four-hour wait, bare minimum. Fel and Dora-chan's spirits plummeted the moment I explained the situation to them, and Sui oozed into a little puddle of disappointment as it realized that we wouldn't get to fight right away after all.

"So, what do you think?" I asked my companions. "Should we give up on the boss room for now and do another lap around the floor?"

『Tiresome as it sounds, that would certainly be preferable to an interminable wait. I sense nothing worthy of note within this room, regardless.』

Fel's mind was made up, but Dora-chan wasn't as convinced. 『Hold up a second—you *sure* about that? There's *definitely* nothing weird in that room? 'Cause if we go off to do another lap and don't find anything, we'll have wasted a boatload of time *and* we'll have to wait here in the end anyway.』

『**You dare to doubt my senses, Dora?**』 huffed Fel, shooting a glare at the little dragon.

『Can you blame me? How many times are you planning on missing crap 'cause you're too stuck up to bother noticing the little stuff?』

『**As I said, that was a matter of chance! Fortune is a fickle mistress! Hmph—I can hardly believe you could do better, talk yourself up as you will!**』

『What's that supposed to mean, punk?!』

Dora-chan and Fel's exchange was quickly devolving into a shouting match.

『**Simple: it means you have chosen to leave the exploration to me because you know full well you lack the ability! If you believe you could do better, then be my guest!**』

『Ugh—yeah, well I'm a better attacker than you'll ever be!』

『**A better attacker? I bear more destructive power in a single claw than you wield with your entire body!**』

『Oh, it's *on!* If you think you're that much better than me, then just try and prove it! I hope you're ready to put your money where your mouth is,

pal, 'cause I'll take you on any day of the week!»

Fel and Dora-chan matched each other's smack talk blow for blow, and the argument was escalating at a concerning pace. The situation was downright explosive, and Sui was left bouncing to and fro between the two of them, jiggling about in helpless panic.

«Fel, Dora-chan, calm down! This is not a good time to get hostile with one another!» I scolded telepathically.

«C'mon, you heard him! This jerk said I was talking myself up!»

«**Not before you doubted my abilities!**»

«It's not 'doubting' if we already know I'm right!»

«**Hah! By that standard, I am at no fault for accusing you of putting yourself on a pedestal!**»

It didn't even take them a minute to escalate right back up to the breaking point. «Come *on*, you two, I said cut it out! We're all friends here, right? Look—both of you went too far, from my perspective, so let's just all say we're sorry and call it even, okay?»

The two of them immediately started grumbling at me, both complaining about how they shouldn't have to apologize when the other was the one who started it. «Oh, okay, is that a no? Well then, I guess it's time for plan B: next time we stop for a meal, neither of you get to eat.»

«**What?!**»

«Why the hell not?!»

The threat of a missed meal was a powerful deterrent, and Fel and Dora-chan were both shaken by my declaration. «Hey, Sui, wanna eat something *really* tasty next meal, just the two of us?» I asked, scooping up the poor little slime and giving it a hug.

«Something *really* tasty? Yay! Sui wants it!» Sui replied happily, ever the mercenary when it came to food.

«**Hold! I shall not abide by the two of you eating anything delicious without me!**»

«Yeah, what he said! It's not fair for you two to hog all the good stuff!»

«Well then, I guess you'd better apologize to each other, huh?» I bluntly laid down the law. Fel and Dora-chan growled with frustration, but missing out on a meal was a fate far worse than a moment of shame in their minds. They scowled as they exchanged apologies. *That's the nice part about running with a group of gluttons. I have their stomachs wrapped around my*

finger.

《All right,》 I said when they were finished, 《now we're all even! No grudges, got it?》

《Very well.》

《Yeah, sure.》

《Great! Now that that's settled, let's go negotiate with the party that's ahead of us.》

《**Negotiate, you say?**》

《Right. It'd be easier for you to tell if there's anything weird in there if you could go inside, right, Fel?》

《**It is indeed an easier task to sense such things when present in the room itself, yes...**》

《And Dora-chan, you'd be happier taking Fel's word for it if we went in to take a closer look, right?》

《Well, yeah, 'course I would. But that means—》

《I know, I know, just give me a minute! If I can pull this off, it'll cut our wait time in half. Just sit tight and wish me luck with the negotiations!》



“Uhh, excuse me? Could I talk with you guys for a second?” I called out to the party that was waiting ahead of us.

“What?” replied one of the adventurers. “The last group’s just about done in there, so keep it short.”

“Right, can do. Umm, sorry to be so blunt, but I have a proposal for you about the boss room...”

In short, I asked him if our two parties could enter the room together. In exchange for letting us tag along, I said that my familiars and I would deal with all of the enemies inside, and the other party would be free to claim any items left behind by the gargoyles we beat.

“So you’re saying you’ll fight all the monsters for us.”

“Yes!”

“And we get all the drops.”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, pal, what’s the catch? You think I’m dumb enough not to know when a deal’s too good to be true, or something?”

“No catch, really! We just need to take a look around the inside of the room. As long as we get to go in with you, we’ll take on all combat responsibilities and leave the rest to you, no problem.”

“You’re...actually serious, aren’t you?” said the adventurer, giving me an appraising look. “Gimme a minute. I gotta run this past the others first.”

I imagined that the man I’d been talking to was the party’s leader. He went back over to his party (which consisted of two humans and two beastmen—one male and one female each—as well as a male elf) and called them all into a huddle to whisper together about my offer. Unbeknownst to them, though, all I had to do was perk up my level-enhanced ears to pick out most of their conversation anyway.

“I mean, why the hell not? What do we have to lose?”

“That’s gotta be the S-ranker with all the familiars we’ve been hearing rumors about, right? If a guy like him went around screwing people over, it’d make the rounds in no time. I think we can trust him.”

“I’m not saying we *couldn’t* take the room on ourselves—I mean, c’mon, we’re all B-rankers here—but putting down that many gargoyles is hard work. Saving our strength for the next floor’s a good thing, no two ways about it. Dunno ’bout you, but I can’t think of any reason to turn him down.”

Nice! Sounds like they’ll be taking me up on it. It took them a little while to reach a consensus, but eventually their leader walked back over to me.

“All right, you handle the monsters and we get the drops. Long as you’re still good for that, we’ll let you come inside with us.”

“Perfect, thank you!”

Just a moment later, the party ahead of us finished up their battle and the cooldown time began. Finally, roughly two hours after that, the leader of the other party called out to us.

“Hey, pal, gargoyles’re up again! If you still wanna go in with us, now’s your chance!”

“We’ll be right there!” I shouted. “Fel, Dora-chan, Sui, get ready! We’ll be going into the boss room with the adventurers over there.”

My familiars, who had all been lying sprawled out on the floor, leapt to their feet.

《I told them that we’d take care of the monsters that’re inside, so you guys are gonna have to wipe out all the gargoyles, okay?》 I explained telepathically.

『Ooooh, Sui wants to do it, Sui wants to do it! Sui'll beat all of them!』 exclaimed the slime, leaping up to perch on Fel's head in a single bounce and deploying the little tentacle it used to fire off its Acid Bullets. It had gone from half-asleep to maximum energy mode in the span of a second.

『Okay, sounds good! They're all yours, Sui—just don't let any of them slip past you!』

『Okaaay!』

『No worries, anyway. Even if Sui does let one of 'em through, I'll be on the lookout to pick it off.』

『Great. Thanks, Dora-chan.』

『**I, of course, shall assist as well.**』

『Yeah, counting on you too, Fel. For that, and for checking for anything weird in the room.』

『**But of course.**』

I didn't *really* think we'd have any trouble with a bunch of gargoyles, honestly, but I had to keep in mind that we'd have a party of unknown adventures along for the experience. I definitely didn't want any of them getting hurt, so I decided to take things even more cautiously than usual.

“All right, let's do this!” called the leader of the other party. He and his friends stepped inside, and we followed along right after them. “They're all yours!” he said, turning to me.

“Okay!” I replied, moving to the front with my familiars. There were about thirty gargoyles packed into the boss room. It wasn't long before a few of them noticed our entrance, at which point they instantly charged straight in our direction.

『Sic 'em, Sui!』

『Okaaay! Take this!』

Pew! Pew! Pew! Pew! Pew!

Sui extended two little squirt-tentacles, wielding them like a pair of handguns and spraying a deadly series of rapid-fire Acid Bullets into the crowd. The gargoyles toppled like dominoes, and mere seconds later all thirty-something of them were dead on the ground, a perfect hole melted through each and every one of their faces.

The adventurers, who'd witnessed the spectacle from beginning to end, stood there with their jaws practically touching the floor. I was pretty shocked as well. “When the heck did you learn how to do *that*, Sui...?” I

asked, bewildered.

『Hee hee hee! Isn't it cool?!』 the slime replied with a proud little wobble.
How has Sui gotten this dangerous this quickly, anyway...?

『I am quite certain now,』 chimed in Fel. 『There is nothing out of the ordinary within this chamber.』

『If you're that confident about it, then I guess that's that. Time for another loop around the floor.』

『Yeah, guess we'd better,』 agreed Dora-chan.

We turned around to leave the room, only to find the flabbergasted adventures still standing there, utterly dumbstruck.

“So, uhh, that's all we needed!” I said to their leader. “We're just gonna move along now. Thanks for the help.”

“R-Right...” he stammered, only barely managing to collect himself enough to watch us leave the boss room.



A short ways into our second tour of the twentieth floor, Fel came to a sudden stop.

“What's up?”

『Something strikes me about this corridor...』 he replied, gesturing down a hallway to our right with his nose. It was only about ten meters long, and I could see the whole thing, on account of it ending almost immediately in a blank wall.

“But that's a dead end, right?”

『Quite. But it is what lies *beyond* the dead end that strikes me as suspicious.』

We shuffled down the corridor to investigate the apparently unusual wall. “Past here, huh?” I muttered, tapping the stone with a knuckle. It certainly *felt* solid enough, and it was sorta hard to believe there was anything hidden beyond it.

『I know one way to find out if he's right. I'll use my magic to blast it to bits!』 Dora-chan suggested enthusiastically.

Fel, however, replied without a second's hesitation. 『Fool! The walls of a dungeon are not so easily damaged.』

『Well then, what's *your* plan?』 huffed Dora-chan with an irritated scowl.

《There must be a mechanism somewhere nearby that opens a passage.》

“Where would they put one of those...? Guess it’d have to be on the walls or the floor, right?” We split up to search the area, stepping firmly on every part of the floor and patting down the walls, but there was no sign of the sort of device we were hoping to find. “No luck on my end,” I sighed.

《Sui didn’t find anything either!》 chimed in the slime. It had been patting down the walls as best as it could with its tentacles.

“Maybe there really is a device, but it’s not super nearby?” I speculated. Fel sensed something strange past the dead end, but that didn’t necessarily guarantee that the device that would open said dead end was anywhere in the immediate vicinity.

《Wait just a sec—there’s one last place we haven’t checked yet!》 said Dora-chan.

“Huh? There is? Where?” We’d scanned every inch of the walls and the floor, so I had no clue what he was talking about. *He was paying attention, right?*

《Up top, duh!》 said Dora-chan, pressing his stubby little arms to the ceiling.

“Oooh, the ceiling! I guess we haven’t checked up there yet, now that you mention it. Would anyone really put a switch on the ceiling, though?”

《I would not be so sure they would not. This is, after all, a dungeon—it was not made by the hands of men. Moreover, our quarry has gone undiscovered for untold years, has it not? I cannot deny that a switch on the ceiling would explain much, as Dora said.》

Fel had a point. I could only imagine how many adventurers had passed through the twentieth floor over the course of the years, but I hadn’t heard any rumors about a hidden room and there was nothing of the sort marked on the map. Demiurge had probably told me about it specifically *because* nobody else had found their way in yet. It almost went without saying that if there was a switch, it’d be somewhere hard to find or somewhere nobody would ever consider checking.

《Anyway, point is I’m gonna give it a look!》 said Dora-chan, fluttering across the ceiling and giving it a thorough pat-down. 《Huh? Hey, something moved! What’ve we got here...?》

Dora-chan flew upward with all his might, pressing one of the stone

ceiling tiles and making it sink in with a *click*. A low, deep rumble echoed through the dungeon, and the wall at the end of the corridor slid aside, revealing a new, unexplored passage.

“All right, bingo! Nice one, Dora-chan! Can’t believe the switch really was hidden up there!”

《Heh heh, talk about a find, right?》

“Yeah, yeah, we’re all proud of you. All right, let’s see what’s in here!”

Our party proceeded down the newly discovered passageway in high spirits.



The passageway we’d discovered stretched about thirty meters straight ahead before opening up into a massive room. When I peeked inside, it looked like it might’ve been even bigger than the floor’s boss room.

A trio of gargoyles stood on the far side of the chamber, but these weren’t anything like the monsters we’d seen elsewhere on the floor. They were big. *Really* big. At least twice the size of the normal ones, in fact.

《Oh ho ho, looks like we’ve got some whoppers here!》

《Those are no ordinary gargoyles. I have never seen an individual of that size before now.》

“Really? Is this a first for you too, Dora-chan?”

《Yeah, never seem ’em get quite *that* big before.》

《They could very well be a breed unique to this dungeon.》

Dora-chan having never seen one before was one thing, but if this was Fel the elder’s first encounter with them, I figured whatever they were, these monsters had to be super rare. *If ever there was a time for caution, it’s now, for sure.*

《They’re kinda big, but they’re still just rock monsters! Sui’ll beat them up the same way as the last ones!》

“Wha—no, Sui, wait!” I tried to intercept the slime before it could go on the offensive, and failed miserably.

《Take this!》 Pew pew pew!

Sui fired off a series of larger than usual Acid Bullets. They hurtled through the air like artillery shells, slamming into the giant gargoyles’ faces and reducing them to gaping craters. The monsters crumpled to the ground.

“Sui...”

《Ooh, instakill. Nice.》

《Indeed. The battle was won in hardly a second.》

《Hee hee hee! Isn’t Sui strong?! And Sui’s still getting stronger too!》

Sui, you’re terrifyingly strong as is. Nobody would blame you if you decided to call it quits here, you know? The slime’s appetite for power was starting to concern me.

The gargoyles quickly vanished, leaving behind a number of reasonably large square-cut gemstones—one red, one blue, and one green—in their places. Appraising the gems, I noted that the red one was a ruby, the blue one was a sapphire and the green one was an emerald. It was pretty impressive that all three of the gargoyles had dropped gems, even if you didn’t take their size into consideration, and I felt pretty good about the profit I’d made as I scooped them up off the ground.

《Look at that, Master!》 said Sui, pointing a tentacle off to the side. I glanced over and saw an age-worn chest sitting by the far wall of the room.

“Hmm... It sure looks old, but, I mean, it *is* a treasure chest, right?”

《Well, yeah,》 replied Dora-chan, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

《According to my appraisal, it is indeed a treasure chest. There are no traps here—I see no reason not to open it.》

Fel seemed confident, but I’d had plenty of experiences with trapped chests in both Dolan’s and Aveling’s dungeons. A little caution never hurt when it came to this sort of thing, so for the first time in what felt like ages, I pulled the mithril spear that I’d had Sui make for me out from my Item Box. I carefully lodged the tip of the spear between the lid and body of the chest, pried it open, and cautiously peeked inside.

“Oh, wow, gold bars!”

《They’re sooo shiny!》

《What, just gold? Lame.》

《A bore indeed. I had hoped for magical items, but this is hardly worthy of my attention.》

You guys just don’t care about anything you can’t eat, do you? And by “anything you can’t eat,” I mean “anything other than meat.” The way I saw it, finding treasure like this on a floor of a dungeon that had already been explored so thoroughly was a big win. A full chest of gold bars and the large

gems the gargoyles had dropped were nothing to scoff at when you added them all up.



<I see you found it! Good, good!> Suddenly, Demiurge's voice boomed into my mind. *<This chamber is what you might call one of the dungeon's bonus stages. Now that it's been found, there's no telling where it will appear next.>*

Ahh, that explains a lot. I hadn't realized that dungeons could have that sort of feature. For a bonus stage, it sure gave quite the payout. Everything we'd found would be easy to liquidate too, which made it an even better find in my book.

"Thank you very much, Demiurge," I said out loud. "Look forward to your next offering—I'll be sure to splurge a little on it!"

<Ho! Ho! Ho! Well then, I shall await it eagerly!>

Please do! I was planning on sending him the full top-ten lists for both his beloved sake and the umeshu he'd taken a liking to recently.

"All right, that wraps that up! Should we head back to the place we teleported into?"

《Yes, indeed. Let us make our way to the thirtieth floor at once.》

《Would be nice if we could cut to the chase and jump straight there from here!》

"I know what you mean, Dora-chan, but it just doesn't work that way. Teleportation stones are handy, but not *that* handy. We should be glad we have one at all."

《Hey, hey, Master? What sort of monsters are we gonna fight next?》

"On the thirtieth floor? Hold on, I'll check." I pulled the map out from my pocket and took a look. "Let's see... Sounds like the thirtieth floor's full of big eyeball monsters called gazers."

《Gazers, you say? Yet another floor of worthless fodder without even the decency to drop actual food.》 Fel whined with a scowl. From the sound of things, he wouldn't be so much as lifting a paw to help deal with them again.

《Ugh, I'll pass on those small fry too,》 agreed Dora-chan. **《Sui can take care of 'em.》**

"‘Fodder’? ‘Small fry’? Aren’t gazers supposed to be pretty tough, though? The map says they can give you all sorts of status ailments and shoot eye-beams and stuff like that."

《They are so far beneath my notice, I care not to describe them any other way. The divine blessings we have been granted nullify status

ailments, regardless.»

Oh. Right.

『Yeah, and those eye-beams? They're magic, and they take ages to charge up. Easiest things in the world to dodge.』 Fel nodded with agreement, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he and Dora-chan were speaking from an extremely skewed perspective.

『It'll be fine, master! Sui'll fight hard and beat them all again, so come on, let's hurry!』

“Okay, okay!” I had to laugh. In spite of having all the work foisted off on it by Fel and Dora-chan, Sui was brimming with as much enthusiasm as ever.

Chapter 3: Pentagram

We arrived back at the twentieth floor's teleportation chamber.

"Okay, onto the magic circle, everyone!" I stood by the pedestal in the center of the circle and held the teleportation stone up to it. A moment of disorienting weightlessness later—sort of like the feeling you get in a fast-moving elevator—and we were back in the teleportation room by the entrance to the dungeon. Real, natural light shone on us through the windows.

《Masteeer, hurry, hurry!》

"I know, I know! Just a second." I tried to keep Sui under control as I held up the stone once again and spoke the words "Floor thirty."

The same weightless sensation washed over me, and suddenly I was standing in a dimly lit room that bore a clear resemblance to the one we'd seen on the twentieth floor.

《Good. Let us be off!》 declared Fel. We proceeded to explore using the same formation as on the twentieth floor: with me and Sui on Fel's back, and Dora-chan flying along by our side. Our trek through the thirtieth floor had finally begun.

It wasn't off to a particularly remarkable start, though. At a glance, the stone walls and winding corridors of the thirtieth floor looked much the same as those of the twentieth. Not too long after our trip began, however, Fel spoke up again.

《They come!》

A second later, a monster rounded a corner in front of us. It looked like a massive eyeball, floating freely in the air with a cluster of writhing tentacles trailing behind the fleshy orb that made up its body: a gazer.

"So that's what they look like? Jeez, talk about ugly!"

The monster was so grotesque that just looking at it made me grimace reflexively. From what I'd read, their usual tactic was to use the power of their magical gaze to paralyze their prey or put them to sleep, then finish them off with a beam of concentrated light. They were crafty monsters, to be sure, but thankfully everyone in my party had the blessing of a god or

goddess on their side, rendering us totally immune to the beast's status ailments.

『Here goooes! Take this!』 Pew!

“Gryyyaaauuuggghhh!”

The gazer let out a horrific shriek as Sui nailed it right in the pupil with an Acid Bullet. It plummeted to the ground and quickly dissolved into a puddle of goop.

“Huuuh... I didn't think that was enough acid to melt the whole thing down,” I observed.

『Gazers are uncommon monsters, so I cannot claim a wealth of experience, but every time I have encountered one, it has died in that same manner.』

『Yeah, same. I've fought two of 'em before, I think, and they melted after I won both times,』 added Dora-chan. He was over a hundred years old and Fel was ancient, so it was no wonder they'd both encountered gazers before, rare or not.

“Man, these things die as gross as they live. That's just great...” I grimaced again, completely repulsed.

A moment later, Sui sent me a message. 『Ah, look! It dropped something!』 it shouted, jumping down off Fel's head, bouncing over to the gooey corpse, picking up the item, and bringing it right back to me. 『Here you go, Master!』

The item was a small emerald-green stone about three centimeters in diameter. “I think this is probably jade, right?” I guessed. “The map says that gazers drop jade, onyx, and magic stones.” Gazers possessed an abundance of magical energy, so even though they were only B-ranked monsters they were known to drop magic stones unusually frequently.

Jade, onyx, and magic stones, huh? Jade's certainly pretty, but is it really worth the effort...? “What do you think, guys?” I asked my familiars. “Should we take a tour around this floor, or move on to the next one right away?”

『I have no interest in fighting weaklings, nor in the rocks they drop. If I cannot eat it, it is not worth my consideration.』

『Hard same.』

『Aww, but Sui wants to pew pew lots and lots of monsters!』

There were dramatically fewer adventurers wandering around the thirtieth floor than there had been on the twentieth, but that wasn't to say there were

no other parties present at all. Considering how outrageously powerful my companions were, I had a feeling that moving on soon might be a better option than potentially clashing with other groups.

“Okay, I’ve decided. We’ll take the shortest path to the next floor! Sound good?”

『Yes, that will be most acceptable.』

『Seconded!』

“All right! Take it away, Fel!”

『Very well!』

Fel sprinted off through the corridors, making a beeline for the next floor. Sui, of course, shot down every single gazer we happened to pass by en route. We were moving too fast for me to scoop up all the drops, so I asked Dora-chan to snag it all for me as he flew past.

There weren’t any other parties waiting outside the boss room upon our arrival. Even better, a quick glance inside revealed a writhing mass of gazers, ready and waiting for their next challenger.

“Looks like there isn’t a line this time, so I guess we can go right in if we want to. What do you think?”

『Must you even ask? Of course we should. Prepare yourself, Sui—do not let so much as a single one escape you.』

『Okay!』

And Sui meant it too. The second we set foot in the boss room, a rapid series of *pews* echoed through the chamber as it unleashed a machine gun-like barrage of Acid Bullets. Its aim, however, was more comparable to that of a trained sniper, and gazers fell by the dozen, shrieking in agony as they melted away into monster-tar. The battle was over before it even started.

『Well fought indeed. I will expect the same from you in the next encounter.』

『Yeah, you’re getting tougher by the day! Still couldn’t hold a candle to me, of course. Keep working at it, though!』

『Yeah! Sui’ll work super hard!』 The slime vibrated with glee at Fel and Dora-chan’s praise.

Kinda wish they would stop encouraging it, though. They’re just going to make it harder to keep Sui in check! It was getting more and more powerful, and watching it walk the path of the warrior made me feel a little wistful.

I remained preoccupied with my complicated feelings about Sui’s

explosive growth as we gathered up all the dropped items, then proceeded down to the thirty-first floor.



Almost immediately after alighting from the staircase, we encountered our first enemy on the thirty-first floor: a stone golem. I didn't have much time to take it in, though, since Fel shredded it with his Rending Claws almost instantly. It dropped a reasonably large yellow gem cut into the shape of an oval, which a quick appraisal identified as a topaz.

"Topaz, huh? Guess this means that stone golems drop gems too. Not a bad size, either—I bet this'll fetch a pretty decent price!"

『I tire of prey that drops nothing but glittering rocks. Has this dungeon nothing more to offer? If our foes must be so weak, they ought to at least have the decency to drop meat,』 Fel grumbled, peering at the gemstone in my hand.

"Come on, don't be like that. I'm sure we'll find a floor with meaty monsters somewhere down below."

『I should hope so...』

Just then, I heard something echoing from down a corridor. I could just barely make out the booming sound of something hard impacting upon stone, and frenzied voices shouting wildly.

"Do you hear that? Think someone's fighting nearby?"

『Yes, I do, and yes, they are. In a room just over that way,』 replied Fel. He led me to the room in question, and we peered inside.

"Just *die* already, ya rocky bastard!" cried an enormous man as he drove a massive mace into a stone golem's torso, the blow landing with a thunderous crash.

"I'll take it down! Get ready to take out its head when it falls!" shouted another huge, muscular man. He drove his greataxe into the stone golem's knee joint, bashing through it like he was chopping down a tree. The golem stumbled, faltered, and finally collapsed to the floor.

"Arright, get 'em!"

"On it!"

"Hraaah!"

Two dwarves immediately leapt into the action, one wielding an

enormous hammer in one hand and the other an even larger warhammer with both hands. In spite of their small stature, the two of them clearly had muscle to spare, and they drove their hammers into the golem's head simultaneously, smashing it to pieces.

A moment later, they cried out in triumph. "Oh, nice! We got ourselves a double, boys! An emerald *and* a magic stone!"

"Hell yeah!"

"God, I love this dungeon! Where else would you get a payout like that?!"

"We're gonna eat like kings when we get back to the surface, lads!"

As the adventurers pumped their fists in celebration, we quietly left the room behind and went on our way. This might be rude, but the only word I could think of to describe them was "sweaty." Seeing them did bring to mind something that Tristan had told me, though: the golems on this floor had their fair share of variations in terms of shape and size, but they always dropped gemstones, without exception.

Stone golems were naturally resistant to magical attacks, but to a party full of powerful, physically-inclined, high-ranking adventurers, they were more or less walking pinatas full of treasure. The thirty-first floor was practically tailor-made for parties like the one we'd just seen, and supposedly a number of them made it their primary base of operations.

Back at the Adventurer's guild, they'd told me all about the floor, and had enthusiastically requested that I send any large gems I happened to find their direction. Unfortunately for both my and their sakes, none of my other party members shared that enthusiasm in the least. *They just don't appreciate the value of money.*

I knew saying that out loud would get me nowhere, though. They'd probably just tell me that we got plenty of gems from the hidden room on the twentieth floor, and I didn't feel a need to hear that from them. The fact that they were treating stone golems like they were fodder monsters was bad enough already.

While we were watching the party of sweaty dudes celebrate, Fel muttered something along the lines of **『They must be easily pleased to be so ecstatic over defeating a single stone golem,』** and Dora-chan added in something like **『Yeah, not like those are that big a deal or anything.』** Sui was talking about beating up as many of them as it could, so I assumed it was looking down on them in much the same way.

In any case, I asked Fel and Dora-chan what we should do, and they both voted in favor of moving on to the next floor as quickly as possible, so we set off on the shortest path to the boss room. Several stone golems that we passed by on the way tried to chase after us, but an almost three-meter-tall walking statue could never hope to keep up with my familiars' speed, and we left them in the dust.

We sped through the thirty-first floor, occasionally chuckling at the extra-brawny adventurers we passed by as they pounded their golem opponents to dust. It wasn't long at all before we reached the boss room, and once again were lucky enough to find no adventurers out front and a full stock of monsters inside. This time, we were up against ten stone golems at once. We plunged right on in, led by an exceedingly eager Sui.

『If you seek to fell a stone golem, Sui, then slashing is the most efficient means of attack. Your Water magic grants you such an ability, does it not? Though these golems are resistant to magic, you should have the power to overcome their feeble defenses. Try it for yourself.』

『Okay! Sui'll give it a try!』

Sui followed Fel's advice and charged into battle with a Water Cutter spell as its weapon of choice. It fired one blade-like jet of water after another, first slicing a perfect vertical line down the center of a stone golem, then cleaving another in two horizontally. The hoard quickly thinned, golems falling one by one.

『How was that, Uncle Fel?』

『Well fought indeed. I commend you.』

『Yeah, you're really getting the hang of this, Sui!』

『What did you think, Master? Did Sui do okay?』

“Huh? Err, y-yeah, that was incredible!”

『Hee hee hee! Master said that Sui's incredible! Yaaay!』

Fel, please, stop teaching Sui to be a more efficient killer! The Fenrir didn't even notice my pointed glare, obnoxiously enough. I started scooping up all the golems' drops, grumbling internally about Fel's aloofness all the while.



The first monster we encountered on the thirty-second floor was another

stone golem. It thundered toward us, footsteps pounding like an army's war drums. Sui shot it in the face and killed it instantly.

The next monster we encountered was a golem as well, but this one was a bit different from all the others we'd seen. It was made from a dull, lustrous material.

『That is an iron golem,』 explained Fel. 『They are made from a relatively tough material, which makes them troublesome foes.』

『Heat puts 'em down before you know it,』 countered Dora-chan. 『I'm not talking just a *little* heat, though. Here, watch this!』

With a startlingly violent roar, Dora-chan opened his mouth and belched a gout of flame in an imitation of the breath attacks larger dragons were capable of. The iron golem's head was engulfed in a raging inferno. When the flames of the pseudo-breath weapon finally subsided, the golem, now left with a pile of melted slag where its head used to be, crashed limply to the floor.

『I expected no less from you.』

『That was sooo cool, Dora-chan!』

『Heh! C'mon, that was nothing.』

“H-Holy crap, Dora-chan...” Fel and Sui were impressed, but I was just plain horrified at the idea of melting an opponent's head clean off. *Isn't that a bit much?*

Meanwhile, the iron golem's corpse vanished into nothingness. “Oh, hey, it dropped something,” I observed. A dull, silvery lump of metal and a small gray stone had been left behind. I felt safe assuming the latter was a magic stone, but I couldn't even begin to guess about the former. It was a proper monster drop, so surely it wouldn't actually be just a plain old lump of iron?

『What is that thing?』 asked Dora-chan, peering over at the same drop I was so confused by with a look of mild distaste on his face. 『Talk about a nasty color!』

“Don't be so fast to judge it—it's a monster drop, so it has to be worth *something*. Just a second...”

I appraised the lump of metal.

【Iron Golem Fragment】

A material that can be used in the creation of magic iron. Magic iron made from a base of iron golem fragments is more valuable than standard magic

iron.

Oooh, magic iron! I remember that stuff! Sigvard, the dwarf from Ark, owned a warhammer made out of it. The conversation we'd had about his hammer back in Aveling's dungeon made it sound like it was really valuable, so it would make sense if magic iron itself—and, by extension, the materials used to make it—could fetch a fair price as well. My appraisal *did* go out of its way to note that golem-based magic iron was especially valuable, after all.

『It would seem to be an iron golem fragment,』 Fel explained to Dora-chan. He must have appraised it at the same time I did. 『It can be made into magic iron, and is worth a fair price.』

『Oh, can it, now? Guess these ones aren't a total waste of effort after all. All right—from now on Sui can take out the stone golems, and I'll deal with the iron ones!』

『Okaaay! Sui'll beat all the rock monsters!』

Both types of golems kept assaulting us all throughout the floor, but Dora-chan and Sui swiftly dispatched them every time. I, of course, was in charge of picking up the items they dropped. *Not like I could ever take on a golem!* Ha ha, ha...

In the end, we reached the boss room without encountering any major obstacles. There weren't very many other parties present at all on that floor, which helped. We'd only run into a single group, whose jaws had dropped open so wide as they witnessed Dora-chan and Sui's hyper-efficient slaughter of the golems we were fighting at the time, I was almost worried they'd pull a muscle.

So, yeah, we made it to the boss room without breaking a sweat and plowed through the team of iron and stone golems inside just as easily. Dora-chan and Sui cleaned them up in a matter of minutes. I collected all the drops, and we descended to the thirty-third floor.

An iron golem charged at us the moment we arrived at the next floor, only to be immediately melted down by Dora-chan's pseudo-dragon fire. We'd delved deep enough that the stone golems had been entirely replaced by their metallic brethren, so Dora-chan got the whole floor to show off, spitting blast after blast of roaring hellfire.

Sui, who couldn't get in on the fighting at all, spent our entire time on this floor squirming restlessly. It wasn't like the slime *couldn't* take down an iron

golem, but it was certainly less well-matched against them than Dora-chan was. His mastery of Fire magic made him the obvious choice to lead the way here.

Fel must have shared that opinion, since a ways into the floor he told Sui **『You will simply have to fight all the harder on the next floor.』** I seconded the sentiment, and thankfully Sui took it to heart and finally started cheering up again.

We kept that formation up through the whole floor, Dora-chan taking the lead and mowing down every iron golem that we came across. In the end, we reached the boss room without ever landing ourselves in anything resembling real danger. When we got there, though, our fearless leader Dora-chan started complaining.

『I'm *starving*,』 he whined, his telepathic words coming through a lot more emphatically than usual. I chuckled. It was hardly surprising he'd be famished, considering how he'd been pulling out all the stops throughout the floor.

『Sui's getting hungry too!』

『And I as well. The hour draws late—we will soon reach the time we would ordinarily go to sleep. We should stop here for the night.』

“Sounds good to me. We can call it here for the day, then take on the boss tomorrow morning. Is there a safe area anywhere nearby, Fel?”

『There is. This way.』

Fel led us to a nearby room where we could bed down for the night.



“Picky pain in the ass, I swear...” I grumbled as I opened up my Online Supermarket’s menu. We had plenty of food in stock, but Fel just *had* to go and demand I make something from scratch.

『I wish to eat something freshly made, and there are no other adventurers here to witness us. Cook,』 he commanded, and that was that.

He wasn’t wrong, to be fair. We really were the only people camping out in the safe area. I took a shot at talking my way out of it by noting that it would take a pretty long time to cook something from scratch, but he told me that would suit him just fine.

The stupidest part was that time didn’t pass inside my Item Box, so the

dishes I had stored in there *were* freshly made in every way that actually mattered. According to Fel, though, “**Watching you prepare the dish and eating it while it is still fresh is an altogether different experience.**”

Sui chimed in as well at that point, saying that «Watching Master cook is really fun!» Not gonna lie, that part cheered me up a bit.

I thought I still had a shot at getting out of it, considering how hungry Dora-chan had been acting, but when I asked him he said that «We’ve been having too much rice lately—I want something that goes with bread this time!» and didn’t even bother answering the question. I’d *just* fed them Bolognese dogs for lunch, so I had no clue where he was coming from with that one.

And that’s how I got roped into cooking, in spite of my best efforts. Cooking something that went well with bread, specifically, which was why I’d ended up scouring my Online Supermarket’s menu for inspiration.

“Hmm? Oh, hey, sandwich bread’s on sale today! Sandwich bread...” Suddenly, it hit me. “That’s it! I know exactly what I can make with sandwich bread!”

I decided to make a simplified, inauthentic version of pirozhkis. I’d ended up with a huge bag of frozen mixed vegetables once, and had learned the recipe from the internet as a way of using them up. I had plenty of ground dungeon pork and beef in stock, which would be perfect for the dish. They were relatively easy to make, you could pack a ton of fillings into them, and they were tasty to boot!

I was sure everyone would be satisfied with my choice, and did my best to remember the recipe as I added all the ingredients I didn’t already have into my shopping cart.

“All right, that should do it!” I said, checking through everything that was delivered. Next, I took the remaining ingredients and my magic stove out of my Item Box.

The first step for the recipe is to mince up an onion. Then you heat some oil in a frying pan, toss in the onion, and sauté it until it’s semi-translucent. When it gets to that stage, you add in the ground dungeon pork and beef, cook it until it’s just a little browned, and add in some frozen mixed vegetables—no need to defrost them beforehand.

Next up, you season the meat dish with some granulated bouillon, soy sauce, salt, and pepper, then stir-fry it all together. Once it’s cooked to your

liking, the filling's finished!

That means you can move on to the outside of the not-pirozhkis. First, you cut the crusts off of your sandwich bread and smoosh it down a little with a rolling pin. Then you pile the filling into the center of the bread, leaving about a centimeter uncovered around the edges.

Next, you combine some water with a little flour and spread the mixture along the uncovered edge. Do the same to another piece of bread, sandwich the two together with the filling in between, and use a fork to poke the bread all along its edges, sealing the two pieces together. After that, all you have to do is brush the whole thing with cooking oil, put it on a baking sheet, and bake it in an oven until it's golden-brown!

I could tell the recipe was turning out perfectly before I even baked them. I'd gone with the same basic seasonings that I'd used the first time I'd made them, but I was starting to think it'd be fun flavoring them with ketchup or curry powder as well. *Too late now, though. I'll have to give that a try next time. Whoops, no time to be planning ahead—I've gotta get these suckers in the oven!*

I slid the baking sheet into my magic stove and turned up the heat. Before long, the appetizing aroma of baking bread began to waft through the safe area.

“H-Hey, is it finished? Surely it must be finished by now?”

《Man, that smells good! I'm hungrier than ever!》

《It smells super great! Sui wants to eat soon!》

Lured by the scent, my familiars all gathered up around me. “Sorry, guys, just a little longer!” I replied. *Not like the food's gonna run away if you don't loom behind me the entire time I'm making it.*

A little longer, just a little longer... Okay, that should do it! I opened up the oven and pulled out a perfectly cooked and absolutely delicious-looking tray of golden-brown sandwich bread pirozhkis. The moment I did, however, I heard shouts and footsteps approaching the safe area at a rapid pace.

“Go, go, go!”

“Hoof it while you still can!”

“Hurry the hell up!”

A party of adventurers sprinted onto the scene at top speed, sliding into the safe area like pro baseball players stealing home. Their sudden appearance caught me completely off guard, and they were clearly just as

surprised to see me as I was to see them. We stood there, frozen, staring blankly at each other as we processed the situation.

Y-Yeah, sorry, guys. Guess it would be pretty shocking to run into someone who's baking bread with a magic stove in the middle of a dungeon. Most people venture in here knowing that in the worst-case scenario they might not escape with their life. What sort of weirdo decides to set up shop and cook a meal in a place like that?

When I really thought about it, I realized that our behavior was completely irrational. Part of me wanted to apologize to the adventurers then and there. A certain someone, however, was predictably unwilling to bow to the gravity of the situation.

“Hurry up! I tire of waiting.”

Fel’s demand snapped me back to my senses, and the fact that Fel had talked at all snapped the adventurers back to theirs. I said a quick “Hello!” to them, since it sort of just felt like the right thing to do, and one of them replied with a flustered “Y-Yeah, hi.”

《C’mooon, get a move on!》 said Dora-chan, who was apparently next in line to harass me. *Seriously, how are you guys this incapable of reading the room?*

Clearly, I’d have to feed my starving chowhounds before anything else. I stacked the piping hot sandwich bread pirozhkis onto three platters. “Okay, here you go!” I said, serving the gluttons their meal. They dug in without wasting so much as a second.

《Holy crap these’re good! The bread’s aroma is to die for, and it’s fulla meat too! I could eat a mountain of these things!》 Dora-chan wasn’t kidding either. He was usually the lightest eater out of the trio (which was a *very* relative statement considering he regularly wolfed down three times my own serving size without batting an eyelash), but he was devouring so many of the pirozhkis I was starting to seriously question whether his tiny little body could physically fit any more.

《Indeed! The filling would be better if you removed the specks of vegetable, but they satisfy none the less.》 Fel never missed a chance to gripe about the veggies in my food, but they certainly didn’t stop him from eating his fill. He was eating one after another in a single bite each. *Maybe at least take time to chew?*

《They’re sooo good!》 cried Sui, whose appetite was exactly as ravenous

as ever. It sucked pirozhki after pirozhki into its amorphous body.

I'd known how hungry they were, but I was still a little stunned by how quickly they were eating. I'd made a bunch of extras that I'd just have to throw into the oven to finish up, and in retrospect, that was a very good decision. I decided to start cooking the second batch preemptively, even.

The smell of baking bread once again filled the safe area, and I could feel the stares of the adventurers—who I *hadn't* forgotten about, for the record—boring into my back. I felt bad for them, honestly, but what was I supposed to do? I'd face severe consequences if I slacked off on my familiars' meal. They'd whine at me, for one thing!

More importantly, though, it was only thanks to them that I could make it through a dungeon like this without dying horribly. Keeping them well-fed was the least I could do in exchange.

Whoops, no time to get lost in my thoughts—the next batch should be just about done! I pulled another tray of piping-hot pirozhkis out of the oven, only to be serenaded by a harmonious chorus of growling stomachs. Glancing over in the direction the noise came from, I made eye contact with the adventurers, who were all staring right at me.

“S-Sorry. It just smells so good!” stammered one of them, scratching his cheek awkwardly. He was a man with a large build and a look that I could only describe as...unique, I guess?

When I say “large build,” for the record, I mean that he was probably at least two meters tall with arms as thick as logs and bulging with muscle. He had long shaggy hair, an equally disheveled beard, and was wearing leather armor. The massive axe in his hand completed the picture. I would've pegged him as a barbarian rather than an adventurer any day of the week.

The other adventurers with him—his party, I assumed—glanced away uncomfortably as well, muttering in agreement with his words.

“N-Nah, it's fine!” I replied. “I probably shouldn't be cooking in a place like this anyway.”

“Yeah, speaking of,” said the barbarian-like man, “I've been in the adventuring business for an age, but this is the first time I've seen a man haul a big-ass magic stove into the middle of a dungeon!” At that point, he burst into a hearty, bellowing fit of laughter.

“Come on, man, don't act like you're surprised! You've heard the rumors too,” said one of his party members, a slightly shorter beastman with dog

ears, a fluffy tail, and a sword at his hip. He looked like he was probably in his mid-twenties or so, and between his angular eyes and his slim but muscular build, he was a notably handsome dude. *Wait, rumors? What rumors? I gotta follow up on this!*

“Umm, that’s a Fenrir, right? And the little dragon and the slime are your familiars, as well? That would make you Mukohda, the S-ranked adventurer, wouldn’t it?” asked another member of their party, a girl who looked like she was in her late teens. She had big eyes and an adorable bob cut, and she was wearing a robe that made me pretty sure she was some sort of mage.

“Yeah, that’s me,” I replied with a smile. I couldn’t help it—talking with cute girls had that effect on me. Her blonde hair and blue eyes gave her the look of a French doll, though on the other hand her flat chest left a little to be desired.

“Y’know what they say about you, pal?” asked another adventurer in their party. This one was a woman in her mid-twenties with short dark-brown hair and strikingly tan skin. She was obviously athletic, tall and muscular, and was carrying a spear. “They say there’s an adventurer out there who travels all over the place with his familiars, cooking them meals so luxurious it’s almost painful to watch an animal scarf ‘em down!”

The massive man, who’d been elbowing me playfully in the ribs, nodded like he’d just remembered it himself. “Oh right, yeah. They *have* been telling stories along those lines, haven’t they?”

People have been spreading rumors about me cooking specifically for my familiars...? I mean, it’s not like they’re wrong, but I’m still not so sure how I feel about that. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui had only become my familiars in the first place because of my food, so I was basically obligated to cook for them. Making our meals luxurious was just part of my job.

“Are my seconds not finished yet? I tire of waiting!”

《Seconds over here too, thanks!》

《For Sui too!》

Oh, right. Good thing they’re already done. I piled more pirozhkis onto their plates.

“Those really do look delicious, gotta say,” said the last adventurer in their party, an old dwarven man with an enormous hammer and a thick beard. Their entire party’s gazes were riveted on my familiars’ meals.

“Hmph! Stare as you will, but I will not spare so much as a shred for

you.”

Come on, Fel, do you really have to be like that every single time this happens? “U-Umm, it’s probably not as good as you think it is, but would you like a bite?” I asked, too overwhelmed by awkward guilt to resist. The adventurers were all too enthusiastic to take me up on my offer.



“*Damn, these’re tasty!*” the massive adventurer, Aleksandrov (or Alek for short, by his request), exclaimed as he dug into his fourth pirozhki.

“For crying out loud, man, show at least a little restraint!” said the athletic woman, Fátima, as she smacked Alek on the chest. “I’m sorry my husband’s such a boorish lout, Mukohda.”

That’s right—her *husband*. Alek and Fátima were married. The moment I learned about their relationship, I had to suppress the urge to explode in Alek’s face. Seriously, why would a woman as beautiful as her go for a guy who looks like he lives in the mountains and sews his own clothes out of freshly-skinned deer hides? The absurdity of it all was mind-blowing.

“Really, though, none of us could’ve ever imagined eating food this good in a dungeon,” said the handsome dog-eared adventurer as he started in on his third pirozhki. His name was Axel.

“Ah, you’re spilling your food!” said the cute girl with the bob cut, picking the crumbs off Axel’s shirt. Her name was Adelmira, and she was very diligent about taking care of the beastman at every turn. I didn’t even have to ask—it was obvious just looking at her that she had a thing for him. *It’s because he’s handsome, isn’t it? I know it is! Don’t try and deny it!*

“If only we had some booze to go along with ’em, right? Bwa ha ha ha!” Needless to say, that was the old dwarven man, Samuel, who wasn’t doing his race’s stereotypes about alcoholism any favors.

I soon learned that the five of them made up an A-ranked adventuring party called Pentagram. They’d spent the past two years in Brixt, gradually working their way through its dungeon.

“We just made A-rank the other day, see,” explained Alek. “Figured it was around time we had a go at these floors, but you can tell how that’s turnin’ out.”

Apparently, they had come to the thirty-second and thirty-third floors out

of an intense desire for iron golem fragments. Samuel's enormous hammer, as it happened, was made of magic iron. Magic iron weapons were harder and tougher than ordinary weapons, and also easy to channel magical power through. Samuel was eager to boast about his, and Alek and Axel were very obviously desperate to replace their own axe and bastard sword with weapons of the same material.

The other members of their party were aware of their ambition, and they had all decided that their rise to A-rank made it a perfect time to try and fulfill it. They'd grown strong enough to take on stone golems without issue, and they had all assumed that meant they'd be able to handle themselves against an iron golem as well. After all, both monsters shared an important trait: they were incredibly slow. They thought that no matter how bad things got, they'd still be able to run away and regroup.

The trip had started off well. They made it to the thirty-second floor, and defeated not only all the stone golems in their way but also three iron golems without trouble. Then they descended to the thirty-third floor, where things started to go south.

"What're we supposed to do when three or four of 'em show up at the same time? This floor's bullshit!" spat Axel.

"Yeah, I hate to say it, but we're not up to taking down three of those things at once, let alone four," Alek bitterly admitted. They'd spent most of their time on the floor running away from one pack after another.

"The only iron golem fragments we've gotten our hands on so far are the ones from the three upstairs. That's not even close to the number we need!" said Axel, sulking at the prospect of not getting to make his magic iron bastard sword after all.

"Meh, no need to give up yet. We've just gotta scrounge up as many as we can from the floor above, right?" said Alek, who also needed fragments for his own axe. It sort of sounded like he was saying it to himself just as much as he was saying it to Axel.

"You're not wrong about that," chimed in Fátima, "*if* we can even make it back up a floor to begin with."

"Our map of this floor is far from complete, after all..." agreed Adelmira.

The members of Pentagram heaved a collective sigh. They'd spent so long playing tag with the iron golems, they'd lost track of where they'd been and where they'd have to go to return to the previous floor. They'd been

wandering this floor for a full two days, judging by their internal clocks, and while they had plenty of provisions on hand, they were just about ready to collapse from physical and mental exhaustion.

“I feel a lot better thanks to your food, though!” said Alek. “We really owe you one. A nice hot meal in your belly makes all the difference!” The rest of Pentagram’s members thanked me as well. I was glad to hear that sharing a bit of food with them had made that much of an impact, but an unfortunate thought was beginning to form in the back of my mind. *I wonder...?*

《Hey, Fel. The boss room’s pretty close by, right?》 I asked telepathically.

《Indeed. They have traveled in entirely the wrong direction.》

Augh, I knew it! I really don’t wanna be the one to break the bad news, but somebody has to tell them. I took a second to work up the nerve, then turned back to face the members of Pentagram.

“So, uhh, guys? I hate to say this, but...the boss room’s right around the corner from here.”

Their eyes opened wide, and then their shoulders slumped in unison. I understood how they felt painfully well, but the most I could do for them was say good luck and hope for the best. *My condolences.*



“Thanks again, pal.”

“No problem, really! I’m sure the info you gave me is going to save us a lot of trouble.”

“If anyone saved anything here, it was you saving our asses! Seriously, thank you! We’ll be in town for a good long while, so if you ever need a favor, all you have to do is ask. Leave a message for us at the guild, and we’ll come running!”

The rest of Pentagram enthusiastically agreed with Alek’s words.

“Later, Pal! See you up topside!” With that, their party left the safe area, ready to take on the dungeon again after a good meal and a night’s rest. I’d done my best to describe the route back to the stairs leading up to the previous floor, with more than a little help from Fel, so I was sure they’d make it out without too much trouble.

They’d given me all sorts of useful tidbits of information as well, so the

encounter had been a net positive for everyone involved. Apparently, only two adventuring parties were working on exploring past this point at the moment, and the party that had been scoping out the thirty-fifth floor had returned to the surface recently on account of a nasty injury.

According to Alek, “Yeah, sounds like one of ‘em lost an arm, and now they’re just trying to figure out what comes next. I feel bad for the guy, but losing a limb means it’s curtains for his career as an adventurer. Dunno if the rest of ‘em are gonna keep going as-is, find another member, or call it quits and dissolve the party.”

The other party was blazing a trail into the dungeon and had advanced all the way to the thirty-seventh floor. They were in the dungeon and exploring at that very moment. Alek told me that they were a party of six, two of them S-ranked and the others all A-rankers. In terms of pure ability, they were supposedly the best active party in the whole country.

They also told me about the monsters we’d encounter further down in the dungeon. Pentagram’s members hadn’t had any first-hand experience with them, of course, but they’d done their homework and could at least share the fruits of their research.

The next floor down, it seemed, was home to a host of ogres. Not just ordinary ones either—subspecies like red and blue ogres were known to appear, and advanced species like ogre kings weren’t out of the question either. The thirty-fifth floor was another ogre stage, but there were apparently way, way more of them to deal with down there.

One very important factor was that the ogres that appeared in the dungeon were dramatically more vicious and keen-scented than the ones you found in the surface world. They could smell a man from an incredible distance, and would pursue any adventurers who came within range of their senses.

“They’re man-eaters, after all,” explained Axel. “No way they’d let a treat as tasty as our kind get away without a fight.” The man who had lost a limb exploring that floor had been the victim of their appetite, in fact. An ogre had bitten the arm right off him.

When I relayed the information to Fel, he smirked. **«Ogres, you say? And ogre kings, even...»** It seemed he’d finally have the worthy prey he’d been hoping for. From the thirty-fourth floor onward, my familiars would be fighting as a trio once more.

That, of course, meant that he was more excited than ever to rush our

expedition along. It felt like the lower floors that Demiurge had warned me about were getting dangerously close far sooner than I'd hoped. *Ugh—I think I feel a migraine coming on...*



The thirty-third floor's boss room was absolutely swarming with iron golems, which Dora-chan exterminated without breaking a sweat. We took a moment to gather up all the iron golem fragments left scattered across the ground, then descended to the next floor.

As expected, Fel decided to join in the fight on the thirty-fourth floor. He insisted on it, as a matter of fact, declaring that **『Should an ogre king appear, I shall be the one to slay it!』**

Unfortunately for him, though, the kings proved elusive. We slew ogre after ogre as we carried out our exploration of the floor, but they were all of the more ordinary varieties, and it wasn't long before Fel started griping about how bored he was. We *did* encounter some of the colored variants, at least, but Dora-chan and Sui slaughtered those with just as much ease as the regular ogres.

From my perspective, though, there was one major problem. "Hey, am I imagining it, or are the ogres all going after me in particular?"

『They are. To them, you look the most delectable out of all of us.』

『Yeah, those things are literal *man-eaters*.』

"And, like, there were ogres in Dolan's dungeon too, but don't these ones look a lot nastier than those did?"

『Why does this surprise you? Did the adventurers we just spoke to not tell us that the ogres here are more vicious than those found elsewhere?』

『Yeah, were you even listening?』

I was, but hearing about how nasty they are is way different from seeing it in person! Not everyone can take these things as casually as you two, y'know?

The ogres were massive, easily over two meters tall, and bulging with muscles. Even worse, the second they noticed our presence they'd set their sights on me, start drooling, and charge forward at top speed. It was scary as hell. Just thinking about those things was making me shiver.

『Master, are you okay? It'll be fine! Sui'll protect you, no matter what happens!』

“Thanks, Sui!” I gave the slime an affectionate squeeze.

Sui followed through on that offer, and ended up carrying us all the way to the end of the thirty-fourth floor almost single-handedly. The ogres only dropped pelts and magic stones, which was a shame (especially considering that ogre pelts are super gross), but we did find a treasure chest, so our net gain for the floor was pretty decent.

That chest was, of course, trapped, but thanks to a preemptive appraisal, I was able to easily avoid the poison that jetticed out the second it was opened. Within were some of the items the dungeon was famous for: jewelry made from precious metals and high-quality gems. There was a pendant and matching earring inlaid with diamonds, a ring set with a fairly large ruby, and a bracelet studded with an incredible number of tiny gems of all shapes and colors.

The boss room was full of red ogres, blue ogres, and even green ogres, which I hadn't actually known were a thing. Sui gunned them all down in the blink of an eye, though, so I didn't have the chance to get a good sense of how tough they really were. Anyway, on to the thirty-fifth floor!

As the good people of Pentagram had warned us, the place was absolutely lousy with ogres. I couldn't even keep track of where they were coming from —it was just one after another, charging in at us from all sides, starting the moment we arrived on the floor.

Of course, no number of ogres could ever overwhelm Fell, Dora-chan, and Sui fighting together, and they were all slaughtered as quickly as they came. The second an ogre entered their line of sight, it was dead. That said, the sheer number of the things still slowed our rate of progress considerably.

“I know you’re upset, but if we want to get to the next level, we’re gonna have to get through all these ogres first!” I said, trying to comfort Fel. He was still indignant about the lack of ogre kings.

Just then, Dora-chan beamed a telepathic message to me. 『Heads up! More incoming!』

『Sui’ll beat them all up!』

『Indeed, it would seem to be quite the sizable force this time.』

“Wh-What do you mean, ‘a sizable force’?! There’s an *army* of the things! Oh man, we’re totally surrounded!” The corridor was packed from

wall to wall with ogres, in front and behind us, roaring with rage and hunger as they advanced.

『Calm yourself. No number of ogres could ever pose an obstacle to us. Dora, Sui, slay the beasts blocking our path forward! I shall dispose of those to the rear.』

『Hell yeah!』

『Okaay!』

Dora-chan and Sui stepped up to face the ogres in our way while Fel spun around to leap upon the ones behind us. I, meanwhile, was left to flap about helplessly in the middle of it all.

Fel brought down his foreleg in a mighty slash, unleashing his Rending Claws and mowing down the ogres' entire front rank. That didn't dissuade the ones behind them, which just kept charging, but Fel slashed again, and again. By that third slash, their entire force had been decimated.

Behind us, Dora-chan was rapid-firing magical chunks of ice, crushing the ogres where they stood. Sui pew-pewed its way through those that remained, bringing them down with fast and precise Acid Bullets. And just like that, it was all over. My familiars had made a clean sweep of the ogres, leaving only piles of pelts and a few magic stones behind.

The thought of picking up all that ogre skin was enough to make me gag, but there weren't any other parties wandering the floor to claim it all for me, and it would be a waste to just leave them lying there. I stowed them away in my Item Box, doing my best to not think about what I was touching. That wasn't the last time we were beset by a massive horde of ogres, but my trio of familiars put them down without issue each and every time.

Finally, we arrived at the boss room. Peeking inside, I saw swarms of ogres—normal ones, colored ones, and one that I couldn't quite identify.

“What *is* that thing?” I wondered out loud. I could tell from the look on its face alone that it was several times more ferocious than an ordinary ogre. It stood in the center of the chamber, looming imposingly over its fellows.

『At long last—an ogre king! It is mine. Do not lay so much as a claw upon it.』

『Sheesh, fine, have it your way. Sui and I will mop up the rest of 'em!』

『Yeah! Wow, there's sooo many! Sui's gonna beat as many as Sui can!』

With our roles decided upon, we advanced toward the boss room. A step before the entrance, though, Fel came to a sudden stop.

『Come to think of it...you have yet to fight since we entered this dungeon, no?』 he asked, turning to me.

“Huh? Err, I guess so.”

『In that case, we shall use this as an opportunity to test your skills.』

“Say what now?”

『Dora, Sui, guide a single ogre to him. Not one of the colored ones, mind you—an ordinary ogre.』

『Yeah, sure. I’ll take care of herding one his way, Sui, so you just deal with the rest of ‘em.』

『Huh? Sui doesn’t really understand, but okay!』

『Good. Let us begin!』

“Wha...? Wait, wait a second! What do you mean, guide an ogre to me?! Don’t I get a say in this?! Hey!” My protests fell on deaf ears. Fel and the others strolled right into the boss room, and I was left with no choice but to follow along after them.

Before me stood an army of ogres, each of their twisted faces more horrific than the last. They growled and roared menacing war-cries as they watched us approach, and much to my dismay, I was going to be forced into single combat with one of the awful things. They were man-eaters, all right—the moment they caught sight of me, the drool started dripping down their monstrous jowls. I was *not* okay with any of this.

Wait, crap, right! Weapon! I need a weapon! It hit me just in time that taking on one of those things bare-handed would be a good way to *lose* my hands, and I withdrew the mithril spear that Sui had made for me from my Item Box. I held it at the ready, my legs quaking so hard my knees were practically chattering.

At the same time, my familiars’ battle had already begun. Not that it really deserved to be called a battle, considering how hopelessly one-sided the fight was turning out to be. For all Fel’s enthusiasm about taking on the ogre king, their match had been decided with a single blast of his Lightning magic. The king took one bolt to the face, tottered back and forth for a couple seconds, then keeled over dead. Most of the other ogres were quickly dispatched by Dora-chan’s Ice magic and Sui’s Acid Bullets.

This is going super well, so I probably don’t have to bother fighting, right? Surely there’s no need for it, right?

If only my optimism had paid off.

『Hey!』 Dora-chan's voice echoed in my mind.『Look sharp! One ogre, heading your way!』

“Grrraauuuuggghhhhh!”

With an earth-shaking roar, a horrible, disgusting, drooling ogre charged directly at me. I screamed reflexively, and would've turned around and ran away on the spot if I weren't too terrified to actually move. The ogre closed in on me at a terrifying pace, howling gleefully in anticipation of what a tasty snack I'd make.

I squealed as I stumbled backward, falling squarely on my ass. Happily enough, that pratfall miraculously left me just barely clear of the ogre's grasping hands as they sailed right above my face. In a fit of blind panic, I used that chance to jab my spear right into its body from below.

“T-Take that!” I shouted. The ogre let out a brief gurgle of shock, then went limp. I nervously glanced up, only to find that my spear had happened to pierce right into its breast, skewering it through where I could only assume its heart was located.

It's now or never! I thought, forcing myself to my feet and driving the spear farther into the monster. It let out a pathetic whine, then fell silent. I waited until I was totally sure it had stopped moving, then pulled my spear out. The ogre fell at my feet, vanishing a few seconds later. I let out a long, belabored sigh of relief and collapsed to my knees.

『Hardly an elegant battle, especially considering you faced but a single ogre. I do believe you fought better in the last two dungeons,』 said Fel, looking down at me with obvious exasperation written all over his face.

Grr—don't give me that, Fel! It's been ages since the Dolan and Aveling dungeons, and I've barely done any fighting at all in the meantime! Cut me some slack! And besides, I'm a total amateur who's never had a lick of combat training in my entire life up till now—these things take time! And the ogres here are terrifying! I'm gonna be seeing those awful, slobbering faces in my nightmares for weeks!

『C'mon, Fel, don't give the guy a hard time! You know he'll never be worth half a crap in battle, so what's the point?』

『Yeah! It doesn't matter if Master's super weak! Sui'll protect him!』

Don't you think you could've come up with a nicer way to put that, Dora-chan? And don't call me weak, Sui! I know it's true, but it still hurts my feelings! I sighed again, more sure than ever that I just wasn't cut out for

combat.

Chapter 4: The Strongest Party Around

The moment we arrived on the thirty-sixth floor, I heard the distant cry of some sort of animal. Distant, but clearly moving in our direction, and fast.

As the noise drew closer and louder, I realized exactly what I was hearing: the piercing barks and yips of a pack of hounds. Sure enough, just a moment later a group of dogs charged into the corridor ahead of us. Or at least, they looked like dogs—they bore a striking resemblance to dobermans, in fact, but each and every one of them was also nearly as big as Fel.

“So those are black dogs,” I muttered to myself as the pack closed in. Pentagram’s adventurers had told me a little about them, and the abhorring scowls they’d all worn throughout that part of the conversation had really made an impression on me.

Fátima had been the first to bring them up. In her words, “The worst part about this dungeon’s the fact that you start running into black dogs if you go down deep enough.”

Alek and Axel had agreed wholeheartedly, explaining that even though stone and iron golems were tough to take down, they were also slow. In the worst case, you could always make a break for it and live to tell the tale.

The same was true of ogres, to an extent—their sheer numbers on the thirty-fifth floor were a problem, of course, but the thirty-fourth floor was manageable enough, and even though they were reasonably quick, they were also giants. Creatures of that size could never match a human’s agility, and running away was still on the table.

“Black dogs, though? Not happening,” Alek and Axel stated in perfect unison.

“They can use magic, see,” explained Adelmira. Specifically, they used Wind magic to boost their already considerable running speed. Even worse, the more advanced variants could inflict a status ailment with their howl, causing their prey to fall into a panic while they closed in.

“Taking on black dogs after slogging through floor after floor of golems and ogres is a recipe for failure,” added Samuel. “Nobody’s got the stamina

for that, 'specially considering there aren't many monsters out there that're as tenacious as black dogs. Those things never give up, no matter how bad you hurt 'em. It's kill or be killed when you run into one of them bastards, no question about it."

Samuel was a dwarf—one of the more long-lived races—and had fought with black dogs more than once already. The look on his face as he described them said it all, really.

Kill or be killed, no question about it... "Hey, are you sure we've got this?" I asked Fel. Pentagram's warnings had set my nerves thoroughly on edge.

『Hmph! I would sooner drop dead of my own volition than be slain by mongrels such as these,』 he scoffed in response.

Fel faced down the pack and unleashed a mighty, menacing howl that stopped the black dogs in their tracks...but only for a moment. They quickly recovered and resumed their charge, barking and yelping louder than ever.

『Pathetic beasts. They lack the ability to even judge their strength against mine... Brainless mutts, every one of them.』 Fel brought down his Rending Claws in a single disdainful stroke, shredding the entire pack to tiny chunks of flesh and fur in the blink of an eye. What little remained of their corpses quickly vanished, leaving behind a scattering of small magic stones.

"So it's true—this really is all they drop," I observed. Pentagram had warned me about that too. The rewards that black dogs dropped were hardly proportional to the dangers they posed. The most you could expect from them was a magic stone or a pelt, and there were an endless number of other monsters with pelts that outclassed black dog skin by every possible margin. Supposedly, if you were to take a survey about adventurers' least favorite monsters, black dogs would almost certainly rank in the top five.

『Dora, Sui, exterminate these mutts the moment you lay eyes upon them. Understood?』

『Yeah, can do. Not like there's many other options—these jerkwads never give up.』

『Okaaay!』

"Sounds like you know these things pretty well, Dora-chan. Have you fought them before?"

『Yeah, a buncha times. You can ignore them for days and they'll still keep following you. Real pain in the ass, I swear. They're just as bad as those

stupid monkeys.»

“*Stupid monkeys*”? Oh, he probably means the black baboons. Yeah, those things really were persistent... I’m feeling worn out just thinking about them.

『These mutts will pose no challenge, no matter their numbers. We shall descend to the next floor immediately,』 Fel proclaimed. None of the rest of us objected, and we made our way to the floor’s exit on the double.

Or at least, that was our hope.

『Arrrgh, these stupid animals’re giving new meaning to the word ‘obnoxious’!』

Heavy, meaty thuds resounded as Dora-chan blasted away at a pack of black dogs with his Ice magic. Their dog-like traits extended past their appearances, and their sense of smell seemed acute enough to track us down from across the dungeon. They just wouldn’t stop coming.

『Screw it, I’m done! You take the next batch, Sui!』

Sui jumped to the task, pew-pewing its way through another pack of them. With each Acid Bullet, a black dog dropped dead to the ground. Dora-chan and Sui had handled most of the fighting as the floor dragged on, with occasional assistance from Fel, but it still felt like an eternity before we reached the boss room.

“Jeez, we didn’t even stop in any rooms on the way and it still took ages to get here,” I grumbled when we finally arrived.

『There was truly no end to the fodder. The tedium came closer to killing me than they did. Let us depart from this floor at once!』

『I’m with you on that one! I got sick of this place a long time ago.』

『Sui got to fight lots and lots of bad guys! This was fun!』 While Fel and Dora-chan were practically bored to tears, Sui was still raring to go.

『Was it, now? In that case, I shall leave the boss chamber to you. There seem to be some upper-tier mutts with magic of their own inside, but we bear the blessings of the gods, so their spells will find no purchase upon us.』

“Yeah, I remember that. They’re supposed to inflict a panic status ailment with their howl, right?”

『Indeed. Nor is that their only ability—they can blind their foes with a similar howl as well.』

Wait, they can? That’s news to me!

『Though only a small contingent of them can use real magic, and the percentage that can inflict such a blinding effect is smaller still. I suspect that one to be capable of it,』 Fel noted as he gestured at an especially large black dog with his nose.

“S-Seriously?! Isn’t that, like, super dangerous?!” Getting blinded for even a second while one of those monsters was bearing down on you would be instantly fatal, no question about it.

『No. We are blessed by the gods. Their protection renders us immune to such effects, so worry not.』

“A-Are you *totally* sure about that? I don’t wanna take any risks with Sui’s... Wait, Sui?!”

『Here I gooo!』

While Fel and I were talking, Sui took it upon itself to charge into the boss room on its own. I chased after it in a panic, and Fel and Dora-chan followed along at a casual stroll, shaking their heads at me in exasperation.

『Why’re you always so worried about this crap, anyway?』 asked Dora-chan. 『Just watch—no way Sui’s gonna get done in by the likes of those mutts.』

I took his advice and decided to watch the fight closely, only to realize that while I had been distracted, Sui had already kicked the battle off with an enthusiastic offensive. The biggest of the black dogs didn’t even get to *try* to howl before Sui peppered the pack with Acid Bullets, and any of the smaller ones that attempted to rush into melee range were crushed without hesitation.

Only a couple minutes after we entered, Sui had already whittled the pack down to a single black dog: the bigger, more advanced form of the species. It bared its fangs, frothing at the mouth with fury for its fallen comrades. The beast let out a low, intimidating growl, then barked ferociously as it charged toward Sui.

『Just one left! Sui’s gonna take it down! Hiyah!』 Sui let an Acid Bullet fly in the black dog’s direction. It didn’t even flinch, meeting the attack head-on at full speed.

Pew!

“Ooof, yikes...”

The dog’s head exploded. I mean, maybe that’s not quite the right way to put it, but the point is that one second Sui’s Acid Bullet impacted its head, and the next second, said body part wasn’t there anymore.

『Hurray! Sui beat all of them!』 The slime bounced about the room with glee.

“Sui...” I muttered, dazed and horrified.

『See? As we told you, there was no cause for concern.』

『Right?』

Ugh, I swear, every time we set foot in one of these dungeons my cute little Sui gets more and more terrifyingly lethal...

While I was busy agonizing over the slime’s gradual transformation into a killing machine, Sui gathered up the magic stones that the monsters had dropped and bounced over to give them to me. It obviously wanted me to praise it, and I had no choice but to swallow my doubts, pat it on the head, and give it as enthusiastic a “Nice work, Sui!” as I could muster. It jiggled ecstatically in response.



We finally reached the thirty-seventh floor. Supposedly, the party that was leading the charge through the dungeon would likely be somewhere on this level. They were apparently the strongest, most outstanding party in the nation, and Pentagram’s adventurers backed that assessment up...though they also noted that these guys were as proud as they were capable, and came across as more than a little disagreeable as a result.

They’re super arrogant, huh? Sounds like they’ll be a real pain if we happen to run into them. Thankfully, the floor was especially huge and a chance encounter was pretty unlikely. Speaking of which...

“Man, this one really *is* enormous,” I mused. The members of Pentagram had warned me about that in advance as well—the corridors were easily four, maybe even five times wider on this floor than on any of the prior ones, and the ceilings were taller to match. They’d described the thirty-seventh floor as being just plain big, and unlike any of the other floors that preceded it.

Unfortunately, they hadn’t had much of anything else in the way of information about the place. There were virtually no established facts about the monsters—even what little info on the subject that could be scrounged up from ancient texts was exceedingly vague.

The only ones who knew anything about the floor were the members of the frontrunner party, and when somebody from Pentagram had asked them

about it, they replied with something along the lines of “That’s vital information for the sake of our expedition, and we won’t be sharing it lightly,” then refused to elaborate.

“Stay on guard, everyone! There’s no telling what’s gonna come at us here,” I cautioned my familiars.

『Yes, there is.』

“Wait, what? Fel, you can tell what sorta monsters live here?”

『Indeed. Their scent makes it plain as day. We are all but certain to encounter—』

“Mooooooooo!”

A mighty roar shook the chamber, cutting Fel off, as one of the very beasts he was trying to warn me about lumbered into view.

“A minotaur?! Since when were they so big?!” I shrieked. It was truly massive, and carried an enormous axe to match. I appraised it reflexively as it thundered in our direction.

【Gigant Minotaur】

An unusually large variant of the minotaur species, and an S-ranked monster. When prepared properly, their meat is considered a delicacy.

『Bwa ha ha ha ha! At long last, a meat-bearing monster! Dora, Sui, take note of that creature—they are delicious beyond measure!』

I could practically see his eyes glimmer with anticipation. *Yup, classic Fel. Of course he’d know that gigant minotaurs are good eating.*

『What?! Beyond measure?! Oh, I gotta get me some of that! Hand over the meat, you overgrown livestock!』 shouted Dora-chan, immediately as hyped up as I’d ever seen him.

『Yay, tasty meat! Tasty, tasty meat!』 sang Sui, bouncing rapidly with excitement.

『Dora, Sui—I trust you know the plan?』

『’Course I do!』

『Yeah!』

Huh? What plan? Since when have we had a plan for this, Fel?

『Today, we hunt this floor dry!』

『Hell yeah!』

『Meeeat!』

My familiars charged the giant minotaur in unison, single-mindedly obsessed with the prospect of their meaty reward. The monster took all their attacks at once and fell dead on the spot.

“Yiiikes...” I muttered under my breath. I knew how they could get when meat was on the metaphorical table, but that concentrated attack was a little intense even by their standards. I was used to their nonsense, and even *I* was sorta freaked out by that one.





『There! More meat has arrived!』

『Arright, meat time!』

『Meeeat!』

“Would you guys *please* stop calling them meat like that?” They definitely weren’t viewing the gigant minotaurs as living beings anymore—they saw them as walking bags of beef.

The monsters couldn’t last a second against the united front of my three familiars. Each creature slain left behind an assortment of massive meat slabs, fangs, and magic stones, and whenever meat dropped, Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui went into celebration mode.

『All riiight, more meat! Yes!』

『Meat, meat, meaty meaty meat!』

『That would seem to be a fine cut indeed! It is most vexing that some of the beasts do not drop any meat at all, though. All the more reason to hunt as many as possible and collect as much as we can! Are you with me, Dora? Sui?』

『Do you even have to ask?』

『Sui is, yeah!』

The plan was set in stone the moment the first gigant minotaur happened to drop meat. Fel wasn’t exaggerating—he really seemed intent on hunting for as long as conceivably possible.

As he pointed out, though, not every gigant minotaur they killed paid out in meat. By my best estimate, meat had about a twenty or thirty percent drop rate. The slabs of flesh that did drop were huge, to be fair, and not only had my familiars been waiting for ages for the first meaty monster of the dungeon, the meat we found also just happened to be some really gourmet stuff.

In short: I couldn’t stop them even if I tried. They were plainly still far from satisfied after we’d collected about ten chunks of the stuff, and in the end we kept hunting and hunting until hunger won the day and they finally agreed to stop for a meal break. According to Fel’s internal clock, it also happened to be coming up on evening, so we decided to make for a safe area and bed down for the night while we were at it.

I'd thrown together both our breakfast and lunch that day pretty quickly, and Fel insisted that **『We will be having the meat we won on this floor for dinner, of course,』** his snout pressed right up against me in a blatant show of intimidation. So, yeah, it was gigant minotaur meat for dinner.

When you're preparing a fine cut of meat, it's always best to go simple and let the ingredients do the talking for you. As such, I went with the basic choice and decided to make some steaks!

Continuing the spirit of keeping it simple, I kept the seasonings for the first round on the minimalistic side: salt, pepper, and nothing else. When working with big, thick cuts of red meat, I'm convinced that's the best way to highlight the steak's flavor in all its glory.

The steaks were nothing less than superb. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui wolfed down plate after plate, and in the end we ran through almost half the meat we'd obtained that day in a single meal, much to my horror.

On the other hand, getting to taste how delicious gigant minotaur meat was for themselves lit a flame under my familiars. By the end of the meal, they were more ready than ever to hunt down every last monster on the floor.



A good night's sleep later, we set out into the dungeon to hunt gigant minotaurs once again.

『Yesterday's winnings were slim, but we shall make up for it today!』

『Yeah! Let's beat lots of monsters up and get lots and lots of tasty meat!』

『No real surprise we didn't find much yesterday. It was already pretty late when we got here,』 noted Dora-chan.『We're spending the whole day hunting on this floor, right? Stocking up'll be a piece of cake! And even if we don't get enough today, we can just spend tomorrow here too! When the meat's *that* damn good, putting in an extra day or two is so worth it!』

『A valid point indeed. Should today's catch prove insufficient, we can always continue the hunt in the morning.』

As I'd feared, my familiars had definitely gotten a taste for gigant minotaur meat. They were even more raring to go than yesterday. It sorta felt like the decision to stay another day if we didn't get enough meat had been set in stone without my input, as well. I didn't mind the idea, exactly, but I was already starting to feel a little sorry for the hapless monsters.

Even if I did object to the plan, of course, I had a snowball's chance in hell of successfully dragging my trio of meat lovers away from their quarry. I resigned myself to a day of hunting, and we spent the morning taking down one gigant minotaur after another.

About halfway through our hunt, though, as we entered a massive new chamber and set about slaughtering all the monsters inside, I heard a series of sharp metallic clangs, explosions, and shouts coming from somewhere ahead of us.

Cling! Clang! Kaboom!

“Now! Finish it!”

Peering toward the other end of the room, I could just make out a party of six adventurers battling a single gigant minotaur. A tall adventurer with a thick build was taking the front, stabbing and slashing at the beast with a bastard sword, while a smaller, nimbler adventurer with a shortsword was dashing in and out of the fray, carving away at its legs.

A massive beastman helped on that front, swinging for the creature's knees with a greataxe, and a stern-faced woman stood a short distance away, pelting its face with orbs of magical fire. She was accompanied by an elven woman with a bow, who shot arrow after arrow into its arms. More than anything, though, my gaze was drawn to the sixth member of their party: a tamer. By his side was a red-furred tiger which he ordered into battle.

The adventurers could only be the ones I'd heard about the day before: the dungeon's frontrunners and the strongest party in the nation. Even at a glance, the fact that they'd earned their reputation was plain as day. Their coordinated assault on the gigant minotaur was a sight to behold.

『**What are you gawking at? Keep a tight hold on me unless you want to fall off!**』 scolded Fel. He was right—I'd been so preoccupied by the frontrunners' fight, I'd let my grip slacken.

“Whoops, sorry!” I apologized, readjusting my hold on his fur. He'd been nice enough to stop the moment he realized I was letting go, and I had that consideration to thank for my not getting thrown off his back.

『**Let's get a move on! Our meat's out there, waiting for us!**』

“*Our*” meat? *That's even worse than before, Dora-chan...* I sighed. “All right, fine. We don't wanna get in the way of their fight, so let's circle around them. And no helping, Sui!”

『**Okaaay!**』

I'd been warned about their prideful, pain-in-the-ass attitudes, and I wasn't about to go poking that hornet's nest for no reason. We gave them a nice wide berth, quickly slipping past them and moving along on our way.

We didn't escape their notice, of course—the strongest party around would never be that inattentive—and for just a moment their eyes widened with shock as they caught sight of us. Then, right after we passed them by, I heard a dull clang. A second later, something thudded into the ground directly in front of us.

“Huh?” I squinted down at the ground. “A stray arrow?!”

Yikes, that was close! I guess this sorta thing just happens when you try to run past an ongoing battle, but jeez!

“That sure could've gone worse! I'm so glad I had you put up a barrier before we went into the dungeon, Fel.” I'd insisted he do so, really, for not just me but Sui and Dora-chan as well. No way was I going to take any chances in a dungeon renowned for its difficulty. That arrow just now had definitely pinged off his barrier, so it seemed to have been a good call in the end. “Thanks for... Wait, what's wrong?”

For some reason, Fel was glaring at the adventurers behind us, his brow furrowed irritably. “What, are you upset about the arrow? C'mon, they're fighting! These things happen in battle. Quit giving them the evil eye like that.”

《Hah! I swear, you're so carefree I have to wonder if you think at all sometimes...》

“What's *that* supposed to mean, Dora-chan?”

《You need not bother, Dora. Explaining matters such as these to him is a waste of time.》

“Matters such as *what*?! How am I supposed to understand if you won't tell me what you're talking about?!” Whatever they were trying to get at, I wasn't following it at all.

《Let's go, let's gooo! We gotta hurry and find more meat!》 interjected Sui.

《Yes, quite. We do not have the time to waste idling in fruitless conversation here.》

《True 'nuff. It's meat time!》

Spurred on by an impatient slime, we set off in search of gigant minotaurs to slay once again.



Interlude: The Adventurers' Perspective

The battle ended shortly after Mukohda's party made their exit, the frontrunners' party emerging victorious in their struggle against the giant minotaur. They *were* known as the strongest party around for a reason, their foul attitudes notwithstanding.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted!" said the stern-faced mage, taking a seat on the ground to catch her breath and glaring at the man with the bastard sword. "And what the hell was *their* deal, boss?! I thought *we* were supposed to be the ones blazing a trail through this dungeon?!"

"Yeah, I'd like some answers on that front as well," said the beastman with the greataxe.

"Not a damn clue!" snapped the man with the bastard sword, scowling bitterly. "I've got a pretty good guess as to *who* they are, though."

"Well? Who?"

"Come to think of it..." said the tamer, stroking his red-furred tiger's head as he spoke. "Don't you remember the rumors that were going around about the S-ranked tamer who commands a Fenrir?"

The slender adventurer with the short sword frowned and clicked his tongue in irritation. "You telling me that some newbie tamer thinks he can just stroll on in and make off with *our* glory? Like hell he can! 'Sides, everyone up top was flappin' their jaws about Fenrir this, Fenrir that, but nobody's ever actually *seen* the damn thing fight, have they? Hell, nobody'd seen a Fenrir *period* outside of the storybooks for gods know how many centuries before that bastard turned up outta nowhere! His rep's bigger than he is, I'm telling you!"

"You don't have to tell *me* that," said the man with the bastard sword. "I'm as pissed as you are. I won't let *anybody* barge in and take this away from us—not after what we've been through to get here! That's why I gave the order to play dirty. Nobody could blame us for an arrow flying foul mid-combat."

"I aimed for his shoulder, for what it's worth. I wanted him hurt bad, but I

didn't mean to *kill* the man. Figured a deep enough wound would send him back to the surface, even if he did have some high-grade potions on hand," said the elf, pausing for a moment to chew bitterly on her lower lip.

"Something got in my way, though. He's got something protecting him—a magic item, most likely."

"Oooh? Your oh-so-precious, oh-so-magical elf-made bow couldn't so much as scratch him? To think!" the mage quipped sarcastically.

"Too bad *you* couldn't be bothered to pitch in with the fire magic you're so proud of, then, eh?" The elf replied with a baleful glare.

"Hah! I'd have been happy to, assuming you were fine with him being reduced to a pile of cinders!"

"Enough!" snapped the man with the bastard sword. "What's done is done—no point fighting over it. All that matters is that we make sure *we're* the first party to clear this dungeon. We'll make that happen, whatever it takes. Whatever. It. Takes. You follow me?"

The other members of the party nodded grimly in agreement.



The day wore on, and we devoted ourselves fully to hunting gigant minotaurs—or rather, Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui did while I sorta just tagged along. We'd find one, kill it instantly, grab its drops, then rinse and repeat, moving on to the next target.

We'd already gathered a considerable stock of gigant minotaur meat, but my familiars were still far from satisfied with the amount we'd obtained. In Fel's words, **『There is no telling when next the chance will come to procure such scrumptious meat.』** As such, he had every intention of hunting down as many of the things as he could possibly justify. Dora-chan and Sui were both on the same page, and diligently assisted him with the hunt.

『Ahh, man, no meat *again...?*』 whined Dora-chan as his latest victim vanished into the aether, leaving behind a bolt of hide, a mace, and a magic stone.

『Sui didn't get any meat either,』 said the slime, sadly bouncing back over with the drops from the gigant minotaur it had slain: a horn, some hide, and a magic stone.

『Grr... I too have obtained nothing of worth,』 said Fel, openly unsatisfied with his own hide and magic stone.

“C’mon, cheer up! We got a bunch of meat from the last group we took out, didn’t we?” I called out as I helped pick up the items. Clearly, my familiars wouldn’t be satisfied with anything less than a hundred percent meat drop rate.

『Peh! We go out of our way to kill ’em, so they should at least give us meat for the trouble!』

『Sui thinks so too! It’d be so great if they all gave us tasty meat when we won!』

『I am in firm agreement, but alas, such is the way of dungeons. We cannot change how they function, but we *can* press on in search of more prey.』 Fel set off to do just that, plodding away without giving me the chance to hop on his back.

“H-Hey, wait! Fel!” I shouted, running to catch up. “Lemme get on first!”

『Your pace is insufferable! If you intend to ride me, then make it quick!』

I wasn’t about to get left behind on a floor like this, so I jumped aboard in a hurry. “Sheesh, Fel! I know how much getting a stock of meat means to you, but you can’t just leave me behind! I’d *definitely* die if I ended up on my own in this place!”

Yeah, no way I’m taking on one of those giants alone. Nope, nuh-uh, not happening! I can imagine a thousand ways they’d kill me, and zero ways I could come out on top.

Fel sighed. 『I truly cannot comprehend the way you think...』

『Yeah, seriously. What kinda weirdo brags about not knowing how to survive on his own?』

I don’t get why you’re so exasperated about this! I’m just telling the truth, here!

『It’ll be okay, master! Sui’ll protect you!』

Suiii, you’re the best! I could always count on my favorite little slime to heal my emotional wounds.



The massacre continued. My peerless trio of familiars had turned the floor

into a giant minotaur slaughterhouse, and all I could do was follow in the wake of their gory assembly line and pick up the drops.

We'd just finished off a room's worth of work, and were moving into a long corridor in search of our next prey. We quickly spotted some not far ahead of us—a pack of giant minotaurs that didn't seem to have noticed us yet.

『I count four. Let us hope these ones have the decency to drop meat.』

『You said it!』

『Come oon, meat!』

Yup, team Fel's taking this as casually as ever, I thought.

『Hmm... Have you noticed them, Dora?』

『You mean the folks behind us? Yup, sure have. They couldn't make it more obvious they're out for blood if they tried.』

『They seek to make our chef into a corpse while we are distracted by the hunt, I assume. Cunning of them—but also far too foolish.』

『Yeah, not like the hunt's gonna take more than a couple seconds. We can deal with those jerks after we're done. They won't be able to get through your barrier regardless, right?』

『Quite. I have reinforced the barrier, as well—not even a dragon's breath could penetrate it now.』

『Hah! Who's the worrywart now, eh?』

『This dungeon is famed for its difficulty, after all. A little caution could hardly hurt. You have no more desire to be deprived of his cooking than I, yes?』

『Ya got that right!』

『In any case, we have little need to deal with the devious fools behind us ourselves. Prove to a human that your strength is overwhelming, and they will flee without hesitation. It never fails—unlike monsters, after all, humans have some small degree of intelligence. Their one redeeming trait is their ability to ascertain when an enemy is beyond their ability to defeat.』

『Breaking their wills by showing how much better than them we are, eh? Gotta say, Fel, that's pretty nasty even for you! Bwa ha ha! 'Course, I think it sounds great, so I guess I'm in the same boat.』

『Heh heh heh... They will soon reap the rewards of their insolence!』

I, meanwhile, had no idea any of this was going on, but I *did* notice that

both Fel and Dora-chan were grinning maliciously.

“Uh, hey, guys? Think you could fill me in on whatever you’re smirking about? I’ve been suspicious about this for a while now—you’ve got a direct telepathy thing going with each other, don’t you? Stop leaving me out of the loop! I get really worried when I know you’re plotting something and can’t listen in!”

《Worry not. It was nothing more than idle chatter.》

《Yeah, what he said.》

Meanwhile, our conversation had dragged on long enough for one of the gigant minotaurs to finally notice us.

“*Mooooooooo!*” it roared, alerting its three companions to our presence as well. All four of their gazes locked on to us as they stamped in our direction.

“Gah, crap, here they come!” I shouted, barely restraining myself from turning on the spot and fleeing from their thundering charge. My familiars, of course, weren’t even the tiniest bit flustered and simply stood there, waiting for their moment.

《So it would seem. Dora, Sui, we will dispatch this round of meat in a single blow each. Prove to our observers that our might is unparalleled!》

《Can do!》

《Sui doesn’t really get it, but that means Sui should pew-pew them really fast, right? Sui can do that!》

“*Mooooooooo!*”

The gigant minotaurs bellowed mightily as they barreled into our formation.

Pew!

Sui shot an Acid Bullet so big it was more of an Acid Artillery Shell, boring an enormous hole straight through one of the monsters’ chests.

Shwick!

A pillar of ice erupted from the floor, perfectly shish-kebabbing another. That would be Dora-chan’s doing.

Fwoooosh!

Fel took on the two remaining gigant minotaurs, summoning up what seemed at first to be nothing more than a mighty gale. A second later, though, the monsters crumbled, splattering across the floor. They’d been reduced to

mincemeat by razor-sharp blades of air.

The entire encounter was over in literally a matter of seconds. “You guys are *seriously* broken, you know that?” I observed, once again keenly aware that I was traveling with a trio of perfectly efficient killers.

Interlude: The Adventurers’ Perspective

The party of six sprinted through the dungeon, their faces white as sheets. Gigant minotaurs tried to bar their path several times, but they slipped past and kept running without pausing for a second. Anything to get even just one step farther away from that S-ranked tamer—or rather, from his familiars.

The members of the strongest party in the country ran, and ran, and only stopped when they finally reached a safe area that felt far enough away to *really* be safe.

“Wh-Wh-What the *hell* was that?!” screeched their mage.

“Those monsters took down a gigant minotaur in one blow...” muttered the elf, whose face had moved past pale and was rapidly approaching a sickly shade of blue.

“It’s hopeless! We could never take that...that *thing* on! What *dumbass* said that the Fenrir wasn’t as tough as it was cracked up to be?!” shouted the mage, rounding on the slender man with the shortsword.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t tough!” he shouted back. “I just said that the rumors were overblown, that’s all!”

The mage’s panic was perfectly justified—as a magic user, she had understood the Fenrir’s overwhelming strength more clearly than any of her comrades. “It didn’t even *move*,” she whispered, starting to faintly tremble.

“It didn’t move? So what?” asked the beastman with the greataxe, arching an eyebrow.

“So, it cast a spell like *that* without even batting an eyelash!” wailed the mage, once again descending into terrified hysterics. “No gestures, no incantation, no nothing! And the little dragon did it too! I’ve never seen an ice spell that powerful before!”

“Not just the Fenrir and the dragon,” added the tamer, who looked downright mystified. “That...was no ordinary slime.” His familiar, the red-furred tiger, was wandering restlessly about the safe area. It must have

intuited the terrifying might of the monsters they'd witnessed as well.

"That's right," said the elf, trembling as she remembered what the slime had done to its victim. "Slimes are supposed to be the weakest of the weak, so what *was* that thing...?"

"They never saw us, I was sure of it," said their party's leader, who'd been silently frowning up until that moment. "But then, after the fight was over, I *swear* that Fenrir turned around to look at us..."

He was right. They'd all seen it. They'd run into the S-ranked tamer a second time by pure chance, and every one of them had been convinced that they'd remained perfectly undetected. They'd decided to take the opportunity to thin the competition, and were working up the nerve to do the deed when everything went wrong.

But the moment their leader pointed out that the Fenrir had looked at them, the pieces finally fell into place. It had known they were there all along, and the display of sheer, overawing power it had put on was meant for *their* sake.

"I... I *refuse* to fight a monster like that! Throw your lives away if you want, but I'm *out*!" shouted the mage.

"You think *I* want to take that thing on any more than you do?!" countered the elf.

The rest of the party thought back on the display they'd witnessed, their expressions wracked with fear and horror. Just imagining themselves standing in the place of those gigant minotaurs was enough to make them shudder with terror.

Their leader closed his eyes and spent a moment in careful deliberation. Finally, he made his call. "Change of plans. We're steering clear of those four, and making for the next floor down as quickly as possible. We'll be the first party to clear this dungeon...no matter what."

The rest of the party was still pallid with fear, but they nodded in agreement with their leader's words. Even in the face of a barrier so overwhelmingly lethal that victory was never on the table for so much as a second, they never even considered giving up on conquering the dungeon.

To emerge from the hardest dungeon in the land, victorious... The thought of the profit and prestige they would earn for such a feat had the entire party enthralled.



《Hey, Fel, how 'bout we move on to the next floor sometime soon?》

《Hmm. Our stock of meat *is* essentially sufficient by now, so perhaps your suggestion has merit, Dora. I believe, however, that there is even greater merit in aiming to have a *more* than sufficient stock of meat.》

《True 'nuff, but if we let ourselves think like that, we'll be here forever!》

《A valid point. I suppose we will have ample time to bolster our reserves on the way to the next floor, as well. Very well, then—we shall make for the path downward!》

Fel and Dora-chan had reached a consensus, from the sound of things. I'd more or less ceded control of our pace over to my familiars at that point. They *were* the ones who were doing most of the fighting, after all. I was basically just along for the ride.

“Sounds like we’re headed for the boss room, then?”

《Indeed, and we shall hunt as much as we can along the way. I trust you do not object, Dora? Sui?》

《To getting one last shot at some meat? I’m always up for that! Hope they drop a ton of the stuff!》

《It’s almost over? Then Sui hopes they drop lots of meat too! Sui’s gonna fight super hard!》

Our time on the floor was finally entering its home stretch. We made for the boss room, taking great care to wipe out each and every gigant minotaur we sighted along the way. Our already substantial supply of meat grew larger still.

Finally, I caught sight of a massive door in the direction Fel was leading us in.

“Is that the boss room?”

《Indeed.》

“All right! Let’s head right on in,” I said as I walked up to it. It really was huge—big enough to suit the floor’s oversized nature—so I gave it a nice, hard push with both hands. Strangely enough, though, the door didn’t move.

“Huh? Is this thing just *that* heavy?” I pushed harder, this time putting my whole body weight into it, but the door still wouldn’t budge so much as an inch. “What’s going on here?”

《Hey, if the door’s not opening, doesn’t that mean there’s somebody else

inside already?»

I thought about it for a moment, and realized that Dora-chan was right. “Oh, yeah! There *was* another party on this floor, huh? We must’ve just happened to get here right after they did. Tough luck for us, I guess.”

《Wait—that means we have no way of knowing when it might open, does it not?!》

“Yup, sure does. No way to tell when their fight’s gonna end.”

《That’s not even the half of it! We can’t be sure the door’ll open as soon as they’re done, right?》

“Right, yeah. Good point.”

The cooldown period before a new group of boss room monsters spawned had varied from floor to floor up until this point, but a fair number of them had definitely been on the longer end of the spectrum. We didn’t have any information about this floor at all, so there was no way to say for sure, but at the very least I felt pretty confident guessing that the cooldown wouldn’t be instant.

《Very well, then. Let us use this opportunity to rest, and challenge the boss room tomorrow.》

“Huh? Is it really that late already? Sure, then, sounds like a plan.” We *had* spent the entire day hunting without breaks, meals aside, so I wasn’t about to object to Fel’s idea. I was pretty tired out, frankly, and calling it a day early suited me just fine. “Is there a safe area around here?”

《There is, and quite nearby. Come.》



The instant we made it to the safe area, my squad of invincible chowhounds started kicking up a screaming fuss about how hungry they were. I ended up jumping right into cooking without a moment’s rest.

“What to make tonight...?” I mumbled to myself. The stock of prepared meals I’d stashed in my Item Box was finally starting to run low, so I had to save those for when I really needed them. Most of it had been stuff that I’d made for the journey to Brixt, so there hadn’t been a whole lot of it left in the first place, really.

I wanted to save the premade stuff for breakfasts or lunches, when I wouldn’t have the time to make anything from scratch, which meant that I

was stuck cooking something fresh for dinner. I didn't have much else to do in my free time before bed, so I wasn't exactly losing anything by devoting it to cooking.

"Sounded like everyone wants more gigant minotaur meat tonight. Hmm..." I spent a moment pondering my options. "Ah, now that I think about it, it's been ages since the last time we had sukiyaki! I bet gigant minotaur meat would be great for that! Plus, I'm starting to crave the stuff myself... All right, that settles it!"

A recipe in mind, I opened my Online Supermarket and stocked up on ingredients. I picked out some green onions, Chinese cabbage, pre-grilled tofu, and shirataki, a sort of chewy, translucent noodle made from konjac. Last but certainly not least, I bought a bottle of sukiyaki sauce.

To make sukiyaki, start by chopping up all the veggies, then slice some fat from the meat you're using and render it out in a pan. Gigant minotaur meat's really lean, so I ended up using a bit of dungeon beef for this step. Once the fat's all rendered, toss in the green onions and let them cook for a while.

The rest of the meat goes in next. Cook it just long enough for it to brown, then add the sukiyaki sauce and turn the stove down to low. Then you just add the Chinese cabbage, grilled tofu, and shirataki noodles, simmer them for a while, and it's done!

"*Man, that smells amazing! This stuff's seriously irresistible!*" The aroma of soy sauce carried an indescribably deep sweetness to it. It was the sort of smell that could lure you in for a helping whether or not you were actually hungry.

『That smells sooo good!』 said Sui, who was jiggling excitedly on the ground beside me. I had a hard time imagining that the slime was the only one who'd been lured in by the smell, but when I glanced over my shoulder I found Fel and Dora-chan huddled together a ways away.

Bet they're having another private telepathy session, I speculated internally. Given the malicious smirks on their faces, I knew that whatever they were planning, it definitely wasn't anything good. *What are they talking about?*

『Hey, he's looking at us!』

『Think nothing of it. In all likelihood, he has once again assumed that we are up to no good.』

『Up to no good? As if! Though I guess we *are* talking about a buncha

good-for-nothings! Heh heh!»

«We have yet to lift a finger against them—any misfortune that they have stumbled across is their own responsibility. Whether they are vanquished or emerge victorious, their fate is none of our concern.»

«You got that right. Gotta say, though, if what we saw was the best they can do, I give 'em pretty bad odds at making it much lower than this.»

«A fact they should be as aware of as we are, and yet they chose to enter the boss room in spite of it.»

«Okay, but level with me, Fel—you totally could've opened that door if you'd really wanted to, right?»

«I cannot deny it, but keep that between the two of us. I care not to hear a certain *someone*'s griping on the matter. Indeed, I am experienced enough to more or less perceive the flow of magic, and I could tell that that door was weak to lightning. In all likelihood, my magic could have opened it with little difficulty.»

«And you didn't tell him about it, even though it could've saved us time. I bet I can guess what you were *really* after.»

«They attempted to slay one of ours. I feel no obligation to save their lives.»

«Can't argue with that. If you wanna survive in a dungeon like this, you gotta stick to floors that you know you can handle. Bet they're gettin' a *real* good appreciation for *that* right about now, ha ha ha!»

«It must be troublesome indeed to have to worry about such things! Heh heh heh!»

I glared suspiciously at Fel and Dora-chan. The faces they were making had somehow gotten even more transparently malicious than they were to begin with.

«Master, the pot's getting all bubbly!»

«Whoops! Yeah, I'd say that's just about ready.»

«Yaaay! Dinner time!»

I was still really curious about the secret conversation playing out behind me, but food took priority. I cracked eggs into each of my familiars' dishes, mixed them up a little, then piled the sukiyaki into the raw egg, going heavy on the gigant minotaur meat and light on everything else.

“Here you go,” I said as I passed them their meals.

«Hmm? I know this smell—we have eaten this before!»

“Yeah, it’s sukiyaki. I think I used wyvern meat for it last time? I had a feeling it’d be a great fit for the gigant minotaur meat too.”

《Oh, dang, this stuff’s great! The egg really takes the whole thing to the next level!》

《It’s sweet, and salty, and meaty, and eggy, and sooo tasty! Sui loves this!》

《Yes, this is superb!》

Right? I mean, of course it is—it’s sukiyaki, for crying out loud! I’d better snag a helping before it’s all gone. I quickly prepared a dish for myself, with a hefty portion of rice on the side. I grabbed a piece of meat, got it nice and covered in the egg, used it to scoop up a bite of rice, and popped the whole thing into my mouth.

“Hot damn, that’s good! Not to be crude or anything, but, I mean, damn!” The sauce had thoroughly permeated the gigant minotaur meat, but it didn’t overpower its already excellent flavor in the slightest. The mild creaminess of the egg rounded out the whole flavor ensemble, and the rice tied it all together. It was literally perfect.

《Seconds, now! And serve only meat and egg this time! Actually, upon second thought, serve only meat!》

“Oh, come on, Fel!” *I get that the meat’s tasty, but meat-only sukiyaki is taking indulgence a step too far!*

《Oooh, I like the sound of that! Meat only for me too, thanks.》

《Sui just wants the meat too!》

“Nope, nope, nope! Out of the question! Are you trying to leave the pot full of veggies?! I’ll go light on them, but you’ve gotta eat *some*, at least!”

I served them seconds, vegetables included, and in spite of their petulant protests they dug into them with just as much enthusiasm as ever.

“Seriously, how do you guys not appreciate how good these are?” I grumbled, then munched on a chunk of green onion dipped in egg. “I think they’re tasty, anyway!”

Interlude: The Adventurers' Perspective

While Mukohda's party enjoyed their sukiyaki, the *other* party on the thirty-seventh floor was having a much less pleasant evening.

"What the hell?! How are there this many of them?! I did *not* sign up for this, dammit!" screamed the utterly terror-stricken mage. "This is hopeless—they're everywhere! We've gotta get out of here!"

The elven archer pushed desperately at the door they'd entered through, barely taking the time to make sure she wasn't attacked from behind. "It won't open! Oh, gods, *it won't open!*"

"Let me help!" the mage called out, freely offering her companion her aid for the first time since they'd joined the party. They pushed with all their might, but the door remained firmly in place.

"You're wasting your time!" shouted the party's leader, not taking his eyes off the gigant minotaurs before him for so much as a second. "It's locked, and it won't open again until the fight's finished!"

A dozen gigant minotaurs were packed into the room. Each member of their party could take on a single one of the monsters alone, in theory, though not without significant risk. With an army like that blocking their path, though, getting through the room without any casualties was an outright impossibility.

The leader's brow broke out in a cold sweat. "If running's off the table, we'll just have to fight! It's do or die, team—get ready!"

Never before had the words *do or die* sounded so disturbingly literal. Each and every member of the party felt the weight of the encounter painfully well.

"Mooooooooooooohhh!"

A giant minotaur's war-cry shook the room.

"It's on! It's *on*, dammit, just watch me!" shouted the beastman, trying to psych himself up as he gripped his beloved greataxe tighter than ever before.

"I am *not* dying here! We're gonna clear this rotten dungeon! We'll make a killing and be famous across the whole damn continent!" shouted the adventurer with the short sword, more for his own benefit than anyone else's.

“He’s right—we’re surviving, no matter what. You can get us through this, right?” said the tamer to his familiar. The red-furred tiger replied with a commendably brave growl of agreement.

“I don’t wanna die... I’m not gonna die... I *refuse* to die in this shithole of a dungeon!” shouted the mage, biting her lip so hard she almost drew blood.

“Stay calm... I’ll make it out of here, no matter what,” whispered the elf to herself before taking a deep breath. She scanned her surroundings, looking for something—*anything*—that could help her through the harrowing situation she’d found herself in.

“We’re *winning* this!” roared the leader. The other members of the party echoed his cry, and the battle began.

The clashing of metal upon horn, the roar of explosions, the bellowing war-cries of the giant minotaurs, and the terrified wails of the adventurers resounded for what felt like an eternity.

At long last, when the dust settled, four minotaurs stood alone in the chamber.

Chapter 5: The Carnivores Rejoice

A nice, relaxing night's rest later, the four of us once again arrived at the massive door to the boss room.

『Let us begin,』 said Fel, pushing the door open with a single paw.

“Ugh, *twelve* of them?” I gaped—there were indeed a full dozen giant minotaurs crammed into the room. “You sure you guys can take that many at once?”

『Hah! What a stupid question. As if we'd ever fall to the likes of them!』

『Dora is quite right. Enemies of their caliber could never hope to overwhelm us, no matter how superior their numbers might be. Worry not for us, but rather for our chances of obtaining one last haul of meat from this floor.』

『At least *somebody* else in this party has his priorities straight!』

『Sui hopes they drop lots of meat too!』

Apparently, worrying about my familiars' safety was a waste of effort. A dozen giant minotaurs might have looked insurmountable to me, but to them it was probably a stroll in the park, at worst.

“*Moooooooooooo!*” roared one of the monsters as it noticed us. They charged in unison, brandishing their ridiculously oversized weapons in a display that took my mind back to all those giant monster movies they showed on TV in my old world. The sight was intense enough to make me want to turn tail and flee, but my familiars seemed totally unfazed.

『Let us end this swiftly. Dora—the four on the right are yours. Sui—take the four on the left. I shall deal with the ones in the middle.』

『Gotcha!』

『Okaaay!』

With a thunderous crash, Fel's magical lightning struck the heads of the four giant minotaurs in the center of the group. They slowly crumpled to the floor, their brains fried in an instant. The four on the right, meanwhile, had their insides blown across the room by magical orbs of flame traveling at an incredible speed, while the four on the left gurgled as Sui's Acid Bullets

melted through their torsos.

“Jeez, you sure weren’t kidding about the ‘swiftly’ part! That barely took a second.”

『Hmph! That goes without saying. More importantly, look—they dropped meat! Hurry and collect it.』

『Oh, they did! Yaaay, we got more meat!』

『Yeah, and three lumps of it too! Looks like we had luck on our side right at the end of the floor!』

Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui all beamed at the huge chunks of meat. That wasn’t all that the gigant minotaurs had dropped, though, and I made sure to pick up all the items my familiars didn’t care about as well.

Let’s see here—looks like an axe, a magic stone, a hide, a horn, another magic stone, and... “Huh? What’s this doing here?”

For some reason, a bastard sword was lying on the ground among the minotaur drops. None of the gigant minotaurs had been wielding a sword, though, and it was way too small to be any of theirs regardless. As I picked it up and gave it a good, long look, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d seen it before somewhere...and then it hit me.

“Hey, wasn’t one of the people in that party from yesterday carrying this sword? Y’know, the ones who took on this room right before us?”

『He was indeed,』 replied Fel indifferently.

“So, what’s it doing here?”

Dora-chan shook his head in exasperation as he fluttered over to me.
『You’re as slow on the uptake as ever, eh? It’s here ’cause he bit it, duh.』

“Wait, he...seriously?”

『Look over there—see the greataxe and the short sword? Bet those look familiar too, right?』 The tiny dragon pointed over to a corner of the room, where an instantly recognizable pair of weapons were indeed lying on the ground.

『The entire party was slain, in all likelihood. The man with the sword you hold was the strongest among them, and if he perished I can hardly imagine any of the others having made it out alive either.』

『Yeah, true that,』 Dora-chan agreed.

Fel went on to explain that when people die in dungeons, their bodies, clothing, and leather armor or accessories—in short, anything made of organic materials—usually get quickly absorbed by the dungeon itself.

Inorganic equipment like weapons get absorbed as well, but it takes a significantly longer amount of time for the dungeons to process them.

“So, wait—you’re telling me that entire party died? B-But hold on, they were supposed to be the toughest, most capable party in the whole country!”

『I know little of their reputation and care even less, but regardless, this is a dungeon. It is only to be expected that some would meet an end such as this.』

I mean, I get that, but having it shoved in your face is still hard to take...

『They just weren’t tough enough to take this floor on yet, that’s all. And besides, anyone who decides to explore a dungeon knows this might happen. You don’t get this far down without being prepared to pay the piper when your luck runs out.』

You’re right, Dora-chan, but still! Even I knew that setting foot in a dungeon meant you might never see the outside world again. Still, though... I hadn’t exactly been on good terms with them—hell, I hadn’t really been on any terms at all with them—but they were living, breathing people who I’d just met less than a day ago, and suddenly, they were dead. It was a tough fact to swallow, no matter how little I actually knew them.

“‘Being prepared’... Sounds a lot heavier in this context than it usually would, huh?” I mused. “I know I probably shouldn’t admit this, but even though I’m in a dungeon right now, I’m definitely not *prepared* to die at all.”

『Nor do you need to be,』 replied Fel. 『Do not delude yourself into thinking that we are on the same level as they were.』

『That’s right! You’ve got me, Fel, and Sui backing you up. There isn’t a one in a million chance of you dying with us around!』

『Sui’ll protect you, Master! It’ll be fine!』

“You guys...” I had to admit, I was a little touched.

『It would be a catastrophe, after all, if I were unable to eat your cooking.』

『You said it!』

『Master’s cooking is too tasty to lose!』

“Y-You guys... My *cooking*...?” *Look, I know! I know, okay?! You’re just after the food I make, I get the picture!*

『Hah, gotcha! For real, though, this whole trip with you all has been a blast, food included. You’re with me on that, right, Fel? Sui?』

『I suppose so, yes. I will admit, this lifestyle has charms that traveling

alone cannot equal.》

《Sui loves being with everyone! It's so much fun!》

“So you’re only *mostly* after my cooking, huh? Eh, I guess I can live with that. It *has* been pretty fun for me too, traveling around with you guys.”

《Right? We’ve got a good thing here, so let’s keep it going! We scratch your back, you fill our stomachs, and everyone wins!》 Dora-chan said, giving me a pat on the shoulder. *That little dragon can be a real smooth talker sometimes.*

“Anyway, setting all that aside for now, what should I do with these?” I asked, waving at the discarded weapons.

《Their owners are no longer around to claim them, so I see no reason not to take them for ourselves.》

《Seconded. If we leave ‘em here they’ll just end up being dungeon chow, so might as well.》

“Good point. Guess I’ll bring them back to the Adventurer’s guild—they’ll probably know what to do with them.”

I collected the weapons and all the remaining drops, then left the boss room, descending the staircase to the thirty-eighth floor. And, barely a second after we reached it...

“Mooooooooo!”

Oh boy. I know that roar.

《Ha hah! It would seem fortune favors us today!》

《Heh, looks like it! Lady Luck must be paying us back for something! Can’t believe we get a whole ‘nother floor of these guys!》

《Yaaay, more meat!》

The very first monster we encountered on the thirty-eighth floor was, of course, another gigant minotaur. Not just one, actually—a whole herd of them, packing the massive corridor from wall to wall. My party’s resident meat lovers were over the moon.

《The hunt is on!》

《Woohoo!》

《Meeeat!》

“Hey, guys, wait a—ah. There they go...”

Needless to say, Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui resumed their gigant minotaur hunt with unabated enthusiasm. The new floor was significantly more densely populated than the last one had been, which only added to their

delight. By the time they'd finished off the veritable army of gigant minotaurs in the floor's boss room, my stock of massive meat chunks had broken into the triple digits.

"We're not gonna be running out of this stuff any time soon, that's for sure," I quietly mumbled. My familiars just smirked at me.



The thirty-ninth floor greeted us with the thick, verdant foliage of a dense forest.

"Looks like a woodland floor this time," I blithely observed.

『It does indeed. Just the same as one of the other dungeons we ventured through before.』

『You mean the Dolan dungeon, right? The one in the city that freak of an elf lives in.』

You can't just call people freaks like that, Dora-chan, it's rude! Even when it is true. I couldn't deny that a certain someone's behavior toward the dragon had been incredibly inappropriate.

『Master, look! Some weird things are flying toward us!』 said Sui, tugging on one of my pant legs.

"Weird things? Where?"

Sui pointed with a slime tentacle, and I looked over to see some sort of insectoid creature flying our way. Now that my attention was on it, I realized I could already hear the buzzing of its wings.

"What is that, a mosquito? It's, uhh, pretty big, huh?" It was *way* out of the scale I liked my insects to stay in, and it was flying directly at us.

『Peh, man, not *those* things. Hey, Fel!』

『Yes, I know. And far more of them lurk beyond our sight, as well. With *him* along, they will flock to us no matter what we do to prevent it.』

『Maaan, I knew it! This blows.』

Fel and Dora-chan obviously knew something about the giant mosquito that I didn't. "What's the deal, guys? Do you know what that is?"

『Yeah, it's a bloodsucker. Those things can't get enough of the stuff.』

『Indeed. Though each individual is weak, their numbers can prove troublesome. They swarm in droves the moment suitable prey enters their territory.』

『And the worst part's that their absolute favorite food is human blood.』』
Dora-chan shot me a glance at that point, and Fel nodded in agreement.

“Err, human blood? You mean, like, mine?”

『Ayup. See? There's one already.』』

“Wha—eek!”

The mosquito monster had to be at least a meter long from end to end, and was already all but on top of me by the time I noticed it, its pointed, straw-like mouth stabbing in my direction—though thankfully in vain.

『Your concern is hardly merited. I have told you time and time again that my barrier will protect you, have I not? Calm yourself—there is not even the remotest chance that those insects will so much as scratch you.』』

Fel was right. The huge mosquito had smacked into an invisible wall just in front of me, and could only scratch furiously and fruitlessly at the obstruction.

“I mean, I *know*, but it's still freaky! Just look at how friggin' *big* it is!” The creature was close enough for me to give it a real inspection, and thanks to Fel's barrier I didn't have to worry about getting caught off-guard in the process. It was so massive, I couldn't even begin to guess how many times larger it was than the normal mosquitoes I used to see back in Japan.

I decided to give it an appraisal while I had the opportunity.

【Vampire Mosquito】

A D-ranked monster. Bloodsuckers that especially enjoy preying on humans. Though not particularly dangerous individually, having one's blood sucked by multiple vampire mosquitoes simultaneously can prove fatal. As such, swarms should be approached with caution.

So they're called vampire mosquitoes? Yeah, that checks out. Their size seemed to be the only thing that distinguished them from the perfectly ordinary mosquitoes I was used to. That said, just the thought of getting my blood sucked by something that huge was enough to make me wince.

I-It'll be fine! Fel's barrier will protect me, right? Right...? I kept trying to tell myself that, but the sound of the horrid thing scraping and scratching against the barrier again and again was making it really hard to believe my own hype. It was absolutely dead set on drinking my blood, come hell or high water.

“So, uhh, do you think it’s gonna give up any time soon?” I asked, gesturing at the monster.

《Hah, ’course it won’t, dumbass! We told you how much those things love human blood, right? No way anyone would give up when their favorite food’s right there in front of ’em.》

“Ugh... I mean, fair enough, but did you really have to call me a dumbass? Rude!”

《Rude, but correct. Moreover, I believe we also explained that they travel en masse. It will not be long before the rest of the swarm joins it—look.》

I glanced around the vicinity and was absolutely horrified to find that Fel was right. Vampire mosquitoes were appearing one after another from every direction, all homing in on me with laser-like precision.

“Oh holy *crap*, how many of those things are there?” They just kept coming, and the obnoxious buzzing drone they emitted as they flew was getting louder by the second. They bashed up against the barrier again and again, until the sound of them bonking and scratching against it was almost as loud as the buzzing.

Sooo... What are we supposed to do now? 《Hey, uhh, guys? Are we just gonna ignore them?》 I asked telepathically. There were so many of the things swarming around me, I couldn’t even see my familiars anymore.

《Dealing with fodder like them is not worth the effort. My barrier will protect you, so I see no need to bore myself with such a chore.》

《Yeah, not like the little creeps care about the rest of us. They want *your* blood—no skin off our backs if they keep at it, honestly.》

I took a closer look through the swarm, and found that Dora-chan was right. They really *were* only going after me—my familiars were standing right nearby, but the vampire mosquitoes were totally ignoring them. *Just how addicted to human blood are these things?!*

《If you find their presence tiresome, slay them yourself. Perhaps you will gain a level or two in the process.》

《Yeah, that’s an idea! You’ve barely fought anything since we got here, so might as well take a shot at it now, right? What’s the point of hitting a dungeon if you’re *not* gonna kill anything?》

Again, Fel and Dora-chan had a point. I couldn’t deny that I’d barely done any fighting so far. I didn’t *want* to do any fighting, to be clear, but on the

other hand, there was the whole matter of my potential new Tenant. Leveling up a few times certainly wouldn't hurt, and Fel's barrier meant that even if I did do a bit of fighting, I could be comfortably assured of my own safety.

『All right, all right, fine. I know I'm not really in danger here, so I'll give it a shot. The numbers part's still a problem, though...』 There were so many needle-like proboscises jabbing at me, I found myself flinching no matter how safe I knew I was.

『Are you okay, Master? Should Sui beat them all up for you?』

『Thanks, Sui, but nah. They're supposed to be really weak, so I wanna try beating them myself this time. Just jump in if it looks like I'm in trouble, okay?』

『Okaaay!』



“Hiyah!”

Shquick! I ran a vampire mosquito through with Sui's specially-made mithril spear, and wiped my brow.

“Man, I stab and stab, but they just keep coming...” I grumbled. I was hard at work taking down as many of the monsters as I could. Fel and Dora-chan, meanwhile, had decided that it was nap time and were off to the side, fast asleep.

“I mean, what is this, the swarm to end all swarms?! Just how far off can these stupid things smell my blood from?!” No matter how many of them I killed, it never seemed like their overall numbers actually decreased. It was pretty obvious why: for every vampire mosquito I shish-kebeted, another flew in to take its place. “Isn’t there any way I could take out all of them at once, somehow?”

Magic jumped to mind as a quick and easy solution for this sort of situation, but the problem was that I only had two types available to me: Fire and Earth magic. Using fire in a forest was obviously out of the question, and Earth magic wasn’t usable in dungeons in the first place.

In other words, I’m shit outta luck. Nothing to do but swat these overgrown mosquitoes, one after another... Wait. Overgrown mosquitoes? Mosquitoes... Oh, duh!

I quickly opened up my Online Supermarket’s menu and purchased a

certain item.

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of this sooner—mosquito spray! The roach spray I bought back in Aveling worked perfectly on those horrible skittering monstrosities, so it stands to reason that mosquito spray should work on these things too, right? Let’s give this a try!”

I pointed the can at the swarming cloud of vampire mosquitoes and gave them a test spray. Within seconds the giant bugs faltered, reeled midair, and collapsed to the ground.

“Oh, man, it totally works!” I shouted excitedly. I went ahead and purchased a second can of pesticide, dual wielding them and unleashing death by aerosol upon the army of parasites.

“Take that!”

Pssshhhhhh!

“And have some of *this* too!”

Psssssshhhhhhhhh!

After a considerable amount of time spraying toxic gas into the horde, their numbers finally started to thin out and I paused to take a breath.

“Man, that really tires you out,” I mused, glancing down at the small pile of empty pesticide cans at my feet.

《Yes, I can see you have been busy. You have slain quite a few of them,》 observed Fel with a big, long yawn as he sat up and took in the substantially larger pile of drop items scattered around us.

“Yeah, somehow. Kinda scary that there are still some around, even after I killed this many of them.”

《Numbers are their only strength, after all. But enough talk of insects—I grow hungry.》

“I had a feeling you’d say that sometime soon. I’m pretty worn out as well, so a food break sounds good to me.” A fair amount of time had passed between lunch and our arrival on the new floor, so I figured we were probably getting close to dinner time anyway.

《Mwha? Somebody say food?》 mumbled Dora-chan with a yawn almost as big as Fel’s had been. The word “food” had been enough to rouse the dragon from his slumber.

《Food? Is it food time?》 asked Sui, who had woken up in turn after Dora’s question.

“Yup, time to eat! But after we pick up all these drops, okay?”

『Drops? Oooh, dang, you really gave 'em what-for, huh? That's not a bad haul, by your standards!』 exclaimed Dora-chan. He sounded genuinely impressed by the pile of items around us.

“Yeah, I guess! Looks like I’ve got what it takes when push comes to shove.”

『Master, you’re amazing!』

“Hee hee hee! Thanks, Sui!”

『Don’t you wanna beat all of them, though? Look, there’s still some more flying around!』

“Meh, it’s fine. I’ll take care of ‘em eventually.”

Sui wasn’t wrong—there were still a few vampire mosquitoes buzzing around the area. At some point along the way, I’d concluded that wiping absolutely all of them out was a lost cause, and decided to call it a day once I’d thinned their numbers enough to make existing on this floor less of a nightmare.

Thanks to my efforts, only five mosquitoes remained, and they must’ve realized that my pesticide attack was bad news. The survivors were keeping their distance and didn’t seem nearly as dedicated to stabbing me with their awful buggy beaks anymore. The fact that they weren’t running away outright was probably a sign that they hadn’t totally given up on human blood, though. They just buzzed about me, waiting for their chance to strike.

The noise was obnoxious, don’t get me wrong, but I knew that even if I put in the effort to beat them, there’d be more around to replace them before long. I had a plan in mind to deal with them all in one fell swoop overnight, but that was something to think about once I’d dealt with the issue immediately at hand.

“Hey, Sui, could you help me pick up all these drops?”

『Sure!』

“Don’t sweat it if you miss a couple—there’s gotta be a billion of them, so it’s not that important.”

『Okaaay!』

There really were more drops than I could count, and since vampire mosquitoes were D-ranked monsters I had a feeling that the loot they left behind wouldn’t be especially valuable. Still, though, Sui and I set about scooping up all the drops we could get our hands on until Fel interrupted us.

『Hey! Were we not going to eat dinner?』

“I know, I know, I’ll make it in just a minute! Though actually, I wanted to ask you a favor first. Y’know those box-houses I make all the time with Earth magic? Can you set up a barrier that’s about that big?”

『A barrier, you say? Very well... There. It is done.』

“Well, somebody’s in a hurry! All right, in that case...”

I picked out another item from my Online Supermarket, immediately opened up the cardboard box it came in, and popped off its lid.

『What is that? It smells atrocious,』 said Fel, scrunching his nose distastefully. Dora-chan and Sui didn’t seem nearly as put off by it, though. They were actually pretty clearly curious about the unfamiliar odor.

“This is a special sort of incense that’s made to repel mosquitoes,” I explained. “I used these all the time back in my old world. You just light up one of its ends, let it burn, and it’ll drive away all the mosquitoes in the area. I figure that since my world’s pesticides have worked well on bug monsters so far, it would make sense for these to drive away vampire mosquitoes too.”

『You just light it on fire, and it drives ‘em off? Dang, that’s pretty much perfect for monsters that come in swarms like those things!』

“Right? The one catch is that it smells even stronger when you light it up,” I cautioned, giving Fel a look. If he was this upset about how it smelled *before* I lit it...

『Worry not. I shall adjust my barrier to block smells, so hurry and put it outside!』

“Okay, okay.” I hadn’t even known that he *could* fine-tune his barriers to block odors, but that was Fel for you. You don’t live for a thousand and whatever years without picking up a trick or two.

I lit up four mosquito-repellent incense coils and set them up around the barrier, putting one just outside each of its corners.

『Hmm. They seem to be working.』

『Damn, no kidding! That’s really something.』

『Oh, wooow! We’re not doing anything, and they’re all falling down!』

“Heh heh—I had a feeling those would do the trick! I don’t think we’ll have any bugs disturbing us tonight.”

The five vampire mosquitoes had been joined by a fresh batch of reinforcements while we were busy talking, but as soon as I put out the incense, they all flopped listlessly to the ground one after another. With that problem solidly dealt with for the moment, it was time to start thinking about

what to make for dinner.



“Man, those are actually working *better* than I thought they would,” I mused. The incense was so astonishingly efficient that I couldn’t take my eyes off the spectacle, and my plans to get right to making dinner had been put on hold. The bugs didn’t stop coming, but the second they got too close to us they dropped dead to the ground. “We *just* picked up all those drops, but now there’s even more of them lying around...”

《Should I go pick them up, Master?》

“Thanks, Sui, but nah, it’s fine. Considering how many we already got, it’s not worth the hassle.”

Incidentally, vampire mosquitoes dropped their wings, their needle-like proboscises, and little bottles full of a liquid that a quick appraisal identified as paralysis poison. As expected, D-ranked monsters like them didn’t drop anything that was worth much, and I was content with the haul we’d already scooped up before we bedded down. The drops would get reabsorbed by the dungeon eventually, so I didn’t feel particularly bad about leaving them lying there.

With that decision made, it was finally time to ignore the swarm and get cooking! “All right—what should I make tonight? Gotta be meat, of course—I’m guessing you three are okay with having gigant minotaur again?” Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui had all gotten completely hooked on it, and had been requesting it for every meal.

《Yes, indeed. That would be preferable.》

《What can I say? Stuff’s tasty as hell.》

《Sui wants that super yummy meat too!》

“Hmm—I’m kinda in the mood to make oyakodon for the first time in ages, but you’re supposed to use chicken for that. I dunno how well gigant minotaur meat would work in it... But then again, people *do* sometimes make a version of the dish with beef called a stranger bowl, so it couldn’t hurt to try!”

《I care not *what* you make so long as you make it before I starve to death!》

《Yeah, same! Pick up the pace!》

《Sui's really hungry too!》

I could hear Fel and Dora-chan's stomachs growling, and Sui was starting to deflate a little. *I guess they did all work their hardest back on the thirty-eighth floor, so no surprise they're famished.*

“Don’t worry, this dish comes together pretty quickly!” I explained.
“Gimme just a minute!”

I was running low on eggs and a few other staple ingredients, so I opened up my Online Supermarket, pulled together a shopping list for the stranger bowls, and got to cooking right away.

Not that much cooking was involved, really—the dish could hardly be any easier. It was prepared in pretty much the exact same way as oyakodon. The only real difference was that I’d always felt that the beef-based version worked better when the dish was slightly sweeter on the whole, so I had to adjust the seasonings a little.

“Just gotta slice an onion, chop up the gigant minotaur meat into bite-sized pieces... Umm, Fel? Think you could give me some space? You’re sorta in the way.”

Fel was sitting literally *right* next to me, drooling with his gaze nailed on the gigant minotaur meat. He must have been even hungrier than I’d given him credit for. Both Dora-chan and Sui were there along with him, the former clinging to Fel’s neck fuzz and the latter perched on his head.

“I’ll be done soon, so just wait a little while longer!” I said with a chuckle.

My familiars reluctantly wandered off again, though not before Fel turned back for a parting word. **《I will expect a substantial quantity of meat tonight! And I do mean *substantial*.》**

《Same here!》

《Sui too!》

“I know, I know! I get it, already!” I replied, barely holding in a laugh as I finished chopping up the meat. “All right, that does it for this and the onions!”

Next up, crack an egg and lightly scramble it up. I say “an” egg, but with the sheer amount of meat I was using in this case, I had to use a ton of them as well to even the proportions out. Then you pour a mixture of water, dashi, soy sauce, mirin, and sugar into a frying pan, bring it to a simmer, and add the meat and onions.

Cook them for just long enough to take the bite out of the onion’s flavor,

then pour in half of the scrambled eggs and turn the flame down to low. Once the first half of the eggs have set, pour in the remaining half and keep them on the heat for just long enough to cook about halfway through before serving it up.

I took out a batch of piping-hot, freshly cooked rice from my Item Box, piled it into our bowls, topped it with a small mountain of tender meat and gooey, half-scrambled eggs, then added a sprig of Japanese parsley on top, just to give the dish a bit of color.

“All right! Stranger bowls, ready to go!”

《Good! Now hand it over.》

“Y’know, when I said you should wait a little longer I didn’t mean that you should loom over me the entire time...” They’d backed off for a while, but it hadn’t been long before the three of them had crept up behind me again.

《Hey, that’s on you, mister slowpoke.》

“Oh, come on! These barely took any time at all to make!”

《Masteeer, Sui’s hungry!》

“All right, all right, fine! Here, extra-large servings for everyone!” I set my familiars’ dishes down in front of them, and they dug in without a second’s hesitation.

《Yes, this is a pleasant dish indeed. The raw egg we ate this meat with some time ago complemented it well, but I see now that cooked eggs suit its flavor in a wholly different manner.》

《Yeah, I’m with you on that! The eggs’re all nice and fluffy, and the salty-sweetness of the whole thing works crazy well with this meat!》

《This is sooo good! And the rice makes it much yummier!》

Right? Half-cooked eggs with a salty-sweet sauce plus rice is a combination that can’t be beat! Honestly, I feel like pretty much anything could taste great with an egg on top and a bed of rice below. Like, leftover veggie stir-fry? Works great. Random scraps of meat and veggies you scavenge from your fridge? Simmer it in a salty-sweet sauce, pour an egg over it, and it’ll taste so awesome you’d never think it was made from leftovers! That’s not even starting on tempura and leftover fried stuff—you’re getting into luxury territory with ingredients like that!

Long story short: finishing off just about any rice bowl with an egg is a surefire win. And with that, I followed my familiars’ example and got started

on my own serving.

“Yup, stranger bowls are just plain good! I can’t find anything to nitpick about this one.”

『You have said ‘stranger bowl’ a number of times now—Am I to presume that would be what this dish is called?』

“Yup, sure is.”

『A peculiar name indeed.』

“Yeah, there’s a whole story behind it. You remember how I made something called oyakodon way back when, out of rockbird meat and eggs? Well, that dish’s name means ‘parent and child bowl.’ I guess I got the eggs from my online supermarket, so that example isn’t *quite* right, actually... Okay, imagine I made that same dish out of cockatrice meat and cockatrice eggs. Makes sense then, right?”

『Yes, I see. A cockatrice and its egg are parent and child, while a giant minotaur and an egg are nothing more than strangers. How droll.』

『Hah! Yeah, that is pretty clever. Family bowls and stranger bowls—I like it!』

『Does that mean you can use other types of meat too, Master?』

“I sure can! Dungeon beef, dungeon pork, bloody horn-bull meat—heck, even orc meat would probably work well!”

『Well observed, Sui! I shall have my seconds with one of those meats, then.』

『Oooh, a taste-test? I like the sound of that! I’m in!』

“Wait, what? You’re not seriously gonna make me go through all that trouble, are you?”

『You yourself told us how little time the dish takes to make. Using a different variety of meat should be the simplest of matters.』

I understood where Fel was coming from, but what he *wasn’t* accounting for was how much time the prep cooking would take. I’d chopped up plenty of onions and giant minotaur meat slabs for seconds and thirds, but if I was going to make the next helping from a different meat, I’d have to go right back to the cutting stage again. *Unless...*

“Let’s see—ah, great! I’ve still got some thinly-sliced dungeon beef and pork in my Item Box. You’ll have to be satisfied with just those two tonight, okay?”

《Hmph. If I must.》

Oh, don't give me that attitude.

I went on to prepare extra helpings for everyone using the dungeon meats I had on hand. The three of them had a blast comparing what made the different versions delicious in their own right. In the end, I asked them which they liked the best, with predictable results.

《All of them.》

《Ayup.》

《They were all so tasty!》

You guys think anything tastes great as long as you're hungry enough, don't you? You'd think they'd have been satisfied with just the gigant minotaur meat, considering. Seeing the elated smiles on their faces made it hard to stay exasperated with them, though.



The next morning, we decided to take a moment to relax after breakfast before hitting the dungeon again. I was lounging around with a cup of coffee, while my familiars were sipping on glasses of fruit milk.

Thanks to the incense I'd lit up the night before, there were only two or three vampire mosquitoes buzzing about outside Fel's barrier, and those few that were brave enough to approach were flying so unsteadily it looked like they might drop at any second. I was struck once again by how frightfully effective the coils were for pest control. Considering how universally potent the pesticides from my Online Supermarket had been so far, I figured they'd probably work on just about any sort of insectoid monster.

I remembered seeing specific pesticides for flies, centipedes, spiders, and bees in the menu, and I started to think it might be a good idea to get a few of each of them to store in my Item Box while I had the opportunity. This was a mid-dungeon forest, after all. It would only be natural for a wide variety of bug monsters to make an appearance before we made it to different terrain. Dolan's dungeon had an area just like this, and it threw plenty of bug monsters at us, along with all the birds and beasts.

Can't hurt to be prepared, right? I opened up my skill's menu, bought a few of each type of pesticide, and dumped them all into my Item Box. As I gulped down the rest of my coffee, I glanced over to find Fel giving me a

pointed stare.

“What?”

《You have leveled up substantially.》

“Wait, for real?” I decided to take a look at my stats and see if Fel was right. “Status Open!”

【Name】 Mukohda (Tsuyoshi Mukouda)

【Age】 27

【Race】 Kind of Human

【Job】 Victim from Another World, Adventurer, Cook

【Level】 85

【HP】 492

【MP】 483

【Attack】 476

【Defense】 464

【Agility】 382

【Skills】 Appraisal, Item Box, Fire magic, Earth magic, Perfect Defense, Double Experience Gain, Familiars (Contracted Magic Beasts): Fenrir, Huge Slime, Pixie Dragon

【Unique Skill】 Online Supermarket (+1)

《Tenants》 Fumiya, Liquor Shop Tanaka

【Blessings】 Blessing of the Goddess of Wind, Ninrir (small); Blessing of the Goddess of Fire, Agni (small); Blessing of the Goddess of Earth, Kisharle (small); Blessing of the God of All Creation, Demiurge (small)

“Bwahuh?!”

Level 85?! I was pretty positive that the last time I'd checked my status I was level 78. In other words, I'd jumped up a whole seven levels before I knew it. I could only assume that the vampire mosquitoes killed by the incense I'd put out overnight had counted as my kills for the purpose of experience. They might have been D-ranked monsters, but considering the sheer number of them I'd taken out between that and the bug spray, it made sense that it would've added up quite a bit—especially with the Double Experience Gain skill the Gods had given me.

Level 85... I'd jumped right past level 80, and even if I'd somehow forgotten what that meant, the little “+1” next to the Unique Skill on my stat

page would've reminded me, like it or not. I had a feeling I knew *exactly* what was going to happen the moment I reached the surface, and if I was right, it was going to be a humongous pain in the ass.

A new Tenant... Ugh, there's that headache again...

Chapter 6: Mukohda Flirts with His Dark Side

『Man, there's just no end to these bugs!』 grumbled Dora-chan, who was flying off to my side. Sui and I were riding on Fel, Sui on his head and me on his back.

『I mean, we're in a forest, so it only makes sense, right?』 I replied telepathically. Fel was running a little slower than he usually would, on account of all the trees, but a verbal conversation was still definitely not going to work at the rate we were moving.

『Okay, sure, but it's weird for there to be *this* many! What do you think, Fel?』

『Hmm. It would seem so indeed. It may well be an inherent trait of this forest itself.』

『A bug forest? Ugh, I do *not* like the sound of that,』 I replied before a thought suddenly struck me. 『Wait a sec. You told me about dungeon cores a while back, right? They, like, control everything about how the dungeon's structured and how it expands, I think?』

『Indeed.』

『But remember the time we found a freshly formed dungeon in the middle of a forest that you forced me to go into? Back *then*, you said that dungeons spawn naturally in places where the ambient mana's really thick. So, which is it? Do the cores make them, or do they just happen?』

『Ahh, yes. I understand your confusion. However...』

Fel went on to explain the whole process in a bit more depth. According to him, ample ambient mana *is* one of many prerequisites required for a dungeon to appear naturally, just like he'd initially claimed.

The dungeon cores come into the process *after* the dungeon gets spawned. They're born once a dungeon has grown to a certain level of maturity, which can apparently take years. The dungeon's growth continues at the same rate after that point, but from then on the core dictates how that growth occurs. It

decides how many floors there'll be, what sort of monsters will spawn, and all that jazz.

Not even the venerable Fel had ever communicated directly with a dungeon core, of course—all of this was purely secondhand knowledge. In any case, I'd verified one important fact: the odds were good that we could blame the dungeon core for setting up the whole floor to be a bug-infested woodland.

『Oooh, another monster! Hurray!』 *Pew!*

Unlike the rest of us, Sui was delighted by the sheer quantity of bug beasts to brutalize. It blasted yet another monster out of the air—specifically, a type that looked like a huge horsefly which I hadn't bothered appraising yet—with a single Acid Bullet.

The slime's position atop Fel's head had actually been Fel's idea this time. According to him, **『The insects may be bothersome, but I am certain Sui will deal with them for us.』**

『Yeah! Sui'll beat up all of them!』 replied the slime with so much enthusiasm I just knew it would have been hyperventilating if it were actually talking out loud.

『Looks like Fel was right! Ha ha ha!』 chuckled Dora-chan as Sui brought down another insect.

『Sui...』 I quietly muttered. Every time we set foot in a dungeon, it took another step toward turning into some sort of dedicated battle-slime, and I was definitely not excited by that prospect.



The insect monsters swarmed and Sui gunned them down time and time again as we advanced through the forest, taking care to pick up the drops from the occasional rare monster. Dora-chan was the smallest and fastest of all of us, so I strapped a magic bag around his neck and had him handle item recovery duty. Sui had just defeated a giant centipede that dropped its shell and a magic stone, and I was getting pretty sick of this entire floor.

『Man, it really is *nothing* but bugs!』 I whined. 『Why couldn't there be at least a couple normal beast-like monsters here and there?』

『It hasn't been *all* bugs,』 replied Dora-chan. 『There've been other sorts of slimy creepy-crawlies too.』

『Oh, right. I guess there were some poison snails and giant slugs, huh? But they're so rare, I totally forgot about them.』 The kinds of "slimy creepy-crawlies" he mentioned were a venomous snail monster about the size of a small dog and a ridiculously huge slug monster. The latter were at least two meters long.

『Oh, and the ones that dropped on us from above too!』

『Aggh, don't make me remember those things, Dora-chan!』

Now *there* was a monster that had seriously traumatized me—big forest leeches. They were exactly what they sounded like: leech monsters that measured about twenty centimeters in length. They were only F-ranked—the weakest class of monster there was—but out of everything we'd encountered up till now, they'd inflicted the most psychological damage on me by far.

They'd cling to the bottoms of tree branches and fall on anyone that passed beneath them en masse. And I do mean *en masse*. I'm talking an absolute rainstorm of giant black wriggling leeches almost the length of my forearm. It was so utterly, mind-breakingly disgusting I still had goosebumps hours after...

They hadn't actually managed to attach to me thanks to Fel's barrier, but if they had, I'm a hundred percent confident I would've passed out on the spot. I had a feeling the scars those horrible things inflicted on my psyche would last for years. Long story short, it was such a disgustingly nightmarish sight that just remembering it gave me shivers.

『Uggh, now you have me *thinking* about those things! I'm gonna be sick...』

『I know I'm the one who brought it up and all, but honestly, same.』 It sounded like Dora-chan had been just as traumatized as I was.

At around that point in our conversation, Fel came to a sudden stop.

『Not that I'm complaining about a break or anything, but what's up, Fel? Something wrong?』 I asked.

『Yeah,』 added Dora-chan, 『I know I said I'm getting queasy and all, but it's not *that* bad.』

Fel let out a snort-like laugh. 『**I have not stopped for your sake. Look,**』 he said, gesturing into the woods. There, finally, stood something I'd thought must not exist at all on this floor: an actual beast-type monster.

『What is that, a red boar?』 I asked. It was surrounded by a group of insect monsters—ant-like creatures that were about half a meter long each, making

them relatively small by this world's standards.

『Ah, so *those* things live on this floor. That would explain why insects dominate the area.』

『Yeah, it all makes sense now. Of course there wouldn't be anything else with *those* around.』

Fel and Dora-chan clearly knew what the ant monsters were, and just as clearly were both going to be insufferable about it. I gave one of them a quick appraisal.

『Let's see—looks like they're called forest army ants. What makes them such a big deal? Is this gonna be a problem?』

『Well, y'see...』

Fen and Dora-chan gave me the lowdown on this new type of monster. Apparently, they were both carnivorous and extremely proficient at using their numbers to their advantage in battle. They'd attack in swarms, and were known to take down monsters much larger and of much higher rank than they were.

Their primary means of attack was biting with their surprisingly strong, pincer-like mandibles. Or, really, that was their *only* means of attack. As such, they weren't particularly dangerous on their own—hence their inclination to hunt in swarms. They won their battles through attrition, paying no heed to their comrades' demise and relying purely on overwhelming numbers.

『Numbers, after all, are the one area they do not lack in. As you can see, they attack with persistence until they claim the life of their prey,』 Fel explained as one forest army ant after another latched onto the red boar.

The phrase ‘strength in numbers’ felt more than a little apt. The red boar desperately thrashed and flailed in an effort to shake the ants off, squealing in pain and frustration all the while.

『So yeah, thanks to all that, the second those things set up a nest in a forest, everything else that lives nearby hightails it the hell outta there. Oh, and you probably already guessed this, but they totally eat humans too.』

Yes, Dora-chan, as it so happens I did already guess that, and would've rather you hadn't pointed it out!

Meanwhile, the red boar gradually ran out of stamina in the face of the ants' unrelenting assault and finally perished. It dropped a pelt and a chunk of meat. The first item, the ants immediately set upon, carving it into smaller

pieces and carrying them off into the woods, while the second was completely ignored.

『Master,』 said Sui, 『should Sui beat them up?』

『**Do not interfere, Sui!**』 reprimanded Fel before I had a chance to say anything.

『What's the big idea, Fel?!』 I snapped back. In my view, there was no call for him to be *that* blunt about it. Sui had taken it personally, and was deflating into a sad little puddle, so I gave it a comforting and protective hug.

『**Hmph. I will concede my tone was harsh, but I had good reason to react so.**』

Fel went on to explain himself. As it turned out, messing with forest army ants could have had terrible consequences in the worst-case scenario. They could sense when their fellow ants died, and that sense drove them to swarm and attack whatever creature did the deed.

Fel had nothing to fear from a bunch of ant monsters, of course, but their sheer numbers were not to be underestimated. They couldn't hurt him, but they could *definitely* annoy the hell out of him. They were one of the monster types he least liked involving himself with, he explained with a scowl.

Dora-chan was on the same page. 『Yeah, if you so much as touch one of the stupid things, they'll keep harassing you forever until you destroy their whole nest.』

Hmm. Destroy their whole nest, huh? I might be able to pull that off, actually. I was almost positive I'd seen a product in my Online Supermarket that would let me do just that.

『Hey, I think I've got a way of dealing with them all at once! Let's follow them, for now.』

We carefully crept along after the forest army ant platoon, keeping a sizable distance between us and their back ranks. It wasn't long before we came across what I assumed was their nest: a huge hole in the ground that the ants all crawled into, concealed in the shadow of a boulder.

『**That would seem to be their burrow. How do you intend to wipe the pests out, though?**』 Fel inquired skeptically.

Thanks for asking, Fel! 『Wait just a minute. I'll get it now,』 I replied telepathically as I opened up my Online Supermarket's pesticide menu, where I quickly found and purchased exactly what I was looking for. 『Heh heh heh, I knew it! They *do* have it in stock! This is just the stuff for ants!』

《Man, that sure is a nasty smirk on your face! What's the deal?》

《Don't call me nasty, Dora-chan! Talk about rude.》 *Though that said, I guess I am sorta flirting with my dark side here.* 《Heh heh heh! Take a look, guys. This here's my secret weapon that'll wipe out an ant nest in one fell swoop!》

The cardboard box with my purchase in it arrived immediately, and I grinned evilly as I opened it up and showed its contents to my familiars.



I lined up the items I'd bought on the ground. Having no clue how big the forest army ants' nest was, I'd gone ahead and purchased five of them. I figured that no matter how expansive their tunnel system was, this would surely be enough to reach every corner of the network.

《So then, what are these things?》

“Heh heh heh! These, my friends, are a very special sort of pesticide from my old world! You just pour in a little water, and they start spitting out smoke that kills bugs dead! You start it up, leave it sitting out for two or three hours, and the job's done, just like that!”

In short, the items I'd bought were do-it-yourself home fumigation devices. I had a good feeling about this plan, and if I was right, I'd be able to wipe out the whole nest of forest army ants in one go.

《Oooh. The world you lived in sure had some crazy stuff, huh?》

“Yeah, and in my experience, these are usually really effective! I think they should be just as good as the ones I've used before. I'll get them ready now!”

I tore open the packages. The pesticide itself came in little plastic boxes with vents in their tops.

“Okay, that should do it! Now I just put some water in, and they'll start smoking. Fel, I'm gonna set these up around the entrance to the nest, so can you put up a barrier to make sure the smoke doesn't blow our way?”

《Very well.》

“It'd also be great if you could blow some wind into the hole! To help the smoke spread all the way through the tunnels, y'know?”

《Hmm. Such intricate magics fall more within Dora's domain than mine. He should handle this task.》

《Yeah, yeah, coming right up.》

“All right, let’s do this!”

I filled the little plastic cups that came with the devices with water and slotted them into their cases, then quickly planted them around the opening to the ants’ burrow.

“Okay, Fel, time for that barrier!”

《It is done.》

Just a moment later, plumes of toxic smoke started spewing out of the pesticide boxes.

《Oh, wow, they’re so smokey!》 said Sui, who was pressed right up against the barrier to get a close look at the devices. It must’ve been really intrigued by them.

“You’re up next for the wind, Dora-chan!”

《I have thinned the barrier in front of you, Dora. Blow your wind through that section.》

《You got it!》

Dora-chan conjured up a continuous burst of wind, sending it blowing into the ants’ nest. The white plumes of pesticide-laced smoke were caught up in the gale, flowing diagonally down into the ground.



“And, that should do it!”

《Is that all? We need do nothing else?》

“Nope, that’s it! Like I said earlier, now we just have to wait around for a few hours.”

《Well, that sure sounds boring as hell.》

《It sounds like the ideal time to have lu—》

“Nope, not yet. It’s still way too early in the day for lunch. I might not have your internal clock, but even I can tell that much.”

《Grrr!》

“Oh, stop looking at me like that, Fel! It’s too early for lunch, but I guess we can have a snack or something while we wait, at least.”

《Oooh, Sui wants cake!》 said my favorite slime, bouncing up and down with anticipation.

“Yeah, I think I can make that happen! Just three pieces each, okay?”

《Hurraay! Cake time, cake time!》

《Cake, is it? Then I shall have the white one I always get.》

《And pudding for me, of course!》

I got Fel three pieces of his usual strawberry shortcake, and picked out three different kinds of pudding for Dora-chan—one seasonal pumpkin pudding, one plain pudding, and one custard pudding. Sui picked out its own sweets this time around, and ended up choosing a slice of its favorite chocolate cake, a slice of white chocolate cake, and a strawberry mille-feuille.

For a bunch of carnivores, my familiars also had quite the sweet tooth, and they happily stuffed themselves with confectionery. I decided on some sort of seasonal “premium” Mont Blanc for myself, which I enjoyed with a cup of Kilimanjaro coffee. The bitterness of the coffee was the perfect contrast for the full-bodied sweetness of the cake, and the two balanced each other out perfectly.

And so we waited, enjoying our impromptu snack time as the hours passed by.



《Surely it must be time by now,》 said Fel as he happily licked his chops.

“You *think*?!”

After our little snack, my familiars had all taken the opportunity for a nap. I knew that we'd be safe thanks to Fel's barrier, so I joined them in a quick snooze. Eventually, I woke up and decided that nap time was over, so I roused the others, only for them to start whining about how hungry they were.

Fel insisted that it was close enough to noon for lunch, and Dora-chan kept going on and on about how there was no way he'd go into the ants' nest on an empty stomach. Between the two of them, I was eventually browbeaten into serving an early lunch. I brought out some orc cutlet sandwiches, which my chowhounds were more than happy to devour.

Anyway, thanks to all that, we ended up spending way longer waiting around than I'd planned. *I guess this means that the pesticide's definitely done its work by now, at least. And really, if it has worked out, it's not like we have any reason to hurry.*

“All right, let’s head into this nest and give it a look!”

We made our way down through a slanting entry tunnel. Fel and Dora-chan strode into the darkness without a hint of hesitation, but they weren’t the most fearless in our party.

《Here goooes!》 Sui jumped ahead and rolled down the tunnel like a rubber ball, rapidly picking up speed.

“Gaaah! S-Sui, are you okay?!” I shouted into the darkness.

《Yaaay! That was so much fun! Sui wants to do it again!》 replied the slime. Apparently, I shouldn’t have bothered worrying.

That was fun for it? C’mon, Sui, don’t freak me out like that! I took a second to pull myself together, then headed down into the nest after it. I wasn’t about to just plunge into total darkness without a second thought like Fel and Dora-chan, though, so I brought out my usual LED lantern before I set off.

I slowly descended through the tunnel, keeping one hand on the wall just in case I happened to lose my footing. Before long, I arrived at what appeared to be the nest’s first major chamber.

《Finally! What kept you? If you intend to proceed so slowly, perhaps you should ride upon my back?》

“Nope, out of the question. That’d be like riding a roller coaster through a pitch-black cave, and I am *not* interested in trying that.”

《Hmph! Those words mean nothing to me, but your refusal, at least,

rang clear. Do as you will. Just take care not to slow us down.»

“I’m a careful person, and you’re just going to have to deal with that fact. Anyway,” I paused, glancing about the room, “I know I’m the one responsible for it, but man, this sure is something.”

The floor of the entire chamber was utterly buried in glimmering black mandibles—the most common drop for a forest army ant.

『Are we gonna pick all this up, or what?』 asked Dora-chan in a disbelieving tone as he looked over the mountain of items.

“I mean, they’re pretty low-ranking monsters. We don’t have to get *all* of them, but we should at least take whatever we can pick up in this room.”

『Ugggh, booring.』

“C’mon, that’s enough of that. Look, Sui’s already helping out! Give it a hand!”

『Here you go, Master!』 said the slime, who had just arrived to hand over a load of drops.

『All right, *fine!*』 said Dora-chan, finally giving in to the pressure.

“You too, Fel!”

『Very well, bothersome though it may be.』

I lent Fel my magic bag and we split up to grab all the ant drops we could lay our hands on. The whole process was almost meditative. Finally, when we’d picked up everything that seemed worth the effort, we moved on.

The path out from that first room led downward once again. My familiars took the lead, plunging ahead with wild abandon, while I followed slowly and carefully behind. I finally caught up with them at the entrance to the next room, and was surprised to find them looking a little dejected.

“What’s up, guys?” I asked, glancing into the room. “Gah! Again?!”

『Are we gonna pick them up, Master?』

Once again, the room was brimming with forest army ant mandibles. *For crying out loud. Just how many of those things were in here?!*

“We have more than enough of these drops already, so we should just move on,” I quickly decided, to Fel and Dora-chan’s visible relief. *Come on, we didn’t spend that long on the last room, did we?*

『Arright then, let’s get going!』 Dora-chan flapped off into the next room...which looked exactly the same as the one before it. As did the one after it, and the one after that. The whole nest was just room after room filled with nothing but ant mandibles.

『Okay, I gotta admit, I thought you were talking out of your ass when you said those smokey things would wipe out all the ants, but man, that stuff *really* works! It even got the ones way off in the back...』 marveled Dora-chan as he glanced into yet another mandible-filled chamber.

『**Impressive indeed,**』 agreed Fel.

“Yeah, fumigation’s one of the more intense options as far as pesticides go. Smoke can fit into even the smallest nooks and crannies, so it’s really effective,” I bragged. *Not like I’m the one who made it, of course. Thanks, Big Pharma! You’ll never know it, but your pesticides are saving the day in another world!*

Anyway, we moved on to the next room, which, from what I could tell, was also the final chamber. That immediately explained what we found inside.

『**That would be the forest army ant queen. To think it would still live —it must be tenacious indeed,**』 said Fel, gesturing with his nose at a massive ant. It was probably four or five times bigger than the rest of them, and was turned over on its back, its legs twitching pathetically in the air.

『Nothing else in the room, huh? Guess the larvae must’ve all bit it. Didn’t even miss one of ‘em!』

『**This slaughter was set into motion by your hand. Thus, yours ought to be the hand that ends it. Finish her.**』

“R-Right, okay.”

At Fel’s urging, I stepped up to the queen and withdrew my mithril spear from my Item Box. With a shout, I plunged its blade deep into the monster’s abdomen. It spasmed one last time, then gradually went limp before vanishing, leaving behind a set of ant mandibles and a tiny magic stone. That would’ve been a disappointing haul, but as it turned out, the room wasn’t as empty as we’d thought.

『**Look!**』

『Yeah, I see it!』

『Master, there’s something back there!』

A treasure chest had been concealed behind the forest army ant queen, small enough to be impossible to notice until after she’d disappeared.

“A treasure chest? Really?” *What would one of those be doing at the bottom of an ant nest?*



We clustered around the treasure chest. It was made out of some sort of wood, and was so old it looked like it might fall apart at any moment. It was easy to forget, but the ant nest *was* still a part of a dungeon, and apparently operated off the same principles as far as loot was concerned.

I appraised the chest, and was relieved to find that it wasn't trapped. "Okay, looks safe. I'll open it up," I declared, though I wasn't quite confident enough in my assessment that I didn't still carefully pry it open from a distance with the tip of my spear.

The chest's lid fell open with a resounding thud, and the four of us timidly leaned over to peer inside, where we found a single pendant. I lifted it up by its chain to get a better look.

The pendant looked like some sort of medal, made from a silvery metallic material with a strange geometric pattern inscribed on its surface. At the very center of the pattern sat a glimmering stone that shone with all the colors of the rainbow. I wasn't positive, but I thought it might be an opal.

『Oh? That is quite the find,』 said Fel, who must've beaten me to appraising it by a half-second. I quickly followed his example.

【Cursebreaker Pendant】

A magic item capable of nullifying any magical spell, no matter how powerful. Can only be used once.

"Hoooly crap..." I gulped.

『What? What is it?!』 asked Dora-chan, badgering me to dispel his curiosity.

"A Cursebreaker Pendant, apparently."

『Oh. Okay, don't care anymore.』

『Sui wishes there was meat inside instead...』

Two of my familiars immediately lost interest, but I had the exact opposite reaction. "H-Hey, Fel, I get that it's a one-time-use item, but when it says it can nullify 'any magical spell,' does that include, like, curse-inflicted status ailments?"

『Indeed. My appraisal would seem to indicate just that.』

Fel's appraisal skill was higher than mine, so he tended to get more

detailed information from it. If even his skill told him that, though, it seemed safe to say that my first impression was correct.

“And that means...”

《You would do well to wear it at all times.》

One very important fact had remained in a corner of my mind ever since I received my first blessing from the gods. That blessing, and all the ones that followed it, was designated as “small.” As the gods had explained to me, a small blessing would make magic easier to cast and would nullify all status ailments, with just two exceptions: spells cast by an especially powerful magic user and instant death effects.

Those exceptions, of course, were the most important part of that explanation. After all, they meant that if I were unlucky enough to run into a *really* powerful caster, it was totally possible that my blessings wouldn’t be able to cancel out their spells!

I’d picked up enough small blessings over time that their protection apparently added up to equal that of a normal-sized blessing, but that didn’t stop me from worrying about it a little. I mean, no matter how many of them I got, they were still *small* blessings. That’s why I was more than happy to take Fel up on his idea and claim the pendant for myself. “Yeah, sounds good. I’ll use it,” I said, immediately putting it on.

Ha ha ha! All right, that’s one less nagging worry to keep me up at night! I didn’t anticipate running into any incredibly powerful mages in the foreseeable future, but it was always good to plan for the worst-case scenario. Having an item like this was a huge weight off my mind, that’s for sure. I just wished I’d be lucky enough to stumble across a magic item that could nullify instant death effects...not that anything *that* implausibly convenient would ever actually happen.

《With that, our business here is finished. Let us depart,》 said Fel.

We made our way out of the ants’ nest. This time I gave in and let Fel carry me on his back, which made the trip fly past in the blink of an eye.



We emerged from the forest army ants’ nest, happy to breathe the outside world’s air once again...though since we were still in a dungeon, whether or not it counted as the “outside world” was very much in question. Regardless,

we quickly resumed our exploration of the forest.

As usual, Sui took point to intercept any monsters that might try to make a meal out of us. And there were plenty that did just that: giant killer mantises, giant centipedes, venom tarantulas, paralyze butterflies, and—much to my displeasure—creatures from the *really* creepy-crawly, squirmly-wormy side of the monster spectrum as well. Just seeing one of *those* sent shivers down my spine, but Sui melted them before they could gross me out too badly, so I somehow made it through.

As we moved farther and farther away from the forest army ant nest, beast-type monsters started gradually working their way into the local mix of beasts. Meat and pelt drops were finally back on the table, which reminded me that it would probably be dinner time before too terribly long. I mentioned it to my familiars, and they unanimously requested that I make something with gigant minotaur meat in it.

“Gigant minotaur again, huh? What to make tonight...? It’s such good meat that I’m tempted to go with a simple steak again, but I can’t make those *every* time... Oh, of course! Being in a forest means we’re not in a closed room, and *that* means that it won’t be a problem if we make a bit of smoke! I can pull out my grill and barbecue something! I mean, *technically* we’re still in a dungeon so this *is* a closed room too, but it’s big enough that it doesn’t make a difference.”

I had a basic theme decided on, but that didn’t narrow it down very much. There are a lot of ways to cook with a barbecue grill, after all. “Hmm. Think I’ll try making some charcoal-grilled steaks this time around!”

I pulled the grill out from my Item Box and got to work setting up my cooking station.

“All right, looks like the charcoal’s nice and hot. Should be ready to start grilling any time now.”

I cut a couple nice, thick slabs of gigant minotaur meat, seasoned them with salt and pepper, and slapped them down on the grill. They started sizzling the second they touched metal, and in mere moments the aroma of meat filled our campsite.

“Man, this smell never gets old,” I happily said to myself.

I took my time, letting the charcoal slowly grill the meat to perfection. Every once in a while, little beads of fat rendered out from the meat would dribble down onto the charcoal, causing it to flare up. *Just a little longer... A*

little longer... All right, that should do it!

I could tell in an instant that I'd flipped the steaks over at exactly the right moment. The grill marks on the underside of the meat were just *perfect*.

"Yeah, this is gonna be great for sure!" I mumbled with an involuntary gulp.

Just then, something dripped down onto the grill and evaporated with a sizzle. I glanced up, confused, only to find Fel literally drooling over the barbecue, his gaze locked on the giant minotaur steaks.

"Aaaugh, Fel! *Gross!*"

《What?》

"Don't '**what**' me! You're drooling like a leaky faucet! And right over the grill, of all places!"

《Oh. My mistake.》

"That's *one* way of putting it! I don't wanna eat a steak that's covered in Fenrir spit! If you *have* to watch, at least take a couple steps back first!"

《Hmph... Are they not finished yet?》

"No. Just a little longer."

《How're we supposed to wait when it smells this good?》

《Sui wants to eat soon!》

Dora-chan joined Fel in heckling me, and Sui was seated atop Fel's head, its attention totally focused on the grill.

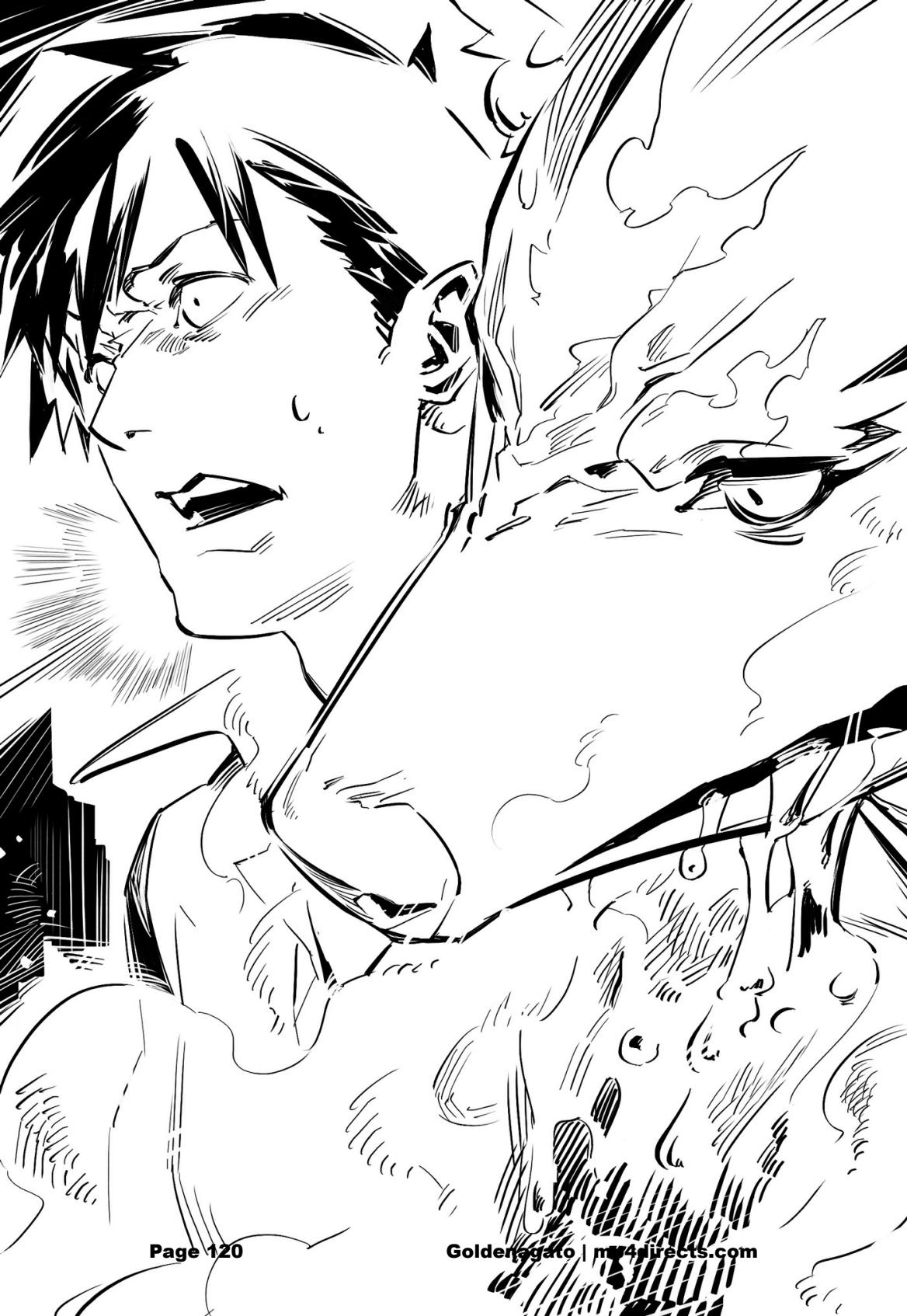
"Just a little longer! Be patient!"

I looked back at the grill. The satisfying sizzling of the meat was quickly drowned out by the sound of a certain *someone* panting directly above my head.

"Oh, for crying out loud! *Fel!* Would you *please* stand back just a little?! Wait, gaaaah, you're drooling on my shoulder now!" I quickly grabbed a towel and dabbed at the wet spot on my shirt. "Seriously, what're you doing?! Do you *have* to hyperventilate right in my ear like that?!"

《It is no fault of mine! The smell of meat is simply irresistible! To tempt me so when my stomach is wholly empty is an act of abject cruelty!》

"Abject cruelty, my ass! How do you expect me to grill meat without letting you smell it? It's almost done, so just sit tight and wait!"



《Grrr!》

『Okay, simmer down, big guy,』 said Dora-chan.『I get where Fel's coming from, though—a smell like this on an empty stomach's beyond the pale!』 he added, slurping back his own mouthful of drool.

『Masteeeer, is the meat done yet? Sui wants to eat now!』 the slime whined with an impatient jiggle.

“I get it, okay?! It’ll seriously be just a couple more seconds!” *A little more... A liiittle more... There!* “Okay, they’re ready!”

I plopped several steaks onto each of my familiars’ plates, which they began devouring without so much as a word. I started grilling the second round immediately, but Fel was finished with his first helping long before they were ready.

《Are seconds not finished yet?》

“No, they’re just getting started. Give me a minute, okay?”

He did not give me a minute. On the contrary, he spent the entire time fidgeting restlessly, asking me if they were finished over and over. Meanwhile, Dora-chan and Sui finished their meals and joined him on seconds standby. When the steaks were finally ready, I served them up, only for them to be devoured in an instant once again.

“Hey, do you guys want steak sauce on the next round?”

《Yes! I desire the garlic sauce on mine!》

『Same here! These’ll be tasty as hell with the garlic stuff, no doubt about it!』

《Sui wants sauce too!》

I got another set of steaks sizzling on the grill, then doused them in garlic-flavored steak sauce. I was on the same page as Dora-chan. There was absolutely no way the flavors wouldn’t suit each other perfectly. I was starting to drool in anticipation myself, but I knew I still had a mountain of minotaur meat to grill through before I’d get the chance to have my own helping.

As expected, my familiars were insatiable. After the garlic steaks, I made a round with a sauce that approximated the texture and flavor of seasoned, grated daikon, followed by one with garlic sauce, and then a buttery steak sauce. One steak after another, over and over. Dora-chan was the first to drop out in the end, patting his bulging stomach with a satisfied smile on his face as he flopped to the ground.

《I have not eaten my fill yet.》

《Sui still wants to eat more too!》

Are your stomachs literally bottomless, or what? Those two were starting to scare me. After another round of garlic- and onion-flavored steaks, though, they were close enough to satisfied that they were just eating their food instead of inhaling it. I figured that meant it was finally my chance, and threw a steak on the grill for myself.

I couldn't eat a whole steak in a single bite, unlike certain members of my party, so I decided to cut my helping down into bite-sized pieces before I dug in. Meat juice flowed like a river as I sliced into the steak, and looking at the cross-section, I saw that I'd cooked it to a perfect medium-rare.

As for seasonings, I decided to break out my personal favorite secret weapon: my stock of flavored salts. I figured that wasabi salt and lemon salt would be a good fit for the meal, and seasoned my first bite with the former.

"Oh, wow, is this ever good!" The subtle, invigorating bite of the wasabi cut right through to my sinuses, and the salt was the perfect compliment for the juicy char-grilled steak. "Damn! Okay, I'm overeating tonight for sure!"

I stuffed myself full of the wasabi-salted steak, unable to stop, until suddenly I realized I'd forgotten something.

"Whoops! Can't fill up on just this. I still have to try the lemon salt!" I sprinkled it on another piece of steak and popped it into my mouth. "Oh, wow, it's so refreshing this way! Yeah, this is delicious too, for sure. It makes the meat feel so much less heavy, somehow."

The lemon salt proved just as irresistible as the wasabi salt had. In fact, I was having a hard time deciding which I liked better. Before I finished pondering the matter, though, I felt a pointed stare turn in my direction.

《Hey! What are those?》

"Huh? Uhh, wasabi and lemon salt."

《And do they suit this meat well?》

"Yeah, they go perfectly with it."

《Then why did you not bring them out sooner?! I demand a helping!》

《Ooooh, Sui wants to try too!》

"Yeah, yeah, coming right up."

As I prepared even more meat for Fel and Sui, Dora-chan heaved himself up into a sitting position and requested I make just a little extra so he could try the salts out as well. Our giant minotaur feast lasted well into the night,

and was so enjoyable I almost forgot we were still in the middle of a dungeon.

Chapter 7: A Slime's Fury

The next morning we ate breakfast and then resumed our exploration of the woods. The process went pretty much the same way it had the day before: monsters would attempt to ambush us at every turn, and Sui would gun them down without mercy.

The slime bounced from Fel's head to mine and back again, firing off one Acid Bullet after another. We were only bothering to stop for the high-ranking monsters' drops at that point, but even with that boost and Fel's impressive mobility, there was still no end to the forest in sight.

『Just how big *is* this floor?』 I asked telepathically. 『How are we *still* in the same forest?』

『I have chosen the shortest possible route to the next floor, I assure you. It is simply that the forest is excessively large.』 Fel went on to explain that judging by his instincts, we were still only a little over halfway to our destination.

『Sheesh...』 I sighed. 『What kind of jerk would put a forest this big in the middle of a dungeon, anyway?』

『I could hardly agree more. And to make matters worse, they did not even have the decency to include any monsters strong enough to entertain me.』

『Man, *same*, seriously!』 piped up Dora-chan. 『At the rate things have been going, Sui'll solo the whole floor no problem! We're not even gonna get the chance to fight!』

Nope, nope, nooope! You two are the only ones who'd ever complain about there not being enough tough monsters! And besides, we've had plenty of A-ranks, and even a couple S-ranked monsters, right? Sui took them out right away, sure, but still!

I'd actually just snagged the drop items from an S-ranked giant Hercules beetle that Sui had killed a moment ago. It had left a massive horn about as long as I was tall and a pretty sizable magic stone. Considering how many nasties we'd already encountered, Fel and Dora-chan's complaints were

definitely getting on my nerves a little, but I knew perfectly well that my trio of ultimate predators would never understand my perspective and ended up just forcing a strained smile instead of trying to explain.

«Guess our only option's to keep going like we have been,» I reluctantly admitted.

«If I were to run faster, we would reach the end in a fraction of the time.»

«Don't even *think* about it, Fel! You know I'd fall off and die before we got there!»

Now *that* was a suggestion I had to shut down right away. Fel's top speed was seriously nothing to sneeze at, and I knew for sure that I'd get blown right off his back if he went that fast. I could see it coming from a mile away. Only not really, because I *definitely* wouldn't last a mile if he went all out. If *that* was the alternative, I was all right with moving along at our current speed.

And so our party moved on, cursing this stupid, seemingly endless forest every step of the way.



Two days of travel later, we'd finally reached the edge of the forest. That, of course, meant it was finally time for the floor's boss to make its appearance.

“That's gotta be it, right?” I asked as I peered out through the treeline. A big rocky mountain stood just outside of the forest. A massive hole at the very center of the range led into a cavern, and in front of that cave a truly enormous monster was stomping around like it owned the place. It *looked* like a bear, except unlike most bears, it was at least ten meters tall and had four thick, beefy, arm-like forelimbs.

We hid behind a big tree right on the edge of the woods and assessed the situation. To start, I appraised the colossal bear thing.

【Hexalimbear】

A creature of unparalleled might. Omnivorous and exceedingly vicious.

“Unparalleled might... Exceedingly vicious...” *Y'know, I could sorta tell*

that much just by looking at it.

『Worry not. I have defeated its like many times before,』 said Fel.

Apparently, my concern was written all over my face.

“You have? Really?”

『Indeed. Their strength and brutality are noteworthy indeed, and their size is impressive, but they haven’t the brains to pose a true threat. So long as you keep your distance from them, they are all but harmless. More importantly, while their meat has a certain gaminess to it, its flavor is altogether quite appealing.』

That statement, of course, immediately caught Dora-chan and Sui’s attention.

『Oooh? Those things’re tasty, huh? I’ve seen one of ’em out in the wild once, but I’ve never gotten the chance to eat one before! I like the sound of this!』

『Tasty meat? Yay! Sui’s excited!』

Welp, looks like in my familiars’ eyes, that walking symbol of savagery is just another chunk of meat. Wish I could say I didn’t see that coming, but I sure did. I suuure did...

『Now then—let us dispatch the beast!』

『I’m in! Hand over the meat, bear-boy!』

『Meat time! Yaaay!』

My familiars leapt out from the treeline in unison. “H-Hey,” I shouted after them, “We don’t know for sure that it’s gonna drop meat! Don’t get your hopes up!” I couldn’t tell if they heard me or not, though. If they did, they were too focused on the bear to bother replying.

Moments later, all three of them unleashed a barrage of attacks.

Kra-kow! A lightning bolt—presumably conjured by Fel—struck the hexalimbear right in the forehead.

Shwiick! A humongous icicle—Dora-chan’s doing, surely—impaled the monster from behind, its pointed tip protruding from the beast’s chest.

Pew! Sui’s Acid Bullet melted straight through it, carving a chunk out of the side of its torso.

Every one of their attacks looked like it could’ve been instantly fatal on its own. The Hexalimbear let out a short, pathetic whimper, then toppled to the ground with an earth-shaking crash.

『Hell yeah! Meat, meat, meat!』 shouted Dora-chan, zipping about in an

ecstatic display of midair acrobatics.

『Meat time, meat time, yay yay yay!』 chanted Sui as it bounced happily to the rhythm of its own song.

“No, seriously, listen to me this time! We don’t know for sure if it’ll actually drop meat at all!”

『**Hmm. Indeed, this is true.**』 *Quit looking so surprised about this, Fel!*

『Say what? Whaddya mean, it might not drop meat?』

『No meat? Really?』

“No, I mean, we won’t know until we see the drops! They’re random, right? Ah, look—there it goes!” The Hexalimbear happened to vanish at just that moment, depositing its drop items on the ground. I gave them a look.

“Let’s see... Looks like a pelt, a liver, and a magic stone.”

『**Ugh! The worst has come to pass...**』

『Maaan, I had my hopes up too!』

『Awww, Sui wanted meat!』

The three of them were about as disappointed as it was possible to be.

“Don’t let it get you down, guys! These things happen. Let’s just keep moving, okay? The stairs to the next floor have gotta be somewhere in this cave!” I said, taking a single step into the mountainside cavern.

“Graaauuuuggghhhhhh!” With an earsplitting roar and footsteps that sounded like earthquakes, my worst nightmare thundered up the tunnel toward me.

“Aaaaugh! Th-There’s anotheer?!”

I shrieked in terror as a second hexalimbear bore down on me, its four enormous arms raised overhead. Before I knew it, the monster was so close I could feel its breath as it unleashed another roar that was so terrifying, my legs gave out and I toppled over backward.

『No bullying Master!』 *Pew!*

『**Impudent nuisance! Perish!**』 *Kra-kow!*

『And drop some meat while you’re at it!』 *Shwick!*

Sui, Fel, and Dora-chan unleashed the exact same attacks on the second hexalimbear that they’d used to brutalize the first one. It gurgled in pain, then crashed to the ground where it lay motionless. A moment later it disappeared, and...

『Yaaay!』 shouted Sui, bouncing in place with glee, 『it left meat behind!』

『Hell yeah, now that’s more like it! I’ve never tried this stuff before! I am

so hyped for this!» shouted Dora-chan.

《I would have preferred if the cut were larger, but I suppose it shall suffice.》

Larger? Fel, that's gotta be ten kilos of meat right there! What are you talking about?! My familiars had eyes only for the meat chunk, but the monster also dropped a claw and a magic stone, which I scooped up as well. Then I stopped and took a long, deep breath.

“Man, that almost gave me a heart attack... It came out of nowhere, I swear! My legs are still shaking!”

《Will you never remedy your ubiquitous cowardice? Stand straight and walk strong!》 said Fel, slapping me about with his tail. Which, for the record, was *not* helpful considering I was barely managing to keep myself upright as-is.

*“Hey, cut it out! And don't blame *me!* Anyone would freak out if one of those came charging up a corridor at them!” Seriously, I think I deserve credit for not pissing myself!*

《Those monsters are big, and nothing more. They are hardly worth making such a fuss about, and far from worth delaying our progress. We will never reach the next floor at this rate. Climb on my back!》

“I definitely haven't said my piece yet, but you know what, sure, I'll take you up on that. If it means we get out of this cave faster, that's good enough for me.” I staggered my way over to Fel and pulled myself up onto his back.

《We are off!》 Fel shouted, dashing off into the dark passageway. We came across a staircase at the end of the cave, which we quickly descended, finally emerging on the fortieth floor to find...

“Oh, come on! Another forest?!”

The fortieth floor was exactly as lush, green, and overgrown as the thirty-ninth floor had been. Trees as far as the eye could see.

“Hey, Fel? Please tell me this floor isn't as big as the last one was.”

《It is indeed. In fact, it may even be slightly larger,》 answered Fel, crushing my hopes and spirit in a single blow.

It's even bigger than the last forest? Just when I thought we were out of the woods! I think I'm gonna cry...

《Complaining will get us nowhere. Let us move on!》

《Not like we have any other choice. We can't get to the next floor without going through this one.》

I sighed deeply. Fel and Dora-chan were right, and I knew it.
『Just leave the monsters to Sui! Sui'll beat all of them up, don't worry!』
At least one of us is in a good mood, I guess. "All right, fine. Let's get this over with."

And so we plodded onward into another enormous forest floor.



The ratio of bug monsters to beast monsters was dramatically lower on this new floor than it had been on the thirty-ninth, but the number of ambushes we faced was more or less the same. We encountered a bunch of monsters we were already very familiar with—red boars, cockatrices, rockbirds, giant dodos, and giant deer—but also plenty of less common ones, such as giant horn bears and wild apes. Sui shot them all down from atop Fel's head before they became a problem, of course, and our journey through the woods was more or less danger-free.

『This is far enough. We shall bed down here for the night,』 Fel eventually declared.

"It is getting pretty dark. Sounds good to me," I replied.

I couldn't explain how it worked, but the "sky" in the dungeon did actually get dark at night and brighten up during the day. The same had been true of the faux-outdoor floors in the other dungeons we'd visited, like the desert and forest levels we'd been through previously. They were a nice change of pace from the floors where you couldn't tell what time it was, but I just couldn't get over how stupidly, unnecessarily huge they were.

『Oooh! Oh oh oh oh oh!』 shouted Dora-chan as he flapped his way in front of my face, waving his tiny arms in the air.

““Oooh’ what, Dora-chan?””

『It’s dinner time! That means you can make something with the meat we found! I’ve never tried that stuff, and I wanna eat it so bad you have *no* idea!』

“The bear meat? Ugggh, this is gonna be another huge pain...” I’d never actually cooked bear meat before, to be clear. I’d eaten it once in a hot-pot at a hot springs hotel I’d visited with my company, but that was the extent of my experience with the stuff.

Well, they’d *called* it a hot-pot, but it really seemed more like bear stew to

me. They'd seasoned the bear meat with miso, and it stuck out in my memory since it wasn't nearly as gamey as I'd expected it to be. It was just good, in a surprisingly normal sort of way.

Thinking back on that trip finally reminded me that I'd actually asked the hot springs hotel's staff about the recipe. That settled it for me. "If I have to use the bear meat, the only recipe that comes to mind is a bear hot-pot. That all right with you guys?"

《A hot-pot? That'd be awesome! Yeah, do that!》

《I too would not object to a hot-pot.》

《Sui loves hot pots! That sounds great!》

That settled it: we'd be having bear hot-pot for dinner. But that said, the people at the hotel had told me that bear meat's flavor and texture were highly variable depending on its age and the season it was hunted in. The one I tried back then had been caught right before it went into hibernation for the winter at just the right age, which was why it tasted so good.

Would the same principals even apply to a hexalimbear that lived in a dungeon, though? I gave its meat a sniff. "Hmm... It doesn't *smell* weird, at least. Guess I'll cook up a piece and do a taste test."

I sliced off a small strip of meat, seasoned it with salt and pepper, cooked it up, and gave it a taste.

"Huh. Actually, it's perfectly fine. Doesn't taste weird at all, and it's not even tough! I guess it has a little of that wild animal gaminess, but not in a bad way at all."

I was honestly caught off guard by just how palatable it was. In retrospect, of *course* it wouldn't taste quite the same as the bear meat I had back in Japan. This stuff was from a bear monster in a fantasy world's dungeon; it'd be weird if it *was* exactly the same.

"Yeah, I think this should be great in the recipe from that hotel!" I did my best to remember the hotel worker's instructions as I picked out ingredients from my Online Supermarket. Once I had them all ready, I started by prepping the veggies.

First you chop up some carrots and a daikon into fairly thin wedges, then shave a burdock root into thin slices, which you wash clean. Next up is the meat. I had a massive hunk of the stuff, so I started by breaking it down into chunks that were a little easier to work with and then slicing it as thinly as I could manage.

After that, you heat some sesame oil in a stockpot, toss the meat in and lightly brown it. Next, throw in the daikon, carrot, and burdock, sauté it a little longer, then add your stock. The people at the hotel had said that a kombu stock was the best option, but I didn't feel like making some from scratch, so I used a pack of instant kombu stock powder.

Normally, at that point, you'd bring it up to a simmer and skim the scum off the top of the stew to get rid of the bear meat's harsh, unappetizing flavors, but I found that with hexalimbear meat there was hardly any scum to skim off at all. I'd even bought these special sheets of kitchen paper to take care of that part—you laid one down on the surface of the stew, and it'd pick up all the nasty scum stuff when you removed it again, easy as pie—so I went ahead and used one anyway, just for good measure.

Next up is the miso! Add it in along with a dash of mirin—incidentally, I used a sort of miso with barley in it this time—and simmer it all for a little while longer. While it's simmering you can break apart a couple clusters of enoki and shimeji mushrooms, slice your green onion, and cube up a block of firm tofu. All of those ingredients cook really fast, so you add them right at the end of the process to finish off the dish!

I gave the stew a try, and I have to say, it was pretty darn tasty! It definitely still had a touch of that wild animal funk to it, but it wasn't unpleasant in the slightest. "Phew! That ended up taking a pretty long while, I guess, but food's done, guys!"

《A long while indeed! I tired of waiting long ago!》

《Yeah, I'm starving!》

《Sui's sooo hungry!》

"I know, sorry! I didn't realize how long I'd spent simmering it. It's done now, though, so here, give it a try!"

I served each of my familiars a big bowl of bear—or rather, hexalimbear meat hot-pot.

《Hmm... I see altogether too many vegetables, but I am so hungry I hardly even care,》 said Fel, digging in after a moment's hesitation. He scowled at the veggies in his bowl, but his distaste for them was outweighed by his voracious appetite.

《So *this* is bear, eh? Let's give it a try,》 said Dora-chan as he took a big bite of the unfamiliar meat.

《Yaaay, food!》Sui shouted with glee. The slime was already working

away at its serving.

I'd ended up using all four of my magic stove's burners to cook four stockpots of the stuff all at once, but in the face of my familiars' appetites, that massive quantity of hot-pot vanished in the blink of an eye. No matter how many times I witnessed it, their capacity to put away a supernatural quantity of food never stopped astonishing me.

『Now that was a meal!』 said Dora-chan as he happily patted his engorged belly. 『Gotta say, though, the bear meat wasn't *bad* or anything, but I like the stuff we got from those big-ass minotaurs better.』

Wait.

『By virtue of the meat alone, indeed, that is all but a given. Meat such as this is delectable in no small part because you do not eat it often.』

Waaait a second.

『Sui thought so too. The meat tonight was tasty, but the big cow-man monster meat was waaaay tastier!』

Suiiiii! You were just talking about how good the bear meat was! You were wolfing it down! How could you do this to me?! I won't lie, I thought the gigant minotaur meat was better too, but saying that out loud would be like admitting defeat.

Guess this means bear meat's a sometimes food.



Three days of travel later, we were still deep in the thick of the forest. Fel was right, the fortieth floor really was even bigger than the thirty-ninth had been. We'd gathered up a veritable mountain of pelts, horns, and fangs that various monsters had dropped along the way, but we hadn't gotten very much meat at all and my familiars were becoming more and more insufferable about the fact.

Finally, though, the trees thinned. The end was in sight, and as we arrived at the forest's edge, we found the floor's boss waiting to greet us.

“Wh-What the *hell* is that thing?” I whispered in awe as I poked my head out from behind a tree to take a look. I'd thought that the hexalimbear was unthinkably enormous, but this new monster—a golden deer-like creature—put even that to shame in terms of size. It was standing in a cluster of shrubs, leaning way down to munch on what looked like purple berries that were

growing from the bushes.

『Oooh? Now this is a remarkable find!』

“You know what it is?” I asked, my eyes still glued to the titanic deer.

『I encountered one once, long ago. I would have liked to dispatch it, but it fled before I had the chance.』

Fel, of course, was over a thousand years old. For him to have only seen the likes of this monster once meant that it really must have been incredibly rare.

『Yeah, I believe it. That’s just what I’d expect one of ‘em to do,』 said Dora-chan with a nod.

“You’ve seen one before too, Dora-chan?”

『Yeah, there was one of ‘em in the forest I used to live in.』 He explained that the one he knew had been an almost mythical creature that some considered the master of the forest. 『They’re smart, and they don’t like fighting either. I bet the one you met figured out you could take it in an instant and decided to run before it was too late.』

That sounded reasonable enough, but I was getting the impression that whether or not one of them ran from Fel, we were looking at a strong monster indeed.

『’Course, I was pretty young back then,』 Dora-chan continued. 『I’d never seen the thing fight, and I figured that the whole ‘master of the forest’ thing was probably a buncha bunk. I figured I could take it, and, well...』

Dora-chan scowled as he continued his story. The so-called master of the woods had made its home at the root of a tree that it was particularly fond of. The tree bore a sort of orange-colored fruit, and was the one exception to the monster’s pacifism. It would do its best to drive away any creature that tried to approach that tree, by intimidation if possible or force if necessary.

Dora-chan, meanwhile, was convinced that those orange fruits *must* be delicious and got it into his head that he had to give them a try. Long story short, he snuck past the master of the forest and stole one of the fruits, right under its nose. While trying to get away from the tree, however, his attempt at stealth was much less successful...

『I tell you, I thought it was gonna bring the whole forest down around me! You see those golden antlers? They can channel lightning magic through ‘em, and the one back then did its damnedest to fry me dead with it. Even worse, it just wouldn’t give up! Chased me for a whole day, I swear!』

Dora-chan shivered as he told the story. In the end, not only did he wind up dropping the fruit partway through the chase and never getting a taste of it, he actually had to abandon his home and leave the forest entirely. In complete honesty, my first thought was that he totally brought all that on himself.

All right! Let's see what this mystery monster that Fel's only seen once and Dora-chan got terrorized by in his youth is called!

【Zlatorog】

An S-ranked monster. Highly intelligent and generally docile, but prone to fits of violent fury when an item or place important to it is approached or threatened.

Welp, that's pretty much exactly what Dora-chan told me about it. “Prone to fits of violent fury when an item or place important to it is approached or threatened” raised some questions, of course. What, I wondered, did the zlatorog before us consider important to it? I was starting to feel optimistic. If we could just figure that out, we might not have to fight it at all!

Hmm... Ah! Of course! “Hey, guys, I think I have an idea about what that thing’s protecting!”

Dora-chan wasn’t listening, though. He was just staring at the monster’s feet.《The one back then *really* liked its fruit,》he muttered to himself.

“I bet we’re thinking the same thing. It’s gotta be whatever’s on those bushes.”

《Quite so. The plants that it is eating as we speak,》agreed Fel.

“S-So, what’s the plan? There’s a cave in the mountain back there, looks like. I bet that leads to the next floor, right?”

《In all likelihood, yes.》

Unfortunately, there was only one route to the cave’s entrance, and it passed directly through the field of purple fruit bushes. It was all but certain that the zlatorog would be unamused if we tried to walk through them, to say the least.

《Why bother fretting over it? If we must slay the beast to pass, then slay it we shall,》Fel said like it was just a matter of course. I had a funny feeling that deep down he simply *wanted* to fight the zlatorog.

《I could just fly over the thing,》said Dora-chan, 《but yeah, that’s not

exactly on the table for you guys. Think Fel's right. We're just gonna have to kill it. It might not be the same master of the forest that gave me hell, but that doesn't mean I can't vent my grudge on its ass anyway!»

Agggh, now Dora-chan's raring for a fight too! But, wait a second, isn't Sui usually the one who's most excited at times like these? And for that matter, where is Sui? The slime wasn't on Fel's back, and it wasn't in my bag or on the ground anywhere nearby either.

“Hey,” I said, turning to Fel. “Have you seen Sui recently?”

《No. I assume it must be somewhere nearby... Hmm? Oh, there it is.》

“What? Where?”

《Right over there,》 said Fel, gesturing with his nose.

“What the—oh god, Sui, no!”

Sui had bounced over to the bushes, then *onto* the bushes, and was currently sitting right by the zlatorog, looking up at it.

《Hello! Are these purple fruits tasty? Sui wants to try one!》

I could hear the slime's voice in my mind as it tried to strike up a conversation with the monster. I didn't know if the zlatorog could hear it, but boy, did it ever react. And by react, I mean it *shrieked* an incredibly loud, earsplitting war cry. A second later the two golden antlers atop its forehead began to crackle with electricity.

“Oh, oh god, oh god! I think we're in *really* big trouble, guys!”

《Yup, that thing's pissed.》

《It has flown into a fury.》

“Why are you acting so calm about this?!”

Meanwhile, the zlatorog had finished charging its antlers and unleashed a mighty bolt of lightning directly at my favorite slime.

Kra-kooow!

“Sui! Noooooo!”

《Oh, simmer down, sheesh! Look, Sui's right over there. It's fine!》 Dora-chan pointed into the bushes where I was relieved to catch sight of Sui, seemingly safe and sound.

“Oh, thank goodness... Wait, no, we've gotta save it! We have to rescue Sui before it's too late!”

Dora-chan and Fel exchange glances. 《‘Save it,’ he says.》

《I hardly see the need.》

“What are you *talking* about?! We don't have time for this! We've gotta

get Sui out—”

Before I could finish my sentence, I was cut off by another telepathic transmission from Sui itself.

《Jeez, that was dangerous! You’re not supposed to do stuff like that without saying something first; it’s mean! Sui’s getting mad now!》

Sui wasn’t the only one getting angry. The zlatorog was enraged to see the interloper in its field alive and unharmed, and let out another harsh, grating scream before unleashing another bolt of lightning at the slime.

Ka-crash! The blast slammed into the ground, but Sui bounced away with ease.

《Ah! You did it again! Sui’s really, *really* mad now! Sui’s gonna get you back for that! Hiyah!》

Pew! Pew! Sui fired a series of Acid Bullets between the zlatorog’s legs, aiming directly for its breast—in other words, its heart. The monster jumped and screamed louder than ever, though with pain this time instead of rage. A moment later, it slowly toppled to the ground.

《Serves you right! Sui’s super strong!》

“Sui...”

《See? We didn’t have to save it at all.》

《Sui has grown mighty indeed.》

Again, why do you sound so calm about this, Fel?! No, not the time, I have more important things to worry about! I rushed out from the treeline and sprinted over to Sui.

“Sui! What were you thinking, running off like that?! Do you have any idea how worried I was?!” I scolded, scooping the slime up in my arms.

《It was making these fruits look so tasty, and Sui just wanted to try them too! Sui’s sorry, Master.》 Sui extended a little tentacle, offering me one of the purple fruits from the bushes.

“It was all for the fruit, huh? I wonder if they’re any good?” It wasn’t especially big—about the size of a large grape, or so.

《Yeah! They’re super tasty! Try one, Master!》

Guess that means it’s already sampled one? Sui offered me the fruit again, and I decided I might as well give it a try.

“Th-Thanks,” I said, as I accepted it. I gave it a quick appraisal before I took a bite, just in case, and found that they were called violetberries. My appraisal told me that they were quite rare and only grew in certain very

specific habitats, but didn't mention anything about them being dangerous, so I popped one into my mouth.

"Oooh, this is great! It's sweet, and a little sour, and so *flavorful!* Sorta reminds me of a blueberry, but without any of the weird aftertaste those sometimes have. It's, like, the best blueberry I've ever had, and then some! If these are this good on their own, I bet they'd make an incredible jam!"

《Is 'jam' sweet, Master?》

"Yeah, it sure is!"

《Yaaay! Sui loves sweet things! Make jam, Master, please!》

"Ha ha, all right! Guess we'd better gather up a whole bunch of these violetberries, then. Think you can help me, Sui? And you too, Dora-chan! Fel...yeah, that's probably not happening. Stand guard, okay?"

《Sheesh, what a pain.》

《**Is standing guard all you would ask of me? Very well, then.**》

Dora-chan, Sui, and I set off into the field of bushes, foraging as many violetberries as we could get our hands on. Dora-chan was grumpy about it at first, but he was just as fond of sweets as the rest of us and put in a pretty solid effort in spite of his griping.

We plucked berry after berry, working so quickly you'd think we were trying to collect every last one of them, and in the end we gathered up five big sacks of fruit. Another zlatorog turned up at some point in the process, but Fel fulfilled his role as our lookout perfectly and killed it on the spot. Then Dora-chan started whining about how he was the only one who hadn't gotten to kill one of them, but I wasn't about to even consider waiting around for a third to show up.

"Okay, I think this should be plenty! I'll be able to make a ton of jam with all these."

《Hurray! Jam, jam!》

《**I have gathered the items the monster left behind,**》 said Fel, dumping the zlatorog's drops on the ground. It had left behind a shiny golden antler, an even shinier golden hoof, and a golden pelt that was somehow the most resplendent of all, plus two magic stones and a couple of items that I couldn't identify at a glance.

"What're these things? They look like rocks, but the colors are sorta weird."

《**I have appraised them, and they would seem to be teleportation**》

stones. The white one is good for a single use, while the blue one can be used five times in total.»

Teleportation stones? Oh, right. I guess they do look an awful lot like the one I got from that adventurer team, Ark. I wonder... “The other teleportation stone, the one Ark gave us, came from the thirtieth floor, right? Maybe this place is made so they only drop every ten floors. We’re really lucky, in any case. They’re supposed to be pretty rare, and we got two at once!”

When our party cleared the thirtieth floor’s boss room, we hadn’t found any teleportation stones at all, so they were hardly guaranteed drops. This was definitely a stroke of good fortune. The five-use limit was a shame, but we weren’t planning on sticking around the Brixt area forever, so for our purposes I figured it would be perfectly sufficient...hopefully.

“Hey, since we have these stones now, how about we go back to the surface for a little while?” I suggested. My familiars immediately piped up in unison to protest the idea, of course, but I kept talking to try and sell them on the plan. “Look, we were supposed to be in here for two weeks, right? It hasn’t been that long yet, but if we keep going any further than this we’re definitely gonna go past the two week mark before we get out of here. That’d be an issue, especially considering I have my offerings to the gods to worry about.”

There wasn’t any particular reason why I couldn’t handle my offerings *in* the dungeon, of course, but it always ended up being a lengthy process and I preferred to take care of it somewhere I could take things easy. Doubly so in this particular case, since I had the question of my next tenant to worry about.

《Hmph! Offerings to the gods are indeed a matter of grave importance. We cannot afford to be negligent with such things, so I suppose I must acquiesce. Dora, Sui, you both benefit from their blessings, so I trust you will not protest either?》

《Well, not when you put it *that* way, I won’t! Back to the surface it is.》

《Okay, Uncle Fel! Sui understands!》

That settled it. Our party would be heading back to the surface. The means to do so were conveniently nearby, as well. We found a room with a magical circle inside just to the left of the staircase down to the next floor. It had the exact same sort of plinth in its center that the teleportation room up topside featured, so I held the whitish stone up to it and said the words “First floor.”

Moments later, we found ourselves in a very familiar room. Light shined

through the entryway, and I could see crowds of adventurers passing to and fro just out the door. I basked in the sunlight as we finally emerged from the dungeon, back in the outside world at last.

“Finally, we’re back!”

『**But not for long. We shall make our offerings to the gods, then return to the dungeon immediately,**』 said Fel, instantly cutting in to spoil my moment of relief.

“What? No way! We’ve gotta spend *some* time taking it easy up here first. Five days, at least!” Suddenly, I was struck with an ominous premonition. “Wait a minute...am I forgetting something important? Hmm... Hey, when we use that stone to teleport back into the dungeon, we’ll be starting on the fortieth floor, right?”

『**Indeed.**』

Yeah, of course we will. That’s where we got the stone, after all, so of course that’s where it would take us. But something’s still bothering me... The fortieth floor... The fortieth floor... Ah.

“H-Hey, just checking—when we teleport in, will we end up at the *start* of the fortieth floor? So, like, we’ll have to go through the whole floor again?”

『*Yeah, most likely. ’S how it worked on the thirtieth floor, anyway.*』

Oh god.

“*Noooooooo!* We have to go through that stupid, *stupid* forest *again*?!” My sudden wail of despair drew an awful lot of attention from the surrounding adventurers, but in that moment I couldn’t have cared less. I’d just inadvertently doomed myself to *another* trip through the endless forest of misery.

『*Oh, hell yeah! That means I get to fight the master this time!*』

Stop being happy about this, Dora-chan! You’re gonna make me even more depressed!

Chapter 8: At Long Last, the Third Tenant

Our first destination after exiting the dungeon was the Adventurer's guild, to check in and report on our progress. We asked the receptionist at the window to tell the Guildmaster that we'd returned from the dungeon, and my plan was to head right on home after that, but Tristan was more sharp-sighted than I'd anticipated and caught us before we could make a break for it.

His relentless politeness got the better of me, and I found myself being ushered into his office in spite of my best efforts. My familiars had come inside with me, but none of them cared enough to make my predicament into their problem. The three of them sprawled out behind the chair I sat down in, ready to nap through my entire conversation.

"Oh, I'm so very happy to see you back already! Could it be that you've already explored the whole dungeon? So soon?!"

"Nooo no no, not yet! Not even we could pull it off *that* quickly." I explained how we'd reached the fortieth floor, found the teleportation stones, and returned to the surface for a break.

"I see, I see! So the fortieth floor is the next one where teleportation stones are available. That's breaking news, and making it that far down means you've set a new record! Nobody's ever gotten farther than the thirty-seventh floor up until now! Leave it to an S-ranker to outdo that achievement on his first try!"

"Ha ha ha, nah, I wouldn't go *that* far, really!" Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui deserved the overwhelming bulk of the credit, after all. "Oh, right, speaking of..."

His mention of the thirty-seventh floor reminded me of the adventuring party we'd briefly encountered there—the so-called strongest party in the country. I explained what had happened to Tristan, and showed him the weapons that I'd found discarded in the boss room.

"It can't be... But, no, it is. I'd recognize those weapons anywhere. I

see..." He let out a long, tired sigh, his shoulders slumped. That party had been the guild's biggest breadwinners, and the news was clearly hitting him pretty hard. "An adventurer's life is always fraught with peril, though. These things happen, and everyone in the business knows it."

That struck me as pretty harsh, but on the other hand, I supposed that for adventurers death was indeed just another occupational hazard. Tristan told me that the guild would take care of contacting the families of the deceased, and explained that since their owners weren't around to claim them, the weapons I'd found were mine by right.

"Now, not to change the subject," said Tristan, rubbing his hands together and smiling eagerly, "But I do have another important matter to discuss with you..."

That important matter, as it turned out, was him asking for any information I could possibly provide on the floors I'd traveled through, no matter how minor or seemingly insignificant. To adventurers on the forefront of a dungeon's exploration, any information they could get on the upcoming floors was of the utmost importance. The farther down in the dungeon they got, though, the harder such information was to come by. The fact that the guild only sold maps of the thirtieth floor and above was sort of telling, in that sense.

The thirty-seventh floor was the farthest any party had reached before we entered the picture, and knowledge about that region was so lacking, even the monsters that appeared were considered a mystery. That particular floor had ended up being a pretty exciting one for my familiars, though the reason was definitely not one other adventurers would consider their priority.

"I'm not asking you to tell me everything, of course!" Tristan clarified. "Perish the thought! But anything you can tell me that won't interfere with your own operations would be *greatly* appreciated."

"I'm fine with telling you everything I know, actually," I replied. "But I'm not sure if it'll amount to all that much, really. We didn't explore all those floors super exhaustively, so there's only so much I can tell you."

I gave Tristan a rundown on each floor's features and the monsters we had encountered there. He asked me all sorts of questions—about the previously unexplored levels after the thirty-seventh floor in particular—and I answered them all to the best of my ability.

"So the thirty-seventh floor is home to gigant minotaurs? I do believe I've

heard that name before,” he said, flipping through the pages of an illustrated monster reference guide. “Would these be the ones?” he asked, pointing at the page he finally found.

“Yeah, that’s them, all right. They were about twice the size of a normal minotaur.”

Tristan skimmed the page. “Hmm, hmm, I see! Their meat is exceptionally delicious, while their hides and horns are top-quality materials for arms and armor...” He cracked a smile as he mumbled to himself.

Eventually, he explained that when he first became a guildmaster, he’d decided that knowing everything he could about monsters and the value of their drops would be essential for his job, and had splurged on that book to help study up on the subject. Needless to say, that decision had quickly proven extremely prudent.

“The thirty-eighth floor had gigant minotaurs too, but *way* more of them than the thirty-seventh did,” I continued.

“I see, I see! In other words, any party that can make it through that floor will come back with more meat, hides, and horns than ever!” His eyes were practically sparkling with excitement.

I’m not selling you any meat, though, no matter how much you beg for it! My party’s resident carnivores would have my hide if I even considered it. I did my best to ignore the look in his eyes as I kept describing what I’d seen.

“Next was the thirty-ninth floor, which turned out to be a forest.”

“Oh ho, a forest, you say? I’ve heard rumors of floors with that sort of environment in other dungeons, but this is the first I’ve heard of such a thing turning up here in Brixt! This is a major discovery!” said Tristan, jotting notes down on a sheet of paper.

“Yeah, and it was absolutely full of bug monsters. The boss was a hexalimbear, though.”

Tristan did a double take. “A *hexalimbear*?!”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right.” That seemed like an overreaction, and when I asked him what the deal was, he explained that not only were hexalimbear furs exceptionally highly valued among the nobility, their livers could be used as an ingredient for a powerful aphrodisiac.

He swore me to secrecy before he was willing to tell me more, but once I promised it would stay between the two of us, he revealed that those aphrodisiacs were invariably snapped up by elderly nobles the second they hit

the market, no matter what price was demanded. I very pointedly *didn't* ask why elderly nobles would want something like that, but the important takeaway from the story was that hexalimbear livers were incredibly valuable. I didn't have any need for bear livers myself, so I immediately agreed to sell the one I'd found to him.

"And what about other materials?!" he instantly followed up.

Tristan, please, dial it down a little! "Umm, I picked up quite a lot of them, but I'd like to keep some of them for myself, and I haven't had a chance to sort through it all. I'll get back to you on that once I've finished taking inventory."

I'd only explored the twentieth floor and the thirtieth through fortieth floors, but in terms of the number of drops I'd obtained, my haul from the dungeon already rivaled my total acquisitions from the Dolan and Aveling dungeons. I'd need to spend a solid chunk of time looking through it all before I'd feel comfortable discussing it. Selling stuff could come after.

"I don't suppose there's *any* way I could convince you to make a sale at this moment?" asked Tristan hopefully.

"Sorry, but no. I really need to take inventory first." I understood where he was coming from, but I just couldn't budge on it.

"Ugh... Very well, then! I won't press the point." Tristan looked extremely disappointed, but I appreciated that he backed off anyway. I decided to take inventory and get back to him as quickly as I could manage.

"Anyway, I have a little more information about the dungeon," I said, jumping back to the previous discussion. "The fortieth floor was another forest level, but it had fewer bugs and more beast-type monsters. The boss was a monster called a zlatorog."

"A zlatorog? Would that happen to be..." Tristan paused for a moment to flip through his monster manual. "One of these?" he asked, showing me a page with a deer-like monster I recognized instantly.

"Yeah, that's the one! It was crazy huge, and every part of it was colored gold."

"Well in that case, you stumbled across another incredible monster indeed! Though I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything less from the fortieth floor's boss."

According to Tristan, not only were zlatorogs themselves extraordinarily rare, their golden antlers and pelts were extremely valuable. The most recent

recorded sighting of a zlatorog was a full century ago, when an S-ranked adventurer slew one of them and presented its pelt and antlers as a gift to the king of Marveil.

“The *most* recent one was a century ago, and it was given to a *king?* The materials are *that* valuable?”

“They most certainly are. Do you have any in your possession?”

“Yup. And I’ve got two zlatorogs’ worth of them too.”

“T-Two of them?!” I explained that we’d taken one of them down, stopped to harvest violetberries, and then killed another that arrived to attack us while we were busy.

The face Tristan made was indescribable. “Your party truly does defy all explanation,” he commented in an awestruck murmur.

Not the whole party! It’s just my familiars, really!

The conversation came to a close not too long after that, and we finally left the Adventurer’s guild behind, though not before Tristan reminded me that I should come back to sell him my materials as soon as possible.



We made our way back from the guild to the massive, luxurious home I’d rented, had a quick and simple dinner, then enjoyed our first soak in a proper bathtub in a very long time.

“Man, *nothing* beats a niice hooot bath...”

《Agreed!》

《The water feels sooo good...》

《**I cannot fathom how you enjoy this experience.**》

One of us, of course, was being a huge spoilsport. Fel scowled as Sui showered him with hot water using one of its tentacle-like appendages.

“Well, you’re filthy from all that time in the dungeon, so you’re just going to have to live with it.”

《**I am not filthy!**》

“No, seriously, you *really* are. You might not *look* that bad, but after running through the woods for that many days on end, your fur’s gotta be absolutely full of dirt. Just suffer through it; we’ll be done soon.”

《Ha ha ha, yeah, that’s right! ’Sides, baths aren’t even close to as bad as you make ’em out to be, Fel.》

《It feels so nice, Uncle Fel! Here, Sui'll shower you with more water!》

《**Grr. The two of you enjoy baths, and as such your opinions carry little weight!**》 Fel griped as I scrubbed his fur with a special veterinarian-recommended dog shampoo I'd bought from my Online Supermarket. For all his complaints, he didn't hesitate to give me very specific instructions about where and how hard I should scrub.

After Sui finished washing the suds from his coat, Fel dried himself off with a mighty shake and practically sprinted out of the bathroom. Dora-chan, Sui, and I lingered for quite a while longer, soaking it up in the tub and letting all the exhaustion that'd built up over the course of the dungeon just melt away.

After I finished with my bath, I headed out into the living room, where I found Fel lying on the floor. He'd already finished totally drying himself off with wind magic.

“See? You really *were* filthy! But your fur looks so much nicer now!”

Fel let out a frustrated harumph. 《**My fur is always immaculate,**》 he groused.

《Master, Sui wants to drink something sweet!》

“Okay, okay! The usual fruit milk, right? You want some too, Fel? Dora-chan?”

《**But of course.**》

《You have to ask?》

We spent a little while lounging around, but it wasn't long before my familiars retired to the bedroom on the second floor.

《We're headin' to bed,》 Dora-chan told me with a mighty yawn.

“Gotcha. Night!”

《**A horrific end to the day, truly. I will fall asleep at once.**》

“I don't care *how* horrific it was, Fel. Washing up after a dungeon's just common sense. Even bath haters have to clean up every once in a while.”

After my familiars went to bed, I was left to check my status and ponder the Tenant problem. “Speaking of status, man, the three of them sure did level up a lot! Especially Sui.” That wasn't much of a surprise, considering the slime had fought more than any of us.

My three familiars' current statuses looked like this:

【Name】 Fel

【Age】 1,014
【Race】 Fenrir
【Level】 947
【HP】 10,151
【MP】 9,778
【Attack】 9,442
【Defense】 10,172
【Agility】 9,974
【Skills】 Wind magic, Fire magic, Water magic, Earth magic, Ice magic, Lightning magic, Holy magic, Barrier magic, Rending Claws, Body Reinforcement, Physical attack resistance, Magic attack resistance, MP Efficiency, Appraisal, Battle Boost
【Blessings】 Blessing of the Goddess of Wind, Ninrir; Blessing of the God of War, Vahagn

【Name】 Dora-chan
【Age】 116
【Race】 Pixie Dragon
【Level】 202
【HP】 1,243
【MP】 3,469
【Attack】 3,324
【Defense】 1,173
【Agility】 4,048
【Skills】 Fire magic, Water magic, Wind magic, Earth magic, Ice magic, Lightning magic, Healing magic, Bombardment, Battle Boost
【Blessings】 Blessing of the God of War, Vahagn

【Name】 Sui
【Age】 6 months
【Race】 Huge Slime
【Level】 50
【HP】 1,756
【MP】 1,709
【Attack】 1,714
【Defense】 1,734

【Agility】 1,758

【Skills】 Acid Bullet, Potion Creation, Cloning, Water magic, Smithing, Giganticize

【Blessings】 Blessing of the Goddess of Water, Rusalka; Blessing of the God of Blacksmithing, Hephaestos

Fel's level had always been ridiculously high, which probably explained why he'd only gone up a single level, but the fact that he'd leveled up at all was impressive in its own right. His stats were a cut above the rest of the party. *Guess they don't call him a legendary beast for nothing.*

Dora-chan, meanwhile, had only gained three levels. He'd been high-level from the start as well, so again, no huge shock there. I had to wonder just how they managed to fight enough to level up when they were starting at such a high level already.

Sui, meanwhile, had gained eight levels. It had gone all-out on the combat during this expedition, and the fruits of its labor were clear to see...unfortunately. I'd known that going up a *couple* levels was inevitable, but I was still distressed. *Sui, please, you've been fighting way too much!*

"That just leaves me. I-It can't be *that* big a jump, right? After all the levels I gained from the vampire mosquitoes, it can't have gone up *much* more... Status Open!"

【Name】 Mukohda (Tsuyoshi Mukouda)

【Age】 27

【Race】 Kind of Human

【Job】 Victim from Another World, Adventurer, Cook

【Level】 90

【HP】 508

【MP】 499

【Attack】 495

【Defense】 480

【Agility】 394

【Skills】 Appraisal, Item Box, Fire magic, Earth magic, Perfect Defense, Double Experience Gain, Familiars (Contracted Magic Beasts): Fenrir, Huge Slime, Pixie Dragon

【Unique Skill】 Online Supermarket (+1)

《Tenants》Fumiya, Liquor Shop Tanaka

【Blessings】Blessing of the Goddess of Wind, Ninrir (small); Blessing of the Goddess of Fire, Agni (small); Blessing of the Goddess of Earth, Kisharle (small); Blessing of the God of All Creation, Demiurge (small)

“The *hell*?!”

What? I mean, what?! How did I level up five more times?!

I ran through my memories of the past several days, looking for an explanation. Finally, it hit me. “Oh, of course! The *ants*! It was the ants!”

I remembered the nest of forest army ants I’d exterminated on the thirty-ninth floor. “But I didn’t *do* anything! I just set up a few fumigation boxes and left it at that... But now that I think about it, I leveled up from the vampire mosquitoes that the incense killed too, didn’t I? Of course I’d get credit for the ants!”

The levels, of course, weren’t the real problem. The big issue was something I would’ve had to face whether I’d leveled up again or not.

“Guess it’s finally time for me to figure out what to do about this tenant.”



“Guess I should start by checking what my Tenant options are, huh?”

I wanted to at least see what was on the table before a certain goddess had the chance to kick up a fuss. I took a moment to steel myself, then poked the little +1 next to the Online Supermarket’s entry on my skill page.

【You have unlocked a Tenant for the Unique Skill, Online Supermarket】

【Please choose from the following:】

【BOS Burger / Yamada Dry Cleaning / Matsumura Kiyomi / Satou’s Fresh Fish】

<All riiiiight!> A shrill squeal of glee pierced directly into my brain.

Hi there, Kisharle. Guess you’ve been keeping a close eye on me, huh?

Also, boy, could I ever hear that one.

<Hee hee hee! My apologies.>

Funny. You sure don’t sound sorry to me.

Apparently, she’d done her homework on Japanese businesses.

Matsumura Kiyomi, after all, was the largest and most well-known drugstore franchise in all of Japan. I couldn't believe that I actually got a drugstore as one of my options, and considering how she'd been desperately wishing for one since she'd learned of their existence, I couldn't really blame her for being excited.

I sighed. Honestly, if it were up to me, I'd have taken the cleaners or the fish shop over a drugstore any day of the week. Getting my clothes washed in this world was a huge pain, after all. I'd gotten used to wearing the same outfit for longer than I had in my old life, to an extent, but my ability to endure being covered in dirt and the stink of sweat had its limits.

It wasn't so bad when I was at home in Karelina. The resident housewives handled all the laundry there. When I was on the road, though, I had no choice but to do my own washing whenever I had the opportunity. I'd bought a plastic washboard and some detergent from my Online Supermarket at one point, which made the task a little easier, but it was still unbearably tedious. If I had access to a dry cleaning place, though, I could leave it all to them! They'd probably send everything back nicely ironed too. Choosing them would make my everyday life *so* much more hygienic...

It goes without saying that the fish place was tempting me as well. Speaking as a Japanese person, I could never turn down fresh fish. I would've gone to *great* lengths for a plate of sashimi, but since the fish in this world were full of horrifying parasites, eating them raw was unthinkable. I was forced to cook everything I got my hands on, and my dreams of sushi remained unfulfilled.

Now, to be clear, my Online Supermarket *did* have a fish section and they *did* stock sashimi. That said, there's a world of difference between the fish you can get at your everyday grocery store and the fish they sell at a real specialist shop, and I was desperately craving the good stuff. They'd probably stock varieties of fish you couldn't get at a supermarket too!

All that said, though...even just thinking about what would happen if I succumbed to my desires and picked the cleaners or the fish shop gave me chills. Kisharle's voice in my head wasn't exactly helping with that either.

<I'm certain, of course, that a kind, considerate man such as yourself wouldn't dream of picking anything other than the drugstore! I believe in you! (Pick the drugstore. I believe you understand perfectly well what will happen if you choose anything else.)>

Her tone *sounded* nice and pleasant, sure, but the overall atmosphere of the exchange made it very clear that there would be hell to pay if I even considered opposing her. I could feel an invisible pressure bearing down on me.

“O-Of course I’ll be picking the drugstore! Here, watch!” I said, caving under the threat of Kisharle’s wrath. I pressed Matsumura Kiyomi.

【Form a contract with the Tenant: Matsumura Kiyomi?】

【YES / NO】

Needless to say, I pressed “Yes.” Not like I had any other choice.

【Contract formed with Matsumura Kiyomi.】

【The next Tenant will be unlocked at level 160.】

【We look forward to your continued patronage.】

<Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha, finally! At long, long last, I finally get to shop at a drugstore! I’ll buy it all, I say! I’ll buy it all! Aaah ha ha ha ha haaa!
 >

Welp. I think I broke Kisharle.

<How very rude! I am not broken in the least, I’ll have you know. I’m simply moderately enthused! After all, this means I now have the means to get my hands on all sorts of beauty products! I’ve done my research, and taken a long and deep look into your homeland of Japan. Oh, so many items I’d just love to try! I can hardly wait!>

She paused for a moment to erupt into another fit of ebullient laughter. *<I would love to see your new selection right away, but I shall restrain myself for the time being. Tomorrow, however, I trust you’ll have some time to spare for me?>*

“Sure thing,” I replied after a long, reluctant pause. *No way I can turn her down when she’s in this good a mood! I’m not even close to brave enough for that, ha ha ha.*

<What was that?!> interjected another voice—Ninrir’s, this time. *<That’s not fair, Kisharle! If you get to request stuff, then I do too!>*

Wow. Can’t believe I’m actually relieved to hear Ninrir barge into my head.

<Oh, you wanted to hear my divinely beautiful voice that badly? Hee hee! I'll give you an earful whenever you'd like!>

“Not even *close* to what I meant. Anyway, yeah, sure, if you have a request, I’ll hear you out.” *It’s right about time for me to make my offerings this month anyway.*

<I, naturally, want sweets!> declared Ninrir. *<Dorayaki, of course, and cake too! If there are any specials going on, I want all of those!>*

Dorayaki and seasonal cakes for Ninrir, then. I jotted her request down on a notepad.

<Kisharle's outta the running for now, so I'll go next,> said Agni, taking advantage of my promise to let Kisharle peruse the drugstore’s menu tomorrow. *<Not that I want anything different, really. Just beer. Y'know, the usual.>*

She asked for the same as always: a case of the premium beer that comes in blue cans, a case of Y-bisu beer, and a variety of local beers from smaller breweries. She had her favorites, of course, but she also wanted to test out as many different types as she could and emphasized that I should pick out a nice, varied assortment.

Normally Agni would ask for some snacks to go along with her drinks, but this time she’d decided to go all-in on the beer. According to her, she could get her followers to make all the snacks she could ever want, but I was her only means for getting her hands on really good beer. She was clearly looking forward to it, so I decided to pick out a few extra-nice variety packs for her to enjoy—within the confines of her monthly budget, of course.

<I'm next. I want ice cream. As many types as you can. Also cake—I want the limited ones too.>

That would be Ruka’s request, and unsurprisingly, she wanted the same thing as always. She asked for the same spread as last time too: an assortment of ice creams from both Fumiya and my standard Online Supermarket’s menu. Apparently the vanilla ice creams sold in each store were subtly different in flavor, and she enjoyed comparing them with each other.

As for her cakes, she had the same preference for seasonal stuff as Ninrir. I hadn’t checked Fumiya’s menu for that sort of stuff yet on this particular day, and I didn’t know if they were holding any events. *Hopefully they have a bunch of limited-time stuff in stock.*

<We're next, and we want whiskey!>

<As if you even had to ask.>

I really didn't. Hephaestos and Vahagn's alcoholic tendencies were hopelessly predictable. They asked for their usual bottle of the world's best whiskey each, and told me to fill the rest of their order with stuff they hadn't tried yet. Apparently they'd turned their mountains of empty booze bottles into a sort of collection, and had made a routine out of gazing at it and discussing all the varieties they'd tried as they enjoyed their daily dose of whiskey.

That covered everyone's requests. "All right, then! I'll send word tomorrow once I have it all ready." As the gods all went on their way with the usual (literally) heavenly chorus of thanks and excited shouts, one especially enthusiastic voice rose above the others.

<Hee hee hee! Oh, I cannot wait!>

Wish I could say the same. I sighed.



So the time's finally come...

Barely a day had passed since I returned from the dungeon. My only task today was to get my offerings ready, so I'd managed to take it relatively easy overall, but the prospect of the evening's divine consultation ended up looming over me the entire time regardless.

I'd just fed my familiars an early dinner, taken a short after-meal rest, and had relocated into a room I wasn't using for anything in particular to summon the gods. It was very easy to imagine the process taking a long time in Kisharle's case, so I made sure to set aside a good chunk of time for it. Considering how she'd been acting yesterday, I had a bad feeling that I'd regret it if I didn't.

No point putting it off any longer. I called out to the gods. "Ahem! Are you there, everyone?"

An instant later, the sound of a stampede was beamed into my mind, followed by Ninrir's bellowing voice.

<How long were you planning on keeping us waiting?!>

<Oh yes, it truly has been a long wait! A long, long wait indeed!> said a second voice.

<Hey! No pushing, Kisharle! Hands off!>

<I didn't push you, Ninrir! You tripped on your own. But that's not important anyway. The moment has finally arrived! Hurry, hurry, hurry!>

<Grrr! Kishaaarle!>

K-Kisharle? Don't you think you're getting a little too worked up?

<Nuh-uh, Kisharle, you're not making the rest of us wait! You get to go last today!> said a new voice.

<Agni?! But why?!>

<'Cause your turn's gonna take an eternity, that's why!>

<That's right,> said another, quieter voice. *<Let us go first, then take all the time you want to decide.>*

<I'll admit, Ruka, you might have a point. I do certainly want to take my time perusing my options.>

<Great, that settles it, so butt out, Kisharle! Sheesh, what was even the point of shoving me? You should've just been nice about it in the first place!>

<Okay, okay, simmer down, people,> cut in Agni. *<You're up first, Ninrir. Don't you want your stuff?>*

<Ah, that's right! Dorayaki! Cake! Hand over the sweets, and make it snappy!>

I know, I know! I pulled a cardboard box with all of Ninrir's offerings out from my Item Box and set it down for her. "Okay, this first one's Ninrir's share. Whenever you're ready!"

<Yes!>

The box vanished, and Ninrir's telepathic squee soon followed. I'd picked out a whole assortment of dorayaki for her this time—some with smooth red bean paste, some with a portion of the red beans still left intact, and some with chestnuts, whipped cream, and red bean paste all together. As far as the seasonal cakes went, I got her a premium chocolate shortcake, a strawberry cheesecake, a strawberry shortcake topped with a huge amount of the sweetest berries you could buy, and a whole assortment of individual cake slices and less remarkable whole cakes. *Let's see her complain about that spread!*

<All right, I'm next! Bring out the beer!>

Okay, okay! I have it right here, Agni, no need to rush me. I got her the cases and sampler packs she'd requested, plus a gift pack of some sort of special malt beer that was apparently brewed with natural spring water. I also

chose a variety pack of stout beers with bottles from a bunch of different brewers, since it happened to catch my eye. Finally, I picked up a half-dozen random six-packs to polish off her budget.

<Ooooh, now that's one hell of a variety! Can't wait to crack some of these open!> Agni exclaimed.

Glad to hear you're satisfied.

<I'm next.>

Don't worry, Ruka, I have your offering all ready as well. I knew how much she loved vanilla ice cream, so I got her everything Fumiya had to offer, plus the most expensive premium vanilla ice creams that my basic Online Supermarket stocked. I also picked out a variety of other flavors for her to try: strawberry, chocolate, matcha, rum raisin, and more. She'd asked for seasonal cakes, just like Ninrir, so her assortment of those ended up being more or less the same as the other goddess'.

The box vanished, and I heard a very quiet chuckle in the back of my mind. *Sounds like she's happy with it.*

<Arright, our turn next!>

<Woo! What sorta whiskey are we gonna get this time?!>

Oh, don't worry, I picked out a whole spread for you. As usual, I'd started with their customary two bottles of the world's best whiskey, then made my way to Liquor Shop Tanaka's whiskey rankings for the rest of my picks.

First up, I picked up a single malt whiskey that was recommended for people who liked their booze to have a smooth, smokey flavor. I had a feeling it might lack punch by Hephaestos and Vahagn's standards—they liked their whiskey hard and potent—but it was definitely something I'd never sent them before, so I figured it couldn't hurt.

Next was an Irish whiskey that was considered unique for being the only peated single malt Irish whiskey on the market. Honestly, I just saw the word “unique” in its description and threw it in my cart. I picked up another Irish whiskey while I was at it, which had supposedly found a dedicated fanbase among the true whiskey diehards, and was made with the attention to detail you'd expect from a favorite of that sort of crowd.

I threw in a couple other random varieties they hadn't tried yet from the list as well. I was sure they'd be happy with such a wide array of choices, and as expected, I heard an immediate laugh of glee as the box vanished.

<Oh ho, what have we here? I've never seen any of these whiskeys

before!>

<It's true! Nothing but new stuff! Let's try one out right away!>

With them out of the way, I'd reached a stopping point in my task. Unfortunately, though, the greatest trial was still yet to come...

<Hee hee hee, finally, it's my turn! The God of All Creation has cautioned us to avoid inconveniencing you...but I've waited for this drugstore for oh so long! I'm sure you wouldn't mind keeping me company just for today, would you?>

All I could do was nod in agreement. Her tone left absolutely no room for me to protest.

<Now then, let's have ourselves a look at the drugstore's menu!>

“All right...” I did as she told me, opening up my Online Supermarket’s new sub-menu. I would’ve loved to be doing anything else at that moment, but I just couldn’t think of a way to get out of it.

Is this just my life now? I have a horrible feeling it might be.



Kisharle wanted to start by taking a moment to casually browse through the new menu, so I opened it up and navigated to a famous cosmetics brand’s page, where our journey began.

A very considerable amount of time later, we’d finally finished our first run through the store’s stock. *<I really did think I'd done my research, but there are so many more options than I ever imagined! What a treasure this store is!>* Kisharle muttered ecstatically.

She explained to me that among the gods’ powers was the ability to look into other worlds, and that she’d been using it to scope out mine. Specifically, she’d been peeking into the cosmetics sections of every Japanese drugstore she could find and eavesdropping on the conversations of the women she came across in the process.

That’s where she had learned about fashion and cosmetics magazines. Her next step was to tail the women she saw buying them and read over their shoulders at every opportunity. They proved to be very good references, from the sound of things.

<They let me learn about all the newest products, and the features were so informative! I learned about the best moisturizers, how to deal with loose

skin—they introduced me to so many wonderful tools! The only problem is that every time I got to read one, my wishlist just ended up getting longer and longer. I can hardly manage it anymore!>

Anyway, once we'd finished browsing through the full menu, Kisharle was finally satisfied enough to move on to selecting her purchases.

<This is a new type of foundation that just hit the market. All the magazines are giving it rave reviews!> Kisharle cheerfully explained about a pink bottle in the new products section. *<If you use it along with a beauty oil that works well for your skin, it's supposed to make those frustratingly tiny wrinkles vanish like they were never even there! How wonderful! And it's affordable to boot!>*

Evidently, she really *had* done her homework. Even her grasp of their typical pricing was on point. Obviously, I could tell that the prices of items in my Online Supermarket were based on what you'd pay for them in Japan, but apparently Kisharle had managed to pick up on that fact as well somewhere along the way.

<Oh, but it would be so hard to pass up this skin cream,> she continued, pointing out another product she must have learned about from a magazine.

The cream was part of a series of skincare products manufactured by some pharmaceutical company or another, and it had been so well-received by the public that drugstores everywhere were starting to stock it. It supposedly had a smooth, rich texture that made it feel exceptionally pleasant, and it was extremely effective at managing wrinkles and increasing the elasticity of skin.

"Why not just buy both of them?" I suggested. The foundation cost six silver coins and five copper coins, while the skin cream was a single gold coin even. They were expensive, sure, but they'd fit in her four gold coin budget no problem.

<I'd love to, but there are just too many other items I'd like as well, not to mention the everyday necessities I'm running low on! To make matters worse, there are some products I just can't get, even at a drugstore.> She name-dropped a foreign cosmetics manufacturer at that point and explained how much she'd love to try their products out. I figured she must've learned about them from one of those magazines as well.

"Those have gotta be really upmarket items, right? You can't exactly walk into a corner store and pick them up on a whim."

I could thank my beauty-product-loving sister for that particular piece of knowledge. She used to make me buy all sorts of crap for her under the pretense that they were “birthday presents.” It bugged me at the time, but in retrospect I only had to deal with it once a year, and the whole experience felt like a pleasant memory now. Well, maybe not *pleasant*, but the point is it was all in the past.

<I can hardly contain my interest, but you’re right. Drugstores simply don’t deal in products of that quality. > Kisharle’s words were laced with a tone of profound disappointment.

All that said, though, Matsumoto Kiyomi actually *did* have a small selection of upmarket cosmetics in stock, from the look of things. One submenu in particular caught my attention—Kisharle didn’t seem to have noticed it, but I’d been shocked when I glimpsed it out of the corner of my eye. It was for a brand that made one of the very same skincare lotions my sister had forced me to buy for her, a single bottle of which cost ten thousand yen.

I never would’ve imagined a drugstore stocking something like *that*. Their products were being sold at a discount compared to what you’d pay in a boutique store, but they were still expensive as hell. Honestly, I’d gone out of my way to distract Kisharle from that page. If they had the brand’s full skincare lineup in stock, four gold coins wouldn’t even come close to covering the cost.

That said, Kisharle had proven herself to have remarkably good intuition in the past. There was no telling how long I’d be able to keep her distracted, and all I could really do was pray that she didn’t notice.

Kisharle went on to point out another product that had caught her interest.

“This one?”

<Yes, that’s it! Go on, read the description! >

“Let’s see... Says here it ‘softens rough skin.’”

<Hee hee hee, excellent! I’ve been dealing with precisely that problem! I’d love to buy a solid stock of these toners, but it’s so hard to manage with a budget this limited. I’ll have to inspect my options with the utmost care. Next! >

I was forced to read the descriptions of item after item as Kisharle found even more products that caught her eye. Eventually, I decided to ask her something that I’d been wondering about for quite some time.

“By the way, Kisharle, I know you’re into cosmetics, but what about, like, full-on makeup? Are you not interested in lipstick and stuff?”

Considering how many magazines she’d read, there was no way she wasn’t aware of them. My sister bought a ton of those magazines on a monthly basis, so I’d been exposed to them often enough to know that they featured tons of heavier makeup. My sister was super into skincare, of course, but she spent plenty of money on that sort of thing as well.

<I’m interested, certainly,> replied Kisharle, <but in my view having beautiful skin is of the absolute utmost importance, beyond all else. And besides, if I started down that path then no budget could ever be big enough to satisfy my needs! I wouldn’t say no to a tube of lipstick and a manicure set, of course, so I suppose I’ll have you give me a glimpse at those menus while we’re at it.>

She was particularly interested in manicures, as it turned out, and was happy to tell me all about how much she’d love to paint her nails with all sorts of designs someday. I, of course, didn’t get it. I mean, they’re *nails*, for crying out loud! They *look* nice if you glue sparkly crap to them or paint flowers on them or whatever, sure, but I could only imagine how much that sort of decoration would get in the way when you were trying to cook. I didn’t even understand what the point of getting your nails all prettied up was in the first place, really.

A short while later, Kisharle had finally looked at everything she was interested in. “So, what’ll it be?” I asked.

<Hee hee hee hee, oh, but I’m not quite done yet! I know you think I didn’t notice, but I assure you, I very much have.>

“Huh? Noticed what?”

<ST-III, of course! What else?>

Ugh!

<Did you forget, perhaps, that I can hear your thoughts? Keeping it secret was hopeless from the very start.>

Riiight, the gods can read my mind. My only chance at keeping anything secret from them would be to go out of my way not to think about it, and unfortunately, I wasn’t nearly disciplined enough to pull that off.

“Y-You’re really going there, huh...?” I sighed. “All right, fine. The ST-III line, right? Let me warn you in advance, though, that stuff’s *stupid* expensive.” I opened up the forbidden menu and picked out the line of items

she was talking about. They were so well-reputed that their brand name, ST-III, was practically synonymous with skincare.

<The magazines all mentioned that they were expensive, but I must admit, seeing the prices for myself did make me wince...> she mumbled.



Yeah, I can definitely relate. I'd been forced to buy some of the stuff myself, so I knew exactly how painful their prices were. The biggest size of lotion they sold was a tiny little 230ml bottle, but it still somehow cost twenty-two thousand yen, *plus* tax. Seriously, twenty-two thousand yen for a single bottle of *lotion!* The time my sister nagged me into buying her a bottle of the stuff, I spent the entire trip back clutching the shopping bag like my life depended on it for fear of dropping the thing and breaking it.

Matsumura Kiyomi apparently had it on a slight discount, but I really do mean slight. A single bottle cost two gold coins and one silver. That was a hefty price to pay, no two ways about it. Buying one would eat half of Kisharle's budget in a single bite. *What's she gonna do, I wonder?*

Kisharle hemmed and hawed as she mulled over her options until finally she spoke up again. *<All right, I've decided! I'll take it!>*

"R-Really? You're sure about that?"

<I am!>

I wasn't about to second guess her, and added a bottle of ST-III skin lotion to my shopping cart. "Okay, what else?"

<A bottle of the ST-III-brand body cream as well!>

"What, seriously?" My sister had me pick up a bottle of that stuff too, so I knew that it was another super expensive product. Eighty grams of the stuff came out to seventeen thousand yen, again before you added in the tax. Matsumura Kiyomi was selling it at a price point of one gold, six silver.

The two types of lotion together would come out to three gold, seven silver in total. She'd be spending the vast majority of her budget on just two items.

<I'm quite serious, yes. Every magazine I came across mentioned the ST-III line, and all of them rated it highly! That simply has to mean that it's effective enough to merit the cost!>

She had a point—or at least, my sister said the same thing. According to her, the benefits more than outweighed the expense. I didn't get it at all, of course. Maybe if I were a girl too, I'd understand why they valued that sort of thing so highly.

In any case, I did as I was told and put the ST-III body cream into my shopping cart. She said to use the rest of her budget on nail polish and nail polish remover, so I picked up bottles of pink, yellow, and beige polish and a bottle of remover as well.

With that, she'd used up every last copper of her budget. I checked out, sent the cardboard box her way, and was thanked with an immediate and ear-piercing squeal of glee.

<Yes! Oh, yes! I've finally, finally gotten my hands on some ST-III! Oh, how I've longed to try it for myself! Thank you! Thank you so, so much, and talk to you again next time!>

And just like that, she was gone. I sighed with relief.

"All right, that's finally over with. Now I just have to take care of Demiurge's portion."

The God of All Creation was on a whole different level than the rest of the divinity, so I always made a point of handling his package separately. He also never made specific requests, which made picking stuff out for him go much quicker. I'd already chosen a nice selection for him this time around, and since I'd gotten my hands on quite a fair sum of treasure in the dungeon, I'd decided to splurge a little.

First up was a sake set from Liquor Shop Tanaka. It came with six bottles, all of which were top-shelf stuff from a particularly renowned brewery. I also threw in a second five-bottle set that came with sakes that had won first place in a variety of competitions.

Next, I got another set from the store's recommendation section, this one of umeshu. It came with three bottles, one of which was brewed using plums at the peak of their ripeness, while the second used shochu and unrefined brown sugar, and the third used plum puree in place of the more typical whole fruits. I picked out another sampler set as well, which included three bottles of whiskey-based umeshu.

Last but not least, I'd made him a helping of gigant minotaur sukiyaki, which I figured would pair really nicely with the sake. My preparations complete, I cleared my throat and called out to him. "Are you there, Demiurge? I have something for you, if you'd like!"

<Ho ho ho! Many thanks, as always! And oh, my, what a feast you've prepared for me!>

"You deserve it! You were right about the twentieth floor, and that advice ended up earning me a ton of treasure."

<Still, though, many thanks! And many apologies, while I'm at it. Kisharle's behavior today was truly disgraceful. I'm well aware of how much she imposed upon you, in spite of my explicit instructions to the contrary... It

seems I'll have to rake her over the coals again. >

“No, no, it’s fine, really! This was sort of a special occasion for her.”

She’d been longing for that drugstore for so long, I could hardly blame her for going a little overboard. I knew for a fact that I’d behave as immaturely as she had if I finally got my hands on something I’d been wanting for that long. I think most people would, really. But that said...

“I *would* rather not spend quite that long on it next time, though. I’d appreciate it if you’d ‘rake her over the coals’ if she does it again.”

<Ho ho ho, very well, then! If that’s what you would prefer, then that is what I shall do. I’ll take my time and make it very clear that she should be more prudent in the future! Ho ho ho ho!>

“Ha ha, great, thanks.”

<Think nothing of it! Until next time!>

And with that, it was over. I had a feeling that Kisharle knew not to cross that line again, frankly, but with Demiurge on my side I figured I wouldn’t have any issues next month even in the worst case.

“Well, that took forever! I bet the others are already asleep, and I think it’s about time for me to join them.”



The next day, with the looming problem of the gods’ offerings—or, really, the looming problem of my new Tenant—resolved, I decided to move on to sorting out all the drop items I’d picked up over the course of the dungeon. Tristan was probably fretting over them at that very moment, and I didn’t want to keep him waiting forever.

There were so many of them that I really wasn’t looking forward to the process, to be honest, but I suppose compared to other adventurers’ worries, that was one hell of a first world problem. “All right,” I exclaimed, slapping my knees to hype myself up. “Time to get this over with!”

『What’re you doing, Master?』 asked Sui, who happened to be nearby.

“I was just about to sort through all the dungeon drops. Y’know, see what we found, tally it up, that sort of thing.”

『Oooh, that sounds fun! Sui’ll help too!』

“Aww, thanks, Sui! I can always count on you to come through for me! Unlike *some* people...”

I glanced over at my other familiars, who had woken up for breakfast and then summarily passed out again. I could hear them snoring from across the room.

“Yeah, those two are out like a light. Meh, they probably wouldn’t have been helpful for this anyway.”

《C’mon, Master, let’s start!》

“Yeah, sounds good. All right, Sui, how about I pull stuff out, and you keep count of how many we have?”

《Okaaay!》

My Item Box made the process a lot easier than it would’ve been otherwise, but the only way for me to access it was via a list that was ordered chronologically by when I’d stored the items inside. That didn’t tell me nearly enough to get a decent count of everything in there, so I’d have to do some legwork if I was going to put together a full inventory.

“All right...let’s start with the stuff we found exploring the twentieth floor.” The gargoyles there had mostly dropped a variety of gems. I’d found aquamarines, garnets, amethysts, turquoise, moonstone—all sorts of stuff. I decided to start by pulling out all the gems at once.

《Ooh, blue stones! There’s one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, umm...next is... Master, what comes after ten?》

The sheer childlike innocence of Sui’s question nearly gave me a heart attack. My little slime might’ve been a living weapon that could give Fel and Dora-chan a run for their money in terms of overwhelming violence, but it was also still a little kid. It forgot how to count higher than ten all the time when we took our baths together.

Unfortunately, that meant it wasn’t going to be very productive to put Sui on counting duty. I had a feeling it might cry if I told it that I didn’t need its help, though... *Ah, I know!*

“New plan, Sui. I’ll count the items, and you can pack them all up into sacks when I’m done, okay?”

《Yeah, okay!》

“Oh, and if we’re storing them in bags...” I quickly purchased an oil-based marker from my Online Supermarket. “Might as well write down the type and number of gems in each bag while I’m at it.”

Okay, here goes—aquamarines first. One, two, three, four, five...

Long story short: it took forever.

“Phew! Finally finished!”

《Indeed, all thanks to my aid.》

《Yeah, did’ja have to pull us into this? I had another nap scheduled after lunch!》

“Yeah, yeah, keep your complaints to yourself, thanks. And wait, you were gonna sleep *more*? Isn’t that a bit much, even for you guys?”

Fel and Dora-chan had woken up just in time for lunch, and I’d thrown together some quick and easy ginger-fried orc bowls to appease them. Sorting through the drop items had been going nowhere fast up to that point, so I’d ended up conscripting them as well before they’d had the chance to leave.

《Hey, hey, Master! Y’know what? Sui thought helping was super fun!》

“You’re such a good kid, Sui! Unlike *some* people.”

《Hee hee hee! Sui’s a good kid!》 The slime jiggled happily.

With all familiars lending a hand, I’d somehow managed to sort through the whole mountain of items. I wasn’t about to sell the meat, violetberries, or magical pendant I found in that one chest, though, so I left those off the list, which read as follows:

Aquamarine (tiny) x 22, garnet (tiny) x 11, amethyst (tiny) x 13, turquoise (tiny) x 16, moonstone (tiny) x 21, citrine (tiny) x 15, lapis lazuli (tiny) x 14, rose quartz (tiny) x 10, cat’s-eye (tiny) x 9, aquamarine (small) x 2, amethyst (small) x 1, citrine (small) x 3, ruby (small) x 1, sapphire (small) x 1, emerald (small) x 1, onyx (small) x 72, jade (small) x 81, onyx (medium) x 9, jade (medium) x 13, gazer’s magic stone (tiny) x 29, topaz (medium) x 16, emerald (medium) x 10, aventurine (medium) x 18, peridot (medium) x 15, sunstone (medium) x 21, sapphire (medium) x 9, agate (medium) x 23, amethyst (medium) x 18, ruby (medium) x 8, diamond (large) x 4, ruby (large) x 2, opal (large) x 2, malachite (large) x 3, morganite (large) x 2, emerald (large) x 2, stone golem’s magic stone (tiny) x 22, iron golem fragment x 44, iron golem’s magic stone (tiny) x 44, ogre skin x 122, ogre horn x 93, ogre’s magic stone (tiny) x 31, red ogre skin x 14, red ogre horn x 6, red ogre’s magic stone (medium) x 20, blue ogre skin x 11, blue ogre horn x 3, blue ogre’s magic stone (large) x 14, green ogre skin x 18, green ogre horn x 6, green ogre’s magic stone (tiny) x 24, black dog hide x 58, black dog’s magic stone (small) x 24, gigant minotaur skin x 196, gigant minotaur horn x 180, gigant minotaur’s magic stone (large) x 470, vampire mosquito

proboscis x 265, vampire mosquito wing x 284, vampire mosquito's paralysis poison x 169, green longhorn beetle shell x 4, red longhorn beetle shell x 3, giant black longhorn beetle shell x 1, giant black longhorn beetle's magic stone (small) x 1, poison earwig's paralysis poison x 3, giant horsefly wing x 4, poison snail's acid x 6, forest army ant pincer x 528, forest army ant queen pincer x 1, forest army ant queen's magic stone (tiny) x 1, giant killer mantis scythe x 14, giant killer mantis magic stone (small) x 3, paralyze butterfly's paralysis poison x 6, venom tarantula poison sac x 16, giant centipede shell x 8, giant centipede's magic stone (small) x 3, giant Hercules beetle shell x 1, giant Hercules beetle's magic stone (large) x 1, kaiser stag beetle shell x 1, kaiser stag beetle's magic stone (large) x 1, hexalimbear pelt x 1, hexalimbear liver x 1, hexalimbear claw x 1, hexalimbear's magic stone (huge) x 2, red boar pelt x 18, red boar tusk x 6, cockatrice feather x 23, rockbird beak x 16, rockbird feather x 24, giant dodo beak x 8, giant dodo feather x 13, giant dodo's magic stone (tiny) x 2, giant deer pelt x 9, giant deer antler x 8, giant deer's magic stone (tiny) x 1, giant horn rabbit pelt x 3, giant horn rabbit horn x 4, giant horn rabbit's magic stone (tiny) x 1, wild ape hide x 28, great wolf pelt x 8, great wolf's magic stone (small) x 8, red tiger pelt x 4, red tiger's magic stone (small) x 4, forest panther hide x 3, forest panther's magic stone (medium) x 3, murder grizzly pelt x 6, murder grizzly liver x 2, murder grizzly claw x 4, murder grizzly's magic stone (large) x 6, tyrant gorilla hide x 1, tyrant gorilla heart x 1, tyrant gorilla's magic stone (large) x 1, zlatorog antler x 4, zlatorog hoof x 4, zlatorog pelt x 2, zlatorog's magic stone (huge) x 2

And from the treasure chests:

Gold bar x 16 (from the twentieth floor's chest), diamond pendant x 1, diamond earring x 1, ruby ring x 1, gem-studded bracelet x 1 (all from the thirty-fourth floor's chest)

Welp. That's a lot, all right.

We hadn't even finished exploring the dungeon yet, and I'd already accumulated a ridiculously huge stock of items. I was doing my best to be picky and choosy about the stuff I bothered to grab, as well. I'd left behind plenty of items that I figured I didn't really need.

The only thing I could possibly complain about was how few treasure

chests I'd come across, but that was to be expected, considering I hadn't explored every nook and cranny of each floor. Even so, I'd found a dazzlingly huge number of gems, which I'd been told were considered the dungeon's local specialty. Both the gargoyles and gazers had dropped them, though only small ones, and when I made it to the stone golems, they sometimes dropped mid-sized gems. To top it off, all three types of monsters would occasionally leave a really big gemstone behind—it was sorta like hitting the jackpot in the monster lottery.

I'd found a ton of different varieties, and I was sure Tristan would be ecstatic to see them. Well, I hoped so, anyway. I couldn't care less about gems, myself, so I was hoping that he'd take the whole lot of them off my hands.

In any case, my big task for the day was all wrapped up. "All right, guys, that's a wrap! Wanna have dinner?"

《But of course, and I shall expect an especially luxurious one as thanks for my aid.》

《I like the sound of that!》

《Oooh, fancy dinner! Sui's gonna eat a ton!》

"Ha ha ha, something fancy, huh? I think I can make that happen! Let's put some of these drops to work!"



I made my way to the kitchen and got right to cooking. My parents used to end up receiving an awful lot of a certain ingredient every once in a while, and they'd always send me a portion of their haul. That meant that I had to figure out how to eat it all, and I found myself looking up recipes to try out online.

That's how I learned about the dish that I was planning on making. I'd only ever made it once before, but I thought I remembered it well enough to pull it off again, at least. I did my best to remember the recipe as I stocked up on ingredients.

My plan was to make a blueberry sauce to serve on three different cuts of meat...though since I'd be using the violetberries from the dungeon, I guess it was technically going to be a violetberry sauce. Blueberry sauce pairs surprisingly well with just about any sort of meat, and I figured that using

three different types in the same dish would give the whole thing a really luxurious impression. It seemed like the perfect meal to fulfill my familiars' request.

"And as long as I'm using violetberries," I mumbled to myself, "I might as well make a dessert with them too! Having an all-violetberry meal could be kinda fun. I have that magic fridge, so I should be able to put something simple together easily enough."

I knew just the dessert to make: yogurt jelly with violetberry sauce on top. The yogurt jelly would need time to cool and set up, of course, so my first step was to bring out my magic refrigerator and get it running. After all, I didn't want to waste the ingredients if it turned out the fridge was on the fritz for whatever reason. I pulled it out from my Item Box.

"Let's see...how did Fel say to get this running, again?"

The front side of the fridge's top half had a magic circle drawn on it, and at the center of that circle was a little cavity. If I remembered correctly, all I had to do was install a magic stone into that slot and it would activate on its own. I selected a small magic stone that looked like it was about the right size and shape, and slotted it in.

The magic circle instantly began to glow faintly, and I heard a dull whirring sound as the fridge started up. I opened up the door to check the inside temperature, and was surprised to find that it was already nice and chilly. Even better, it was easily as cold inside as the fridges in my old world got.

"All right, looks like the fridge won't be causing any problems! Time to make some yogurt jelly!"

The first step is to combine a packet of powdered gelatin with some water and let it sit for a while to fully hydrate. While you're waiting on the gelatin, mix some milk and sugar in a saucepan and bring it to a simmer. Add the gelatin once it's ready, and leave the pot on the heat just long enough for the gelatin to totally dissolve. Once everything is fully combined, take the pot off the heat, add in your yogurt, and mix it all up again.

At that point you're basically done. Just portion it out into containers and place them in the fridge to chill and set! Incidentally, the containers I chose for Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui's portions were extra-large glass bowls that I bought from my Online Supermarket. I figured that would be just right for my party of gluttons.

Next up is making the violetberry sauce! It has to chill before serving as well, so I figured it would be best to get it done nice and early.

To start, slice the violetberries in half. That helps them break down as they cook. Since violetberries are on the larger side of the berry spectrum, it doesn't take nearly as long as it would with blueberries.

Once the berries are all halved, dump them in a saucepan with some granulated sugar and a bit of lemon juice, and put them on a low flame, simmering and stirring until the berries' juices have fully seeped out, the sugar's totally dissolved, and the whole mixture is starting to get just a little bit jammy. That's all it takes. Once it reaches that stage you just pull it off the heat and refrigerate it!

With that, my dessert preparations were complete and I could move on to the main course. I decided to use giant minotaur, rockbird, and red boar meat as my three cuts of choice. I roasted the giant minotaur in my oven and sautéed the other two meats in a frying pan. They'd all be getting the violetberry sauce treatment in the end, so I kept the seasoning simple. Just salt and pepper for all three of them. Speaking of which, while the meats were cooking I had to actually make the savory batch of violetberry sauce!

Somewhere around that time, a thought struck me. "Man, not to talk myself up or anything, but I've *really* gotten better at cooking lately. I guess I did have 'Cook' show up in my list of jobs a while back... I wonder if that means that my cooking skills improve every time I level up? Not that I've ever considered myself a cook in the first place."

I didn't consider myself an adventurer either, for what it's worth! In my mind, my primary occupation was being a merchant. I hadn't done anything even remotely merchant-like in a very long time, but I still liked to think of myself as technically being one.

Meanwhile, I kept putting together the second violetberry sauce. This one starts with putting halved violetberries in a saucepan along with red wine, soy sauce, balsamic vinegar, honey, salt, and pepper. Ingredients aside, it's basically the same as the first sauce from that point on. Just cook it down until it starts to thicken, and you're good to go.

The roast beef—I mean, roast giant minotaur—had just finished cooking by the time I was wrapping up work on the violetberry sauce, so I pulled it out of the oven, sliced a piece off the end, and gave it a taste test with a spoonful of the sauce.

“Yup, thought so. That works pretty great!” The sauce was unlike anything I’d cooked recently, and the dish was just plain delicious on the whole. Sweet, sour, and fruity sauces pair much better with meat than I ever would’ve guessed.

As I happily chewed away, though, I sensed somebody glaring at me from outside the kitchen. Three somebodies, really: the ever-hungry trio of Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui.

『Hey! How dare you eat on your own while we starve?!』

『Yeah, what he said! Dish it up already; I’m famished over here!』

『Master, Sui’s huuungry!』

“It was just a taste test, guys, lighten up! And anyway, it’s already done, so it’ll be out before you know it. Just wait a couple more minutes!”

『Very well. Only a couple,』 huffed Fel as the three of them plodded back into the living room.

Sheesh, I can never catch a break with those three... I started plating their meals. If I was going to make a fancy dinner, I wanted it to look the part, so I bought some new dishes that were white, flat, and extra-large to serve the feast on. I started by slicing the roast gigant minotaur as thinly as I could, arranging it on each dish like a flower bud with a little sprig of mint right in the middle. Then I dribbled the violetberry sauce in a circle around the meat flower to finish off the first dish.

I used the same sort of plates for the other dishes as well. Next up was the rockbird sauté. I sliced up the cuts of rockbird, arranged them in a line on the plates to make them look as appealing as I could, and garnished them with mint leaves off to the side. A scoop of sauce on top of the meat, and dish number two was good to go as well!

For the third and final dish, the red boar sauté, I tried spreading the meat slices out in a sort of fan-like pattern. I placed a mint leaf at the bottom of the fan where all the pieces overlapped, and drizzled violetberry sauce over everything.

With that, the whole meal was complete! It looked fancy, that’s for sure, and the brilliant color of the violetberry sauce made the whole feast appear incredibly delicious.

Wait, this is no time to be admiring my work! I’ve gotta get this out to my familiars before they start a riot!



《This...is remarkable! I would not have expected a sauce that is so sweet and yet sour to pair with meat as perfectly as this one does.》

《You said it!》

《It's so tasty!》

I was devastated as I watched my familiars inhale their meals. They clearly liked the food, of course, but they'd also pounced on it the second I set it down in front of them. I'd hoped that they'd take at least a second to appreciate the effort I'd put into making my plating all nice and fancy, but nope, not so much as a passing comment on the aesthetics of the meal. It was probably a mistake to expect anything of the sort from them, honestly.

“Fel, the one you’re eating is gigant minotaur meat. The one Dora-chan went for is red boar meat, Sui’s is rockbird, and the sauce is made from violetberries. What do you think? Pretty fancy, right?”

《Indeed. The chance to try three different types of meat at once is most welcome.》

《And this sauce works *crazy* well with the red boar meat!》

《Oh, does it now?》 said Fel, immediately turning to his own plate of red boar meat. 《Hmm, yes, Dora was right. This is exquisite!》

Sui was quickly lured into sampling the red boar as well. 《It’s true!》 said the slime. 《This is really, really good!》

After hearing them heap all that praise on the meal, I couldn’t waste the chance to try some myself. I’d prepared my own helping in advance, thankfully, though given my preferred serving size, I’d used a single plate for all three types of meat. I started by popping a bite of red boar meat dripping with violetberry sauce into my mouth.

“Oh wow, yeah, you really weren’t kidding!” The ever so slight gamey flavor of the boar meat was a perfect match for the sweet and sour bite of the sauce.

I tried the rockbird next. “Hmm... This is pretty good too. The meat stands out a lot less, but that just means the sauce can take center stage. It’s a great fit in a different way.”

Fel immediately gulped down a mouthful of rockbird meat. 《Yes, it certainly is,》 he agreed.

《The sauce really improves the gigant minotaur meat too,》 added Dora-

chan. 《Makes it feel a lot lighter, somehow!》

He was right. The incredible marbling of gigant minotaur meat could make it feel a little heavy sometimes, but the violetberry sauce completely compensated for its fattiness.

《**This is not enough!**》 declared Fel, who had already cleaned all three of his plates. 《**I require seconds immediately!**》

《Same here! Just red boar and gigant minotaur for me this time, though.》

《Sui wants seconds of all of them!》

“All right, I can do that! It’ll take just a minute. Oh, but be careful. I made dessert too, so be sure to save some room for it!”

《Yaaay, dessert!》 exclaimed Sui. The slime was probably the biggest sweets lover out of all of us.

My familiars ended up liking the dishes so much, I lost track of how many servings I prepared for them before they were finally satisfied enough to move on to our dessert. I brought out the extra-large glass bowls full of perfectly wobbly yogurt jelly and set them out for the three of them, though not before topping each helping with a hefty scoop of violetberry sauce, of course.

“Okay, dig in! I decided to make violetberries the theme for tonight, so I made yogurt jelly with more violetberry sauce as a topping. They’ve been sitting in my magic fridge, so they should be nice and cold!”

《**So you finally used it?**》

“Yeah, this seemed like the perfect chance. It worked really well, so I’ll be taking advantage of it for all sorts of stuff from now on! Should be great for desserts in particular.”

《**Oh? Then I shall look forward to them.**》

《This wibbly-wobbly dessert’s yummy!》 piped up Sui.

《Yeah,》 agreed Dora-chan, 《especially right after all that meat. This is a real nice palate cleanser!》

The three of them all took quite a liking to the refreshingly tart jelly, and it wasn’t long before all three bowls were licked clean.

《Master, Sui wants more of the jiggly stuff!》 Sui begged. It seemed to like the jelly even more than the rest of us had.

“Wait, more? You want seconds?”

《Yeah! Sui wants seconds of the jiggly stuff!》

“Oh. I, err... Sorry. I didn’t make any extra of this.” The bowls were so

massive, it hadn't even crossed my mind to make any spare jelly. Whoops.

『Awww...』 moaned Sui, deflating into a sad little puddle.

“I-I'll make extra next time, I promise! It's just too late for it today, okay?”

『Okaaay. It's a promise, Master!』

It was mind-boggling that it could slurp down a huge bowl of jelly right after the mountain of meat it had just devoured, and actually want *more* on top of it... *I know this is old news at this point, but Sui's appetite is a force of nature.*

Chapter 9: More First World Problems

“Incredible, truly! Why, everything you’ve brought to me is of superlative quality! It’s been quite a long time since I’ve found myself this impressed by an adventurer’s findings, I assure you.”

The next day, I left my familiars to watch over the house and made my way to the Adventurer’s guild alone. Or really, it might be better to say that they chose to stay at the house themselves. The instant they realized where I was going and that my purpose was to sell off all those drop items, they lost interest in unison and decided they’d rather spend the day napping.

The moment I arrived at the guild I was escorted into the guildmaster’s office, where I found Tristan waiting for me. I cut right to the chase and brought out the many, many drops I had available, and he got so worked up about them he could hardly contain himself.

I have to admit that, his distressing level of enthusiasm aside, he was clearly *very* good at his job. He assessed the items and determined which he wanted to purchase at a breakneck pace. I was impressed, and figured it went to show that he wouldn’t have made it to his current position unless he had what it took to judge items objectively.

Though that said, it wasn’t like he was being all that picky. For one thing, he quickly decided to buy up literally all of the gems I’d obtained. I shouldn’t have been surprised, really. They were the Brixt dungeon’s equivalent of a local specialty, and demand for them was so high it almost always outstripped the guild’s supply.

Tristan was so ecstatic to get his hands on a windfall of gems, it felt like he might never stop thanking me. We were off to a great start, which got me thinking that this just might be my chance to offload some of the items that the other guilds wouldn’t touch.

“I actually have these on hand as well,” I tentatively opened as I brought out the leftover gems from the Dolan and Aveling dungeons, as well as the rest of the treasure from the bandit king’s hideout.

I didn’t think it was possible, but somehow Tristan’s smile grew wider

than ever. I'd found so much fine jewelry in the bandit king's cave that not even he could justify buying all of it, but he *did* offer to take all of my old dungeon leftovers off my hands. He seemed really torn up about not being able to buy the bandit king's loot as well and let out a terribly frustrated sigh as I stowed it away again in my Item Box.

He was still more happy than upset overall, though, having gotten his hands on a huge stock of jewels and jewelry that were sure to fly off the shelves. He also purchased all the tiny magic stones from the gazers, stone golems, and ogres, plus the small ones from the iron golems. As far as monster materials went, he bought the hexalimbear pelt and liver, as well as the pelts from the great wolves, red tigers, forest panthers, murder grizzlies, and the tyrant gorilla.

The hexalimbear liver was apparently a must-have in his mind. Considering his reaction when I told him about how they spawned on the thirty-ninth floor, I was expecting that. He clearly wanted to get his hands on the ingredients for that aphrodisiac he'd mentioned at all costs. All those pelts, meanwhile, were apparently popular among the nobility as materials for winter clothes and rugs. He beamed like nothing else when he realized how many high-quality, almost undamaged pelts he'd be able to acquire.

Tristan really, *really* wanted to buy the zlatorog pelts as well, but explained with tears in his eyes that he had no choice but to pass on them. Considering the limitations of his budget, he'd be forced to give up on a sizable portion of my gemstone haul if he were to buy the zlatorog pelts, and that was simply out of the question. The whole exchange reminded me that a zlatorog's golden pelt was considered precious enough to offer up to a king. Tristan sighed with regret once again as he handed the pelts back to me but, nevertheless, he didn't hesitate in his decision to part with them.

He passed on quite a few items, but in spite of that, by the end of our negotiations his desk was still all but buried in gemstones, magic stones, and pelts of all shapes and sizes. Tristan was clearly delighted by his haul, and had one of the guild's staff members bring me a cup of tea when we finished. I accepted it gratefully and breathed a sigh of relief.

"We'll appraise all of your items as soon as possible and have your payment ready by tomorrow," Tristan cheerfully explained. I wasn't about to complain about getting paid quickly, so I decided to stop by again the next day.

“So,” he continued, “will you be returning to the dungeon after your business in town is concluded?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan. I mean, my familiars are gonna drag me back down there whether I like it or not,” I admitted with an awkward chuckle. I wouldn’t have complained if I never set foot in that place ever again, but Team Fel was hellbent on conquering every last floor of the dungeon. Considering Demiurge’s warning about the danger that awaited us on the final floor, I *really* would’ve preferred to move on and never look back.

“To think you’ve already acquired such an incredible assortment of drops in your run to the end of the fortieth floor! Why, when I consider what you might find past that point... Oh, I can hardly suppress my excitement! Gweh heh heh heh!”

Were you listening to how you laughed just now, Tristan? Do you realize how nasty it sounded? Not that I couldn’t understand how he felt. I had a pretty good idea of how big the guild’s profits would be when they sold off everything they bought from me at a substantial markup, and if I were in his position I might not have been able to hold back my laughter either. Which isn’t to say it didn’t creep me out, of course, so I decided that now would be a good time to make my exit.

Tristan saw me off with a satisfied smile and an enthusiastic “See you tomorrow!” as I departed from the Adventurer’s guild. My familiars weren’t around to rush me for once, so I decided to take my time and stroll through Brixt’s shopping district on my way home. I didn’t find anything especially new or exciting, but I did notice some handy-looking sacks that I bought quite a few of. Then I headed for home to rendezvous with Fel and the others.



I took things nice and slow the next morning, made lunch for everyone, then headed back to the Adventurer’s guild. I ended up going alone again, for much the same reason I had the day before.

Tristan sprinted over to me the instant I walked inside. “I had a feeling you’d be showing up sometime soon! Come along, now. To the second floor!”

I followed him into his office and sat down across from him at the table. Barely a moment later, one of his staff members arrived to present us with

tea. We spent a moment sipping our drinks, then got right to business.

“So,” I began, “did the appraisal go all right? Did you finish everything?”

“We did, yes!” replied Tristan. “We made the appraisal of your items our top priority, and moved the process along as quickly as we could manage. Please wait just a moment!”

Tristan stood and walked over to a safe that was set up by the far wall of his office. “Now then, this will be your payment in full,” he said as he reached inside. “It came out to a grand total of forty thousand gold pieces.”

“A... A total of...? Whoa!” I was so flabbergasted by his words, I almost dropped my teacup. Thankfully I saved it at the last second, then took a few deep breaths, carefully set it down on the table, and turned back to Tristan. “I’m sorry, d-d-did you just say f-forty *thousand* gold pieces?”

“Yes, that’s correct! You supplied us with a most outstanding stock of gemstones, after all. Not to mention magic stones, which are always in demand, and those wonderful pelts! This has been without question the most profitable transaction I’ve made in my capacity as a guildmaster!” Tristan boasted with an ecstatic grin. “Allow me to break down the sale for you: that’s twenty-two tiny aquamarines for 16 gold apiece, totalling 352 gold, eleven tiny garnets for 15 gold each, totaling 165 gold, thirteen tiny amethysts for 15 gold each, making 195 gold, sixteen tiny turquoise stones for 14 gold each, totaling 224 gold...”

Tristan ran through an exhaustive list of each item and its precise worth, but the sheer impact of the words ‘forty thousand gold coins’ was so overwhelming that it all went in one ear and out the other. The only part that actually registered, albeit barely, was the fact that he’d rounded the final number up to hit forty thousand on the dot.

“And with that, here is your payment! Considering the substantial weight that forty thousand gold coins would add up to, we’ve taken the liberty of providing your funds in platinum coins,” said Tristan, plopping two sacks onto the table before me. “I’ve ensured that there are precisely four hundred platinum coins within, but for formality’s sake please feel free to count and confirm that for yourself.”

I peeked into the sacks and found that they were indeed full to the point of bursting with silvery coins of a sort I’d seen on a number of occasions before. “A-All right,” I replied with a gulp, then started counting out the coins into piles of ten.

“Three, three, four—that’s ten. Three, three, four, twenty, three, three, four, thirty, three, three, four...”

By the time I was finished, the table was inundated with platinum coin stacks.

“Four hundred! Your count was right on the money.” My hands trembled as I swept the coins back into the sacks and stored them in my Item Box.

“Wonderful! And may I just say that I’m very much looking forward to your next visit, mister Mukohda,” said Tristan with another of his trademark grins.

I was glad he seemed pleased, but a small part of me had to wonder if this was really all right. It wasn’t exactly my business, of course, but could they really afford to buy anything else from me after forking over *forty thousand* gold? His attitude made me wonder if they were perhaps holding back some of their funding in anticipation of whatever else I might find down there. I decided to check as tactfully as I could manage, and asked if he’d be willing to purchase materials from me again.

Tristan replied with an immediate and enthusiastic “Yes, of course!” He must have read my train of thought too, since he followed it up by asking, “Are you concerned about our coffers, perhaps? If so, no need to worry! The truth is, certain sharp-eared individuals have already approached us with inquiries regarding the purchasing rights for any items you might bring in.”

Wait, what? Seriously?

“Those who are in the know are well aware of what a visit from Mukohda the S-ranker and his Fenrir familiar means,” added Tristan.

From the sound of things, certain people considered the mere fact that I’d gone into a dungeon and returned alive to be a surefire sign that I’d be unloading a treasure trove of dungeon loot in the near future. They weren’t wrong, to be fair, and why else would I have gone straight to the Adventurer’s guild upon my return if not to sell my drops?

“We haven’t put out any notice ourselves, and yet we already have plenty of prospective buyers! The drops you’ve provided for us will be selling out all but immediately, I assure you. Bwaa ha ha ha haaaa, oh, I just can’t help but laugh!”

Uhh, Tristan? You’re starting to sound like some sort of evil local magistrate. In any case, it looked like my worries about the guild’s budget were groundless. That meant they’d be able to buy anything else I found

during my next excursion, so as far as I was concerned, it all worked out perfectly. My business concluded, Tristan happily saw me off as I departed from the Adventurer's guild.

"Man, though, four hundred platinum coins? What am I even supposed to do with them?" I muttered to myself. Having some money in the bank was never a bad thing, but I'd be satisfied so long as I had enough to buy food from my Supermarket without needing to worry about the cost. This was a little excessive, to say the least. "Maybe I'll talk to Fel and the others and look into making another donation somewhere."

It wasn't a bad idea or anything, but considering the sheer amount of money that had been piling up in my coffers lately, no number of donations would be enough to make a substantial dent in my savings. I was cursed with the most flagrant example of a first world problem you could find: an excess of money and nothing to spend it on.



"I'm back!"

《And at long last! I hunger.》

《Same over here.》

《Sui's hungry too!》

I was disappointed to find myself greeted by an immediate and unanimous demand for dinner.

"C'mon, guys, I literally just got home!"

《Which does nothing to alleviate my hunger. Matters of food must take precedence above all else.》

You could make that point just fine without glaring at me, Fel!

《Right?! Getting to eat tasty grub's the source of our power!》

《Master's cooking is always so yummy, it gives Sui tons of energy!!》

Dora-chan and Sui were right on board with Fel's logic, but at least *they* were decent enough to butter me up at the same time. I certainly didn't mind that, and I was starting to feel like making dinner right away might not be so bad after all.

"Ohh, okay, okay! I'll make something now."

《Great! I want gigant minotaur meat tonight. That stuff never gets old,》 said Dora-chan.

Fel agreed with a nod and a simple 『Indeed.』

『Sui wants that tasty meat too!』 the slime added. All three of them had taken a real shine to that meat, though of course, so had I.

“Okay, sounds good! I’ll come up with something to make with gigant minotaur meat for dinner.” I left my familiars behind in the living room and moved over to the kitchen.



And so I soon ended up standing before my rental home's massive kitchen counter, muttering to myself once again.

"I'd really like to talk with them about the money situation first...but meh, I guess it can wait until after dinner. I'll just whip up something to eat, nice and quick!"

That said, I hadn't even started deciding what to make yet. *Hmm... Think I'll browse my Online Supermarket and see if anything sparks an idea.* I opened my skill's menu.

"Oh, mushrooms are on sale?" *Mushrooms and gigant minotaur meat... Yeah, that could work really nicely.* "And I think they had just the right tool for it in stock a while back..."

I navigated to the kitchenware page, where I'd bought all my pots and pans. "Ah-ha! Thought so! They *do* sell steamer pans!"

The ones my Online Supermarket had in stock were essentially just little metal plates with holes in them. You needed a pan of the right size to use them, but they also came in various sizes, so really all you needed was *some* sort of pan with a lid.

"All right, that settles it! I'll make a steamed beef—err, that is, a steamed gigant minotaur dish tonight!"

Seeing all those cheap mushrooms reminded me of a great method for cooking just about any sort of meat. You just wrap your meat up in aluminum foil with whatever other ingredients you want, pop it in the steamer, and that's more or less it! Recently, our meals had been trending toward having lots of really heavily seasoned meat in them, so I thought it might be nice to have something a little lighter for a change.

"I'll just need some of those mushrooms, onions, and a bunch of bell peppers..." I piled the ingredients into my shopping cart, then checked out. "All right, that should do it! Let's get cooking!"

You start by prepping your mushrooms. I ended up picking out maitake, shimeji, and enoki mushrooms, personally. All you have to do is slice them into bite-sized pieces, and they'll be good to go! Next, slice the onions, finely chop the bell peppers, and slice the gigant minotaur meat, preferably on the thin side.

That's all the prep out of the way! Next, pile up some onions and bell peppers in the middle of a large piece of aluminum foil. Add the mushrooms next, and finally pile the meat on top of everything. Then you do it all over

again, repeating the layering process. Season the dish with a mixture of soy sauce, sake, and mirin before wrapping it all up and folding the edges closed as best you can manage.

All you have left to do after that is to steam the parcel using one of the steamer pans I mentioned before, and it's finished! I ended up using both my own magic stove and the one installed in the house's kitchen simultaneously to steam up a ton of foil packs at the same time.



『Wait...』 Fel muttered grimly as he stared at the plate of food I served him. I could just tell he was about to go off on me.

“Yeah, I *know*, you’re gonna say it has too many veggies and not enough meat. Please, at least try it before you complain, just this once!”

『Hmph!』

『Hey, Fel, this stuff’s actually pretty great!』 said Dora-chan, who had already started in on his helping.

『It’s super juicy and delicious!』 added Sui.

That’s right, Sui! You really know your stuff! The juices that seep from the vegetables during the cooking process end up incredibly rich in umami. That plus the veggies themselves, not to mention the meat, comes together to form an incredibly tasty whole.

『If you insist, I shall deign to at least try it...』 grumbled Fel, grimacing as he tentatively bit into his meal. He started out slow, anyway, but with each bite, he picked up a little more speed until finally he was devouring it at a breakneck pace. I seriously almost cracked up.

Before long, the first four foil parcels had been emptied and the foil itself licked clean. Unsurprisingly, I was called upon to make seconds almost immediately.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot. Try squeezing some of the juice from these fruits onto it this time!” I said as I served up their second helpings. “It’s called a sudachi, and it’s a special sort of citrus fruit. That little bit of sourness makes the whole dish *so* much more refreshing, trust me!” I seasoned half of my own helping with sudachi juice, demonstrating the technique to my familiars.

『Hmm. Sour and refreshing, you say? Very well, then. Season mine.』

《Mine too!》

《And Sui's!》

I quickly obliged, squeezing a sprinkle of sudachi juice onto each of my familiars' plates.

《Indeed, this *does* grant the dish a certain freshness. It is quite the satisfying variation.》

《I think I might actually like it better this way, myself!》

《Sooo refreshing!》

I spent a moment watching them try the new variation, then gave my own helping a taste. I'd also made a couple side dishes for myself: a bowl of instant miso soup, some sliced and seasoned kombu strips, and a small dish of lightly pickled cucumbers. Last but definitely not least, a heaping bowl of freshly-cooked rice.

I tried some of the steamed meat and veggies, followed immediately by a bite of rice. "God, that's so good..." I murmured. I was firmly of the opinion that any food that went well with rice was a winner, no questions asked.

We all ate our fill of the steamed meat and veggies, then took some time to lounge about and relax after dinner was done. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui requested their usual Fumiya cakes and puddings for dessert, while I brewed myself a cup of black tea and breathed a sigh of relief, my work finally finished.

"Oh, right. Hey, guys! I've got a question for you," I said, taking the opportunity to ask about the massive sum of money I'd obtained from all those drops.

《What is it?》

"It's about the drops from the dungeon, see. You know how I went to pick up the money we got for selling them today?"

《Quite.》

"Well, it was a lot. Like, *way* more than I expected. I've had too much money for a while now, and I've been making donations like I talked about before, but this made up for all the money I've given away and then some. What do you think we should do with it?"

《Hmm. Matters of money are hardly my area of expertise...》

《Right? As long as we keep getting plenty of tasty grub, I don't think any of us need anything else.》

《Yeah! As long as Sui can eat yummy food, Sui doesn't mind at all!》

Yeah, figures. I don't have anything I'm itching to buy either. Our needs are pretty much met as is.

『You donated a buncha cash to that one orphanage, right? Why not just do that again?』 suggested Dora-chan.

Fel nodded in agreement. **『Indeed, and another donation to the goddesses' temples would not go amiss. You must not forget to pay your respects, and I am certain that Ninrir will be most pleased if you do.』**

“Yeah, that was my best idea too, honestly.” *Or really, it was my only idea.*

We were all in agreement. At some point, we'd find the time to swing by the local orphanage and temples to drop off more donations. Of course, I planned on gathering information about the establishments and scoping out the premises personally beforehand. I didn't want to accidentally donate to some sketchy fake charity.

I hoped that a solid bit of charity would take a chunk out of my excess of liquid capital, but there was one flaw in this plan: I'd be diving right back into the dungeon before long, and there was absolutely no doubt that I'd emerge with enough new items to make me even richer than ever. It was a constantly escalating cycle, and it was giving me a headache.

Part of me was tempted to start ignoring all of the non-meat drops, but something about that idea didn't sit right with me. Not only would leaving all those items behind be a waste, it just felt *wrong* to abandon the spoils of my familiars' battles. And then, of course, there was the twinkle in Tristan's eye when he told me how excited he was for my next visit.

Clearly, this wasn't a problem that could be solved immediately. I'd just have to keep picking up all the items I could for the moment, and donate money whenever an opportunity cropped up, while thinking about a better way to get rid of it all.

And so the days passed by. Before I knew it, it was time for us to head back into the dungeon once more. I'd asked my familiars for five days, but in the end I managed to eke out an extra day on top of that by arguing that I needed the time to prepare more meals for our next excursion.

“Would've liked to stay up here even longer, though...” I mumbled disconsolately.

『Oh, come on, just give up and accept it already!』

『Indeed, you will have to be resolved for the next stage of our

journey. We make for the lower reaches of the dungeon, and even with us there to protect you, you will need to be constantly alert.»

《Dungeon, dungeon, dungeon, yaaay!》

“I know, I know! I get the picture, gimme a break.”

Our party arrived at the dungeon to find a certain guildmaster waiting for us, his eyes shining once again with the light of the highest expectations imaginable. “I’ll be awaiting your return with bated breath! Best of luck to all of you!” said Tristan, rubbing his hands together excitedly.

Tristan, please, you’re expecting too much of me! Tone it down, I’m begging you!

《Let us be off!》 declared Fel, marking the beginning of our second expedition into the dungeon legendary for being the hardest in the land.

Extra: Of Goddesses and Girl Talk

《Well, that was a nice bath! I'mma pass out now.》

“Sounds good, but I’ve still got a few things to get done. I’ll be heading to bed a little later.”

《Have fun with that, then. Night.》

《Nighty-night!》

“Sleep well, you two.”

Dora-chan and Sui climbed up to join Fel in the bedroom on the second floor, but I made my way to the living room instead. I was planning on doing some shopping while enjoying a cup of nice floral tea that I’d first tried in Lambert’s shop and had taken quite a liking to.

“All right, let’s see here... Vinegar and black pepper...” I’d noticed that I was nearly out of both ingredients while cooking dinner that night, and had decided to stock up before I forgot. I had a favorite brand for both of them, and decided to buy in bulk this time.

I wasn’t quite done with my tea by the time I finished, though, so I decided I might as well browse through the seasonings menu a little more and see what new items were in stock while I drained my cup. Unfortunately, my moment of peace was broken just seconds later.

<Hey there, otherworlder!>

<We’ve a quick request for you, if you’d be so kind!>

<And you should feel honored that we’ve come to you for it, so listen up!

>

<Please.>

That’d be Agni, Kisharle, Ninrir and Ruka. “Kinda weird for all four of you to show up together. You know I just sent your offerings for this month three days ago, right?”

<Yes, certainly, but we were hoping you could grant us just the teensiest little favor,> replied Kisharle hopefully.

<That’s right! You know about that thing they call ‘girl talk’ in your world, don’t you?> added Ninrir. And I was familiar with the concept. I’d

heard some of the women at my company talk about having girl talk get-togethers a few times, at least.

<We want to try it too,> said Ruka. Considering how subdued the personality she usually projected was, I felt a little surprised they'd managed to drag her into this.

<And so,> Ninrir continued, *<we thought we'd have you send over some of that sweet liquor you were drinking the other day! That way Ruka and I can enjoy a drink along with the others!>*

“Sweet liquor”? Not totally sure what you’re talking about.”

<You said something about how it's refreshing and goes down nice and easy. Actually, you got me thinking that I'd like to give the stuff a try as well,> said Agni, the goddesses’ resident alcohol aficionado.

A sweet booze that's refreshing and goes down easy...? “Oh! I get it. You mean the canned chuhai I had with dinner a while back!” I pulled out a few of the leftover cans from my Item Box. “You mean these, right? The booze that comes in really colorful cans?”

I’d been looking in my Online Supermarket for something nice to drink with dinner a little while ago, and happened to notice the chuhai section in its menu. I ended up impulse-buying a ton of them, focusing mostly on the types I’d never tried. The cans I pulled out to show the goddesses were a few of the leftovers from that shopping spree.

<That's right, those! They looked just like that!> Ninrir excitedly exclaimed.

“Okay, I think I get the picture. You want to do some girl talk, and you’re asking me to send you some canned chuhai to drink while you have your chat.” *Sheesh, talk about needy. Is this really important enough to justify sending me a four-goddess oracle? This world’s gods are way too frivolous about using their powers, I swear.*

<Come on, just a little! We would so love to give this ‘girl talk’ concept a try!> begged Kisharle.

“If all you want is to get together and gossip with each other, don’t you already do that whenever you gather up to spy on me?”

<This and that are completely different! After all, we're planning on having today's event over at Agni's abode. Not to mention that a little alcohol will make the proceedings so much more entertaining than usual!>

Yeah, I bet it was pretty easy to sell Agni on that plan. Considering how

much she likes her booze, I bet she was the most enthusiastic of all of them. Though really, Kisharle, Ninrir, and Ruka all seemed pretty excited about it as well.

<C'mon, man, throw us a bone!>

<It's just an ever so small request! And we would appreciate it so very much.>

<We're begging you, here!>

<Please.>

Call me a pushover if you will, but I just couldn't bring myself to say no to a request like that. I'd be a pretty sorry excuse for a man if I did. "All right, fine," I replied with a sigh.

<Hurray!> The goddesses shouted triumphantly in unison.

I brought out all the chuhai cans I had left over and lined them up on the table. I was a fan of the more citrusy flavors—lemon, grapefruit, and the like—so I'd bought an especially large number of them. Ninrir and Ruka wanted something more on the sweet side of things, though, so I bought a few cans of peach and strawberry chuhai to add to the assortment. By the end of it, there were a couple dozen cans filling up the table.

"Is this enough for you guys?"

<That's plenty! Thanks a million!>

<Thank you kindly!>

<Well done!>

<Thanks.>

The cans vanished in a flash of light.

"Oh! I forgot to mention, chuhai doesn't *taste* super alcoholic and goes down real easy, but bottom line, it's still booze! It's actually pretty high up there in terms of alcohol content, so be careful not to drink too much!"

Chuhai's one of the easier drinks to accidentally get totally smashed on if you let your guard down. *Wonder if they even heard that last part?*



Some time later, in the realm of the gods—specifically in Agni's estate—the four greatest members of the pantheon gathered together. The Goddess of Wind, Ninrir, the Goddess of Earth, Kisharle, the Goddess of Fire, Agni, and the Goddess of Water, Ruka, had each developed an interest in the so-called

“girl talk” gatherings that the mortals in another world they had been observing partook of.

The four goddesses decided that they would host such a gathering of their own, and petitioned an otherworlder with a particularly convenient skill, Mukohda, to help them. He offered up alcohol for their cause, and so their event began.

“*Damn*, though, this is some good stuff! Goes down like water, I swear,” said Agni as she flicked open the tab of her third can of chuhai.

“It really is,” agreed Kisharle, “and it’s so refreshing as well! It might even be nicer than the fruit wines I’m so partial to.”

“Right?! The booze from that other world puts our stuff to shame!”

“True indeed, though unlike you, I don’t imagine I’ll be placing any orders for it any time soon. My beauty products take priority, after all.”

“Hah, ’course they would! What good’s all that primpin’ doing you, anyway? Not like it makes a difference for us.”

“Complacency is the enemy, Agni! We may be gods, yes, but time passes by for us just as it does for mortals, albeit much slower. Our looks may fade slowly, but they *do* still very much fade!”

“R-Right, sure they do,” said Agni, wincing back from the intense pressure suddenly emanating from Kisharle.

“Okay, okay, settle down, Kisharle,” said Ninrir, sliding into the conversation. “Here, try some of this. It’s nice and sweet!”

She passed her fellow goddess a can of peach chuhai. Despite her notoriously unreliable nature, Ninrir could be surprisingly smooth when push came to shove...sometimes, anyway. She was the eldest of the goddesses, and on very rare occasions she actually managed to look the part.

“Oh,” said Kisharle as she tried a sip of the drink. “This *is* sweet! How delectable!” Her mood improved instantly.

“It’s so sweet and tasty, even I can drink it,” Ruka noted as she downed her own can of chuhai. She normally wasn’t much of a drinker at all, so this was quite the exception.

“Oh, right, here’s a nice story,” said Kisharle, changing the topic. “You know that goddess who became the God of All Creation’s attendant the other day?”

“You mean that lesser goddess?” asked Ninrir. “Reddish-brown hair, seems a bit on the simple side?”

“Right, her! The one who has an air like some provincial peasant girl.”

“Oh, yeah, guess that was a thing. Why, what’s her deal?” Agni droned.

“Oh, Agni, at least *pretend* to be a little more interested! After all, you’re involved in this story.”

“Say what now? I am?”

“You are! Or at least, a lesser god in your service is. Most of your followers are incredibly muscular tough guys, but you have that one boy who’s comparatively slender, yes? The one with the blonde hair and blue eyes?”

“Oh, him, yeah. Why, what’d he do?”

“I’ve heard that he and the God of All Creation’s resident peasant girl have been sighted together quite often recently, and that they seem to be getting along *very* well indeed!”

“They *what*?! That kid’s such a fresh-faced little brat he’s never even managed to land a single hit on me! What’s he think he’s doing, acting like some sorta adult?!”

“I heard they were spotted getting *friendly* with each other by the eastern gardens recently.”

“You knew about this too, Ruka?! That little punk must not even be trying to hide it! That does it, he’s sparring with me tomorrow morning, whether he likes it or not!”

“Oh, my!” Kisharle lilted, transparently feigning concern.

“If *that*’s the sort of story you want, I’ve got one of my own,” said Ninrir. “I’ve heard that one of the God of War’s followers and one of the God of Blacksmithing’s followers have been getting awfully *friendly* with each other as well, if you catch my drift!”

Kisharle let out a squeal of glee. “And neither of them have any goddesses as followers, so that means—oh, I simply *love* the sound of this!”

The conversation dragged on, and time passed by.

“Maaan, this girl talk stuff? I’m into it!”

“If you’re into anything, Agni, it’s your cups! You haven’t stopped drinking this whole time, have you?” asked Kisharle.

“Bwa ha ha ha! ’S good stuff, ’course I haven’t! Wait a minute...where’d Ruka ’n Ninrir go?”

“Ruka fell asleep before finishing her first can, and Ninrir passed out after her second. What about *you*, though? Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Huh? Why wouldn’t I be?” replied Agni, taking no notice of the impressive line of empty cans beside her.

“You remember what the otherworlder said before we left, don’t you? About how these drinks contain far more alcohol than you’d think, if you judged them by their taste?”

“’S fine, ’s fine! Wait...huh? ’M feelin’ kinda dizzy,” Agni slurred, moments before she toppled over backward and fell asleep on the spot.

“What did I tell you? Really, were none of you listening?” Kisharle sighed. “Well, if everyone’s asleep, I suppose I’ll head on home. This was fun, though. We should do it again sometime.”

And so Kisharle strolled home happily, leaving the other three goddesses passed out on the floor.

Afterword

Hello! Ren Eguchi speaking. Thank you very much for purchasing *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill Volume 11: Sukiyaki and the Blessings of Battle!*

We've already reached the eleventh volume! I'm pleased beyond measure that this series has managed to last for such a long time. My readers deserve all the credit for its continued publication, and I can't possibly thank all of you enough for your support!

In this eleventh volume, our heroes finally set foot in a new dungeon. As far as Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui are concerned it's all fun, all the way down, but Mukohda's just a little too much of a coward to want to go anywhere near a place like that. I hope that seeing the familiars work their hardest and Mukohda get dragged along after them is enjoyable for you!

Also worth noting is the fact that this volume features the first appearance of a party of haughty, less-than-friendly adventurers, though Mukohda's just a little too easygoing to actually notice the threat they pose to him! I hope you enjoy their part in the story!

The publication of this volume coincides with the publication of the eighth volume of the comic adaptation of this story, as well as the sixth volume of *Sui's Great Adventure*, a spin-off comic in which Sui takes the starring role! Both comics are really entertaining, so I'd love it if you'd give them a read!

To Masa-sensei, who did the illustrations for this volume, Akagishi K-sensei, who's drawing the main comic adaptation, Futaba Momo-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 your constant help and support!

Finally, allow me to thank you, my readers, one last time. 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. I look forward to seeing you again in volume twelve!

Bonus Short Stories

To Seek the Phantom Fruit

It all started when I got a message from the local guildmaster asking me to make an appearance at the Adventurer's guild.

"You and your lot haven't completed any requests around here recently, have you?" he asked. "Must mean you've got a lot of time on your hands, eh?"

No, actually, I don't! At all! We went hunting just yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, and even the day before that too! We've been hunting nonstop lately thanks to my familiars and their boundless reserves of energy!

I was so exhausted from all the hunting we'd done that week, in fact, that in the end I'd found myself begging and begging and begging Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui for mercy and had *finally* secured myself a day to rest. I was looking forward to spending it safe and sound relaxing at home, and then the guildmaster had to go and ruin it with his sudden summons. I couldn't exactly ignore a message like that and reluctantly dragged myself to the guild hall, only to hear that I "have a lot of time on my hands"? *Come on, give me a break!*

"Actually, no, not at all," I bluntly replied, shooting him a reproachful glare. "Fel and the others won't stop making me take them out hunting. You've seen all the monsters I've been hauling in the past few days, right?" To be fair, I hadn't gone out of my way to visit him in person every time, but I knew for a fact he'd been getting reports about everything I brought in.

"Oh, don't give me that look," the guildmaster fired back. "Doesn't change the fact that it's been a while since you've done a quest, right?"

"Well, I mean, err," I floundered. I didn't think any of the requests the guild had on hand would catch my familiars' attention, so I couldn't imagine them agreeing to take one on.

"Well then, I've got just the job for you and your crew! What do you

think? Feel like taking on some work?"

"What makes it so good for us?" I asked cautiously.

"Good question," he replied with a nod. "See, the request this time around's to go out and gather a certain fruit. Thing is, the only place you can find 'em is the Tyran Woodlands."

"The...Tyran Woodlands?" I cocked my head. I'd never even heard the name of that particular forest.

Fel, on the other hand, perked up his ears. It seemed he knew something I didn't. **"The Tyran Woodlands? Those would be the woods due north of here, would they not?"**

"That's right," replied the guildmaster. Fel's eyes took on a glimmer of unmistakable interest, and I felt an ominous chill run down my spine.

『What's the deal, Fel?』 asked Dora-chan. 『There some reason we should go to this Tyran place?』

『Indeed there is,』 replied Fel. 『You will find it to be quite the amusing destination. I could hardly choose a better hunting grounds.』

Hunting grounds? Ugh, I knew it!

『Is it really that great, Uncle Fel? Sui wants to go!』

『Ha ha ha! Yeah, if you think the place is amusing, no way it'll be a drag! Count me in too!』

The slightest urging from Fel was all it took to get Sui and Dora-chan on board. I turned back to the guildmaster. "So, these Tyran Woods. Are they, y'know...?"

"Infested with high-ranking monsters, yup. The local adventures call the place the 'Forest of No Return.'"

"The Forest of No Return?!"

"Name's on the money too. Unless you're A-ranked at least, odds are good you won't come back from that place in one piece. Hell, even an A-rank probably couldn't make it to the heart of the woods safely—that takes an S-ranker to pull off," the guildmaster blithely explained.

I knew this would happen. Saw it coming a mile away. He wouldn't have gone to the trouble of calling me to the Guild if it wasn't one of *those* requests.

"Way I see it, you're a perfect fit for the job," he continued. "There's this lord in the next province over, see? Fellow's made a name for himself as a real gourmet type, and every year 'round this season he sends out a request to

every damn guild in the region, asking us to get him this fruit. Thing is, it's been about five years or so since anyone was brave or crazy enough to take the request on, and the pressure he's starting to put on us is a real hassle."

The guildmaster explained that the so-called phantom fruit was more properly known as an iris fruit. The lord in question had gotten his hands on one by pure chance, and was so intensely moved by its flavor that he'd been obsessed with them ever since—hence his decision to start putting out a request every time the fruit came into season.

Considering *where* they grew, though, taking on the request was no laughing matter, and after five consecutive years of failure, the lord was beginning to lose patience. The incessant pressure he put on the local guildmasters finally grew so unbearable that they got together to discuss it, at which point the S-ranker from Karelina was brought up as a possible solution.

In the guildmaster's own words, "They decided that there's no way the most promising S-ranked tamer around could mess it up, so we could just shove the job off on you and call it a day." And, to be fair, they were probably right. The request would be a piece of cake for Fel and the others.

By "Fel and the others," however, I very specifically mean Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui—*not* me. I would just be forced to tag along as their chaperone into a deathtrap of a forest filled to the brim with high-ranking monsters, and it probably goes without saying that I was *not* in favor of doing that.

Unfortunately, my fate was sealed the moment the Tyran Woodlands came into the picture. My familiars' interest had been piqued, and there was no longer anything I could do to stop them. I ended up taking the request for the iris fruit and agreed to set out for the Tyran Woodlands the very next day.



"Guess this must be the place..." I muttered. A thick, verdant forest stood before us. "And the fruit's supposed to be, just...*somewhere* in there? We don't really have much to go off of here, huh?"

The guildmaster, of course, had given me a flippant "Eh, you've got a mighty Fenrir on your side. You'll work it out," when I voiced my doubts. There were times when Fel was a little bit *too* reliable, in that sense. *He could've at least tried to give me some more specific info!*

『Worry not. Once we have entered the forest, I shall find the fruit by

its smell before long. More importantly,» Fel said, pausing to give Dora-chan and Sui a look, **«I am sure you know what else we are here to do?»**

«Hunt!»

«Indeed! Now, let us depart! Hold on!»

At that particular moment, of course, I was sitting on Fel's back. "Huh? Wait, what? You're going hunting *now*? Like this?!"

«Away!»

"Wait, wait! Why are you taking *meee*!?"

It was too late. All I could do was cling to Fel for dear life.

Some time later, I heaved an exhausted sigh of relief. "Finally... *Finally*, it's over..."

We'd successfully located our target: the tree that bore the iris fruit. Getting there, though, had been even more of a trial than I'd anticipated. I could practically feel my eyes glazing over as I thought back on everything I'd just been through.

Fel had dragged me along on his hunting trip, and hadn't left me the slightest chance to talk my way out of it. That meant getting right up close and personal with the action as the Fenrir took on snakes with bodies as wide as my torso; polka-dotted, emerald-green lizards that were both obviously venomous and so big that I had to wonder if they weren't literal dinosaurs; a massive gray tiger that was even bigger than Fel; and so many other woodland horrors I actually lost count before we were done.

Every one of them was terrifying enough to turn my legs to jelly at a glance, but my familiars had been over the moon to hunt them down to the last. The worst part was when I finally got so sick of it that I straight up told Fel it was time for us to make for the iris tree, and the fuzzy jerk just said "**Not yet,**" and ignored me! Dora-chan and Sui both begged me for more hunting time as well, and I just couldn't say no in the face of all the fun they were having.

But finally, *finally* we'd reached our destination. "I can see why they call it a phantom fruit. Can't believe it was *this* deep into the woods," I observed, glancing around the area. There surely couldn't be that many adventurers capable of brushing aside the sort of monsters we'd encountered on the way here. "So, these are the iris fruits, huh? They *look* good, I'll give them that much."

The fruits were remarkably plump—each around the size of a melon—and hung heavily from the limbs of a massive tree. More remarkable than their size, though, was their coloration. The top of each fruit was red, but then they gradually shifted to orange, then yellow, then green, eventually passing through all the shades of the rainbow before reaching their bottoms.

『They smell reeeeally good, Master!』 said Sui, who was riding on my shoulder and gazing hungrily up at the iris fruits.

“I know, right?” I agreed. I could tell how ripe the fruits were even from the base of the tree. Their scent was indescribably sweet and potent. “All right, let’s get harvesting! Think you can handle it, Dora-chan?”

『You got it!』 said the dragon, flapping up toward the fruit-laden branches above.

『Sui’ll help too!』 said the slime, bouncing off my shoulder and onto a branch. It jumped up and up, branch by branch, following in Dora-chan’s wake. Fel, incidentally, couldn’t have cared less about fruit and was dozing off somewhere behind us.

『Comin’ in!』 yelled Dora-chan, who had already plucked an iris fruit and was flapping his way back down to me.

“Nice, thanks! And oh, man, this really *does* smell great!” I said as I accepted the fruit from him. Its aroma was even more intense this close up.

『It’s sooo tasty!』

『Dangit, Sui, no sneaking a taste before me!』

『Hee hee hee! Sui just tried a little bit, that’s all!』

Can’t blame it, really. Not with how good these things smell. And there are so many of them, no reason not to have a taste...

“All right, gather round, everyone! Let’s have a taste test!”

『Oh, hell yeah!』

『Sui’s gonna eat too!』

『I suppose I shall deign to join you.』

Everyone gathered around, watching intently as I peeled off the iris fruit’s skin. Coloration aside, it really reminded me of the skin of a peach—it had the same slightly fuzzy sort of texture. It was pretty easy to peel off as well, revealing the off-white flesh beneath. It could hardly have looked any more peach-like, so long as you ignored its size.

I sliced up the fruit, which I could tell at a glance was going to be *incredibly* juicy, and passed the pieces out to my familiars. Then we all dug

in, and a sweetness the likes of which I could hardly believe exploded into my mouth.

“*Delicious!* Holy *crap*, is this ever delicious!” I shouted. It was so amazing, it had robbed me of my vocabulary. It really was just *that* good.

It did taste an awful lot like a peach in the end. Or at least, the flavor was best described as peachy. It differed in the sense that I’d never, *ever* had a peach that came even close to rivaling it. I was a pretty big peach fan to begin with, and I’d splurged on some expensive fruits in my time, but this one put all of them to shame. Maybe it wasn’t a fair comparison since it technically wasn’t a peach at all, but I couldn’t think of anything closer to relate it to.

《Hot *damn* that’s good!》

《It’s even yummier without the peel!》

《I must admit, this is at least somewhat satisfactory.》

From the sound of things, my familiars unanimously approved of the fruit.

“Y’know, the request only asked us to bring back *five* of them. And that means...”

《We get to keep the rest!》 said Sui, excitedly finishing my thought for me.

《We can’t just leave fruit *this* good lying around, after all!》

《Indeed. If the request specifies five, then five they shall have, and no more.》

“I’m with you on that one.”

And so we harvested every iris fruit we could get our hands on.

“We’ll have to come back again next year, huh?”

《Perhaps. I would not object.》

《Seconded!》

《Sui wants to come back too!》

I left the now bare tree behind, returning to town in a considerably better mood than I’d been in when we left.

I Just Can’t Stop Eating!

One day, I had made an early lunch at Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui’s urgings. The nice, sunny weather lulled my trio of gluttons right to sleep after they finished scarfing down their meal, and I was left with an afternoon to myself for once.

I decided to kick back and take it easy, brewing a nice cup of coffee and browsing through my Online Supermarket. That had become one of my favorite ways of entertaining myself. There was always some sort of surprise waiting for me among the new products, so every time felt fresh and exciting. I was expecting something new on that particular day as well, and I wasn't disappointed.

"Ooh, a special on yuzu, huh?" A mountain of the distinctive yellow citrus fruits was prominently displayed at the center of the menu. Colorful writing danced across the screen, describing the fruits as organic and fresh from the orchard.

"Maybe I should pick some up. Putting a few yuzu into a bath gives it such a nice scent, after all," I mused. I'd shown that trick to Dora-chan and Sui a couple of times, and they loved it. "I can cook something with them too, of course! Nice to see they're organic, on that note." A lot of yuzu recipes used the peels as well as the fruit's flesh, so not having to worry about pesticides getting into the dish would be a load off my mind.

That was when an idea struck me. I happened to have quite a sizable stock of daikon at the time, and if there's one thing that paired well with yuzu, it was daikon radish.

"It's been ages since I've made that stuff! All right, that settles it—I'm making yuzu daikon!"

A lightly pickled dish like yuzu daikon made for a perfect palette cleanser, and it was surprisingly nice for a drinking snack as well. Fel and the other carnivores probably wouldn't even consider giving it a try, of course, which meant that I'd have a snack purely for myself for once. I considered sticking to just a small batch for a moment, but then decided that I might as well go all out and make a ton. No harm in having a stock of the stuff, after all.

"Okay, let's get some yuzu!" My mind was made up, and I added a box of the fruit to my cart before going back to leisurely browsing through the various other new items in stock.

Eventually, I finished paging through the Online Supermarket's full menu and downed the dregs of my now cold coffee. I got up, stretching as I glanced around the room, and found that my familiars were still fast asleep. They looked so peaceful when they were napping, and I found myself wishing that every day could be this calm and laid-back.

The sun was still shining brightly overhead, and I had plenty of time left

before I had to start getting ready to make dinner. “Might as well get a jump on making that yuzu daikon, since I have the time and all,” I said to myself.

I might’ve said it a little too loudly, though, since Fel opened his eyes and sat up the moment I spoke. Dora-chan and Sui had been using him as an improvised bed, so they woke up right along with him.

“**Making what?**” asked Fel in a sleepy drone. “**Is there meat in it?**”

I chuckled. Fel’s hearing was incredible even at the worst of times, but it sometimes felt like he could hear for miles whenever food was involved.

『Whazzat? Grub time?』

『Fooood?』

“Nah, not quite. It’s still too early for dinner, so you can go back to sleep for now.”

『’Zat so? ’Kay, then, I’mma nap more.』

『If there’s no food, Sui’s going back to bed too.』

Dora-chan and Sui quickly drifted back off to sleep, but Fel wasn’t quite so easily dissuaded. “**Well? Is there meat in it or not?**”

“Not. I’m about to go make some yuzu-flavored pickles, that’s all.” I lifted up the box of yuzu for Fel to see.

“**No meat? Then do not wake me up for it,**” said the Fenrir, already curling up into a ball once more.

“I didn’t wake you up for it, *you* misinterpreted me and woke up on your own! I don’t put meat into *everything* I make, y’know? Hey, are you listening?”

He wasn’t. Fel was, in fact, already fast asleep, leaving me to grumble fruitlessly as I carried my citrus into the kitchen.



Step one: prepare the daikon! I pulled a fresh, thick, leafy radish out from my item box. You could tell how high-quality it was from the slight glossy sheen of its skin alone. This particular daikon had come from Alban’s field, and I knew from experience that it would be just as tasty whether I cooked it or ate it raw. I usually bought my daikon from my Online Supermarket, but since I had access to a field overseen by a pro with a green thumb, I figured I might as well make the most of the vegetables he gave me.

“Man, though, this thing is *huge*,” I muttered in awe. I’d bought the seeds it’d been grown from off my Online Supermarket, which might’ve had something to do with their exceptional yield, but I figured I also had Alban’s

expertise to thank. Considering how well they'd turned out, I was already eagerly considering what I'd ask him to grow next.

Anyway, the recipe starts with washing and peeling your daikon, then chopping it up into relatively short sticks—a little shorter and thicker than if you were julienning them. Be sure to keep the daikon's leaves around, by the way, since you can use them for all sorts of other recipes!

Daikon leaves are delicious in their own right, and throwing them out should be a crime. They're great in miso soup, and make a tasty addition to pretty much any stir-fry. My favorite use for them is stir-frying them with some whitebait and serving it up on a bowl of rice, though using sakura shrimp in place of the whitebait is just as good!

Anyway, I stored my daikon greens in my Item Box to use some other time and got back to the yuzu daikon. Once your radish is all chopped up, the next step's to put it in a plastic bag, sprinkle in some salt, seal it up, and give it a very thorough kneading. After that, just let it sit for about ten minutes so the salt can draw the moisture out of the daikon.

While you're waiting for that, you can prepare your yuzu! I pulled a few of the fruits out from their box, and their pleasantly refreshing aroma instantly filled the kitchen. The first step with them, of course, is to give them a thorough washing! If you're using organic yuzu like I was, you'll also want to inspect their peels for blemishes and black spots, which you can trim off with a kitchen knife.

After that, you quarter the yuzu and squeeze out all of their juices, making sure to strain out all the seeds. The peels don't go to waste, though. The next step is to trim out as much of the pith as you can manage, leaving just the flavorful outer peel remaining. The pith is where all the bitterness in citrus peels comes from, so don't skimp on this step! Once you're finished, slice the remaining peel into long strips.

At that point, you're pretty much finished! All that's left is to combine the daikon, the juice and peel from the yuzu, some sugar, salt, and vinegar in a plastic bag (the ones with zippers work perfectly for this sort of dish). The final ingredient is a couple chili peppers, de-seeded and cut into rounds. Then you just give the bag a *very* thorough massaging and carefully squeeze out all the air you can manage as you seal it up! All that's left at that point is to shove it in your fridge—or magic fridge, in my case—and give it at least an hour or so to sit before you dig in.

I was excited enough to go for mine immediately after that first hour had passed. I hummed happily as I strolled into the kitchen and opened up my magic fridge to find...

“Ooh, these look *great!*”

My yuzu daikon was all ready, and I just *had* to give them a taste test right away. I scooped a small portion out onto a small plate and bit into a piece of daikon, relishing its crisp, satisfying crunch.

“Wow, the yuzu *really* comes through in these!” Both the skin and juice of the citrus fruit had thoroughly permeated the daikon, and its texture was out of this world. “Yeah, these turned out awesome! They’re delicious!

Munch, crunch, munch.

Munch, crunch, munch.

Munch, crunch, munch.

“Ah, whoops! I’m all out.” I couldn’t resist serving myself a second plate of pickles.

Munch, crunch, munch.

Munch, crunch, munch.

Munch, crunch, munch.

“God, these are *sooo* good!” So good, in fact, that I just couldn’t stop eating them. “Shame that Fel and the others don’t appreciate how awesome this sort of food can be.” *If they’d only give them a chance, then maybe they’d pester me to make stuff like this every once in a while and lay off the meat for once!*

Good Food Trumps All

“Phew,” I sighed, pausing for a moment to wipe the sweat off my brow. “Man, I’ve really pulled out a solid clump of this stuff, huh?”

“**Only because you have been brushing so insufferably hard,**” grumbled Fel with an indignant glance.

“Oh no, you don’t get to blame me for this! If you’d just take a bath every once in a while, this wouldn’t have to be such a big deal. I keep telling you that you should take one at *least* once a month, but you gave me the slip last month *and* the month before that!”

We’d also been going out into the woods to hunt more than usual lately, which meant his fur would’ve been filthy whether or not he’d bathed in the

past month. And yet, it had still been a herculean ordeal to convince Fel to suck it up and take a bath for once.

“Man, though, we’re not even in the bath yet, and I’m already exhausted! Can’t believe that just brushing out all your loose fur is this tiring. The fluff on your belly was the worst—it was so full of dirt, it was practically one solid piece!” I commented, maybe just a little more snidely than was strictly necessary. Fel scowled, but that didn’t change the fact that I was right. Dematting all his hair really *had* been a nightmare.

“Grr!”

“Oh, quit growling. It’s time for our bath!” I said, stripping down and literally pushing Fel into the bathroom with me.

《Oh, you finally made it! Took you long enough.》

《Master, Uncle Fel, you’re both so slow!》

Dora-chan and Sui, who had both gone in early, greeted Fel and me as we walked into the bathroom.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t believe how nasty Fel’s fur was,” I explained. “It took me ages to get him all brushed!”

“Hold your tongue! You are *not* to imply that I am dirty!”

“I wasn’t *implying* anything, I was *saying* it straight up, ’cause you really were!”

《Well, yeah, of course he was. Since the last bath Fel took, we’ve gone hunting *how* many times?》

《Uncle Fel’s diiirty!》

“Wh—no, I am not! I groom myself on a daily basis, and that is more than sufficient to keep me clean!”

“Sorry, Fel, but that can only take you so far. *Especially* considering how often we end up going out into the wilderness.” Going hunting meant finding yourself in all sorts of less-than-sanitary places, after all. “Seriously, I dunno what we’re gonna do with you! I can’t believe you hate baths *this* much.”

《Right? ’Specially considering they feel so good!》

《Sooo good!》

Dora-chan and Sui laid back, basking in the water. I had added in some bath salts in advance, and they were making it look really appealing.

“Grrrrrr! I have *never* been negligent in my grooming! Not once,” grumbled Fel with a frustrated grimace. His usual routine just wasn’t going to cut it with all the running around we’d been doing, unfortunately.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Look, we’re gonna get you nice and clean today, Fel. Just accept it, all right? Sui, can you do the usual?”

《Okaaay!》

Sui extended a tentacle, turning it into a makeshift showerhead, and started hosing Fel down. Meanwhile, I pulled out a bottle of unscented, additive-free, one hundred percent all-natural dog shampoo I’d bought from my Online Supermarket and started lathering him up. At this point, Fel had finally resigned himself to his fate and was standing stock-still. I took the time to wash every inch of him, even scrubbing down his face and washing away the bubbles to leave him sparkling clean.

“All right, much better!”

“Is it over, then?” Fel asked, transparently relieved. Unfortunately for him, I wasn’t done yet.

“Nope, not quite!”

“What?!”

“I’ve still gotta rub the conditioner into your fur! We used it last time, remember?”

“I care not for such things! Spare me the trouble!”

“Hey, Dora-chan, what do you think? If we’re gonna do this we might as well do a proper job, right?”

《Uh, yeah? I mean, duh.》

“And you like it when Uncle Fel’s nice and fluffy, right, Sui?”

《Yeah! Sui thinks Uncle Fel’s super cool when he’s all fluffy!》

“Well, you heard ‘em. Might as well give up, Fel. And hey, Dora-chan, Sui, wanna give me a hand?”

《Can do!》

《Sui’ll help!》

“H-Hey! Wait!”

“Nooope!”

Then Dora-chan, Sui, and I slathered Fel with conditioner before he could get a word in edgewise.



“Okay, *now* you’re all washed up! Once we dry you off, you’ll be as fluffy as you’ve ever been.”

That was all the permission Fel needed. He immediately gave himself a mighty shake, covering the entire room—and me—in water and, more

importantly, his fur.

“*Fellll*,” I moaned, “I meant with a *towel!* I was gonna do it for you!”

“I do not have the time for such sluggish means. My way was faster, and I am leaving now,” replied Fel, stomping out of the bathroom without waiting a second longer.

“Come *on!* Ugh, peh! Gross, his fur’s in my mouth now!”

《Pff! Fel *really* must’ve been excited to get outta here, huh?》 snickered Dora-chan, who’d returned to the bath the moment he finished helping wash Fel. I could tell he was on the verge of cracking up at the sight of me covered in fur.

“Ugggh, this sucks! It’s all over me!” I scooped up a bucketful of water from the bath and poured it over my head, washing most of the fur onto the floor, then finally climbed back into the tub.

“Ahh, now *that’s* more like it!” I sighed, stretching my legs out in the water. “Fel sure does shed a ton every time we do this, though, doesn’t he? Not like he can help it, I guess.”

I’d brushed a massive amount of loose fur off him this time, and for lack of any better place to put it, I’d just shoved it into a garbage bag I happened to have on hand. I never knew what to do with the stuff. I’d tried burning it once, but it just wouldn’t seem to light up, so I’d been burying it when I had the energy and sealing it away in my Item Box when I didn’t feel like bothering. I’d had Sui dissolve it for me once, but the more I thought about the slime eating Fel’s dirty sheddings, the more the idea grossed me out, so I decided not to resort to that trick again.

“I’m glad you two don’t shed, or anything,” I commented. “You take your baths without making a capital issue out of it too.”

《I mean, not like I have fur to begin with,》 countered Dora-chan. 《And baths feel good, so that works out for me.》

《Yeah, baths are sooo nice,》 agreed Sui.

“So nice is right. For sure.”

《Oh, and they smell real nice too! That’s a big plus.》

《The hot water smells sooo good!》

“Heh, yeah, I’m pretty particular about my bath products. The bath salts I used this time were lavender scented—that’s a type of flower, by the way.”

《Yeah, I think I’m into it.》

《I like the flower smell too!》

It was nice to hear that they both shared my taste in bath salts.

『Oh, right,』 Dora-chan piped up.『I don't have fur and it's not as big of a pain as Fel's whole deal, but I do sorta shed something.』

“Oh, you do?”

『Yeah, my teeth. I grow new ones 'bout twice a century or so. Not the scales, though—those stick around unless they get real beat up.』

Oh? Huh. News to me.

『You can have the old ones next time I grow a new set, if you want 'em. I bet *somebody* would fork over an awful lot of coin for a couple, eh?』

“Which ‘somebody’ is that?”

『Y'know, the elf.』

That was all the reminder I needed. “Oh, you mean the one in Dolan...” I muttered. He could only be talking about a certain elf we'd met there who had such an abnormally intense fixation on dragons, it bordered on pathological.

“That wouldn't bother you?” *Selling off a part of your own body to a guy like that?*

『Hah! Nah. I mean, I've just been throwing my old teeth out up 'til now. Might as well make some coin off 'em, right? Bet that guy'd give you just about anything you ask for,』 Dora-chan added with a sneer.

Where has he been getting these ideas?

『So, yeah, they're all yours. You can pay me in advance with some of that otherworldly meat of yours.』

“You mean the wagyu I made for you guys before? Sheesh, I should've known you were after something along those lines.” The slightest taste of the high-quality meat from my Online Supermarket had been enough to hook my familiars.

It was a luxury, no doubt about it, but he had a point. Having some really good meat every once in a while *was* nice enough to justify the splurge. That said, when I factored in the sheer volume of meat my familiars could consume, it occurred to me that said splurge could end up costing an unfathomable amount of cash before it was over. In any case, I had to chuckle at Dora-chan's flagrant opportunism.

Suddenly, the door to the bathroom opened. An enormous living ball of fluff stood on the other side, which on second glance turned out to just be Fel.

“If Dora-chan is striking such a deal, then I shall as well! Sell my fur

too,” said Fel the ever sharp-eared, who had apparently been listening in on our conversation.

“What, sell your nasty old fur? Seriously?”

“Do not call it nasty! You speak of the fur of a Fenrir!”

“Actually...when you put it that way, you have a point.” I was so desensitized to Fel’s presence that it hadn’t even occurred to me, but what was nasty old dog hair in my eyes would be the fur of a mythical beast to the locals. “Maybe we *could* actually get a decent price for that stuff.”

“There is no ‘maybe’ about it. You will, without question.”

“And that wouldn’t bother you?” Clean or not, if it were me, it’d feel weird to think about selling something that grew from my own body.

“If it allows me to eat good food, then I care not for the details. Good food trumps all.»

“So if I get a good price for your fur, you get wagyu in exchange. Is that the deal?”

“Indeed. Dora and Sui may also partake,” Fel added with a smug grin.

《Ooh, now that’s the Fel we know and love! Generous as hell! Thanks! Man, I’m drooling already!》

《Thanks, Uncle Fel!》

I still wasn’t totally convinced we’d actually get much of anything for Fel’s fur, but in my familiars’ eyes the deal was already sealed. They were working themselves up into a beef-induced frenzy, and I could only shake my head in exasperation.

Of course, I had no idea at the time that when I *did* finally try and sell Fel’s fur, I’d get quoted a price so astronomically high it would leave me shaking my head in dumbfounded astonishment.

“Peach” Jellies

“Hmm...”

I was in the kitchen, arms crossed and mind preoccupied.

《Master, what’re you doing?》asked Sui as it bounced into the room and onto the counter. It must have heard me mumbling to myself.

“Oh, just thinking to myself. I’ve been starting to wonder if there’s something else we can do with *these*. I’m getting kinda tired of eating them on their own,” I replied, tapping on a remarkably colorful fruit.

We'd been sent out on a request to collect the so-called "phantom fruits"—more technically known as iris fruits—at the personal request of the local guildmaster some time ago. I'd tried a piece of one of them on the spot and was shocked to find that they tasted like the freshest, sweetest peaches I could possibly imagine. I've always been a peach lover, and Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui had taken a liking to them as well, so we'd harvested the whole crop and even made plans to go back again for another haul next year.

And that was all well and good, of course, but the thing is, the request had only required us to hand over five of them. The rest of the harvest was ours to keep, and there were a *lot* of them. They were downright delicious, don't get me wrong, but we'd been eating iris fruit for days on end at this point. No matter how tasty a dessert is, you can't eat it for a week straight without starting to get at least a little tired of it. I might have been a peach lover, but even *I* had my limits. Yes, yes, first world problems, I know.

"I really like these things, of course, but I figure there's gotta be something else we can do with them! So I've been thinking about what sort of dessert they'd work well in," I explained. The problem, however, was that I'd walked into the kitchen, stared at the fruit for minutes on end, and only *then* remembered that I was more or less clueless when it comes to cooking desserts. I'd been compensating by following recipes on the backs of ingredient boxes recently, and that had been working out well enough that I'd sort of tricked myself into thinking I'd picked up the knack for sweets.

"Hmm... Ah!"

《Did you have an idea, Master?》

"I sure did! Peach jellies! Of course! It's so obvious!"

I'd finally remembered an incident that happened back when I lived with my parents. Our family had received a ton of peaches for some reason or another, and my mother ended up making them into peach gelatin in the end. I recalled it clearly since I'd helped her peel the peaches, and I was pretty sure I could more or less remember the recipe.

"Let's do this, Sui! We're making peach jellies!"

《Peach jellies?》repeated the slime with a puzzled jiggle.

"Oh, right. Not peach, I guess. Since they're iris fruits, it'd be iris jellies. But anyway, jellies are a really tasty dessert that jiggles around just like you do!"

《Oooh, Sui wants to make jellies, then! Sui'll help!》The slime raised two

little tentacles into the air and bounced about in excitement. It always got a little worked up when dessert was figuratively on the table.



First things first: I had to do some grocery shopping. That said, the recipe didn't take very many ingredients and I already had most of them on hand, so in the end, all I needed to buy from my Online Supermarket was a packet of gelatin. I picked that up, then got right to cooking.

"All right, let's see here... First step's to peel the iris fruits. You'll help with that, right, Sui?"

《Yeah!》

"Okay, start by making a little notch in the skin with a knife, like this. Then you sorta peel it up like this, little by little..."

I demonstrated the technique to Sui, showing it how the skin came off cleanly if you did it right.

《Wooow! Sui wants to try!》

"Sure! Just a sec." I pre-notched an iris fruit and passed it over to Sui. "Okay, see the cut I made here? Just grab the skin there and peel it off, nice and smooth."

《Nice and...smooth! It worked! Sui did it!》

"Oh, nice, that was great! Okay, let's keep up the good work!"

《Yeah!》

Sui and I peeled one iris fruit after another until we had a very solid pile of them stacked up on the counter.

"Phew! Okay, I think that'll be plenty," I said, looking over our handiwork. "Next, we have to chop them up into good-sized chunks!"

Once your fruit's all chopped up, the next step is to put some water, sugar, and a little lemon juice into a pot. Heat it until the sugar's dissolved, then turn the flame down to low and add the iris fruit. Keep it simmering for about five minutes, taking care not to let it come to a full boil.

《It smells so sweet, Master!》

"Yeah. I know what you want to do. Just a little, okay?" If you stopped at this stage, you'd be left with a perfectly serviceable compote, so I didn't see any harm in stealing a quick bite in the name of taste testing. Sui and I sampled the mixture as we waited for it to finish cooking.

Finally, the kitchen timer I'd set started beeping, informing me it was time for the next step. "Okay! Now we take the pot off the flame—hyup!" I

heaved the pot off the magic stove. Pretty much all the pots in my collection were of the stock variety, so it took quite a bit of muscle to make that happen. “And now we just wait for it to come down to room temperature! Sui, can you stir this in the meantime? Be really gentle about it, though!”

《Okaay!》

I tasked Sui with keeping the mixture moving for the sake of saving time. A gentle stirring would help it come to room temperature much quicker than if we just left it alone. I, meanwhile, set about dissolving the gelatin powder in a bit of boiling water.

Once the fruit mixture’s cooled down, strain out the chunks of peach—I mean, the chunks of iris fruit, and portion them out into the bowls you’re planning on serving the jellies in. I went with the usual massive glass bowls for my trio of gluttons, and a much more reasonably sized glass for me. At that point, all you have to do is stir the hydrated gelatin into the leftover iris fruit juice mixture and pour it into your chosen serving receptacles! I gave Sui a ladle and had it handle that step for me.

《Master, Sui’s all finished!》

“Great! And ooh, nice job!” One of the bowls was conspicuously fuller than the others, but I managed to resist the urge to chuckle about it. “Now we just cover them in plastic wrap and let them chill in the magic fridge until they set! They’ll be ready in time for dessert.”

《Yay! Sui’s so excited!》



That night’s dinner was, as always, mostly made up of meat. My familiars all stuffed themselves to satisfaction on big juicy dungeon pork bowls. It was time to make my move.

“All right, guys, dessert time!” I said, setting out the huge bowls of iris fruit jello before them.

《Oooh, it’s the stuff we made this afternoon!》

“That’s right! Sui and I made this together for everyone.”

《Oh? So we will not be having fruit tonight? I was growing weary of the same dessert day after day, as it happens, so this is a welcome change.》

《Me too! Can’t keep eating the same thing over and over like that. I was thinking of asking for pudding tonight, myself! It’s been way too long.》

“I’m right with you on that, but just so you know, this does have iris fruit

in it! I thought it'd be nice to make it into a jello instead of just eating it as is."

《Let me see,》 said Fel, taking a big mouthful of the jello. 《**Hmm! This jiggly texture is quite satisfying. It cleanses the mouth, in a way.**》

《Yeah, I get you! I like that it's nice and cold too.》

“Hear that, Sui?”

《Hee hee hee! Sui's really happy!》

“Right? It turned out super tasty!”

The texture of the gelatin and the sweetness of the iris fruit combined to form a dish that was worth more than the sum of its parts. It was delicious in a totally different way than the fruits were on their own.

《It's really yummy...but Sui might want cake for dessert tomorrow.》

《Pff, ha ha ha, Sui, you shouldn't be saying that! You *made* the stuff!》

《**Sui's honesty is indeed unshakable.**》

I chuckled. Fel was right—being honest to a fault really was just like my favorite slime.

Pentagram Post-Mukohda

“Arright, people, grub’s up!” shouted Fátima. The tanned, muscular adventurer stirred the pot on her party’s newly purchased magic stove, then ladled the soup inside into bowls and passed them out to her eagerly waiting partymates.

“Damn, that’s tasty!” said one of them as he sipped the hot soup. He was massive, standing at over two meters tall, and his unkempt hair and scraggly beard plus the greataxe he carried as a weapon gave him the air of a bandit. His name was Aleksandrov, aka Alek.

“It feels like it’s washing all the exhaustion right out of me,” agreed Axel, a handsome young beastman with doglike ears and a fluffy tail.

“Yes, it really is delicious! I feel like I can finally relax,” added Adelmira, a blue-eyed girl with features so striking one might mistake her for an intricately crafted doll. She let out a long, relieved sigh as her muscles untensed for the first time in who knows how long.

“Perfectly seasoned too! Nothing beats going on a rampage and following it up with a good meal!” said Samuel the dwarf, pausing just long enough to get the words out between bites.

The five of them together made up the A-ranked adventuring party known as Pentagram, and they'd spent nearly two years now exploring the Brixt dungeon.

"Oh, *please*," said Fátima. "It's just soup, nothing fancy! You're gonna embarrass me, complimenting me over nothing like that!"

"*Nothing?* Hah!" Alek chimed in. "Don't be ridiculous! Everything you cook's delicious, no exceptions!"

"Alek..." said Fátima, gazing deeply into her husband's eyes. Watching them was like seeing a scene from *Beauty and the Beast* acted out in real life.

"Oh, gods above, spare us the flirting, *please!*!" jabbed Axel.

"W-We weren't flirting!" shouted Alek.

"R-Right, yeah! Any more of that talk and you won't be getting seconds, Axel!" added Fátima.

"Yeah, yeah," Axel said, rolling his eyes. Samuel and Adelmira, meanwhile, just snickered at the entire exchange. It wasn't long ago at all that Pentagram had come dangerously close to losing their lives on this very floor of the dungeon, but now they chatted casually, whiling away a moment of leisure time over a hot meal.

"Seriously, though, it's really something that decent food could change things *this* much for us," Alek mumbled.

"I've always thought that quantity trumps quality when it comes to dungeon food," Samuel said. "Long as it filled my belly, I didn't much care for how it tasted."

"Same," Axel said, nodding in agreement.

"Not like we can carry an unlimited amount of stuff with us into the dungeon," noted Fátima. "Dungeon food means dried meat andhardtack—I always thought that was just common sense."

"That *is* standard practice for this line of work," agreed Adelmira. "I've started reconsidering that stance recently, though. Comparing tough, oversalted meat and bread so hard it chips your teeth to this soup, I think it's a given which meal would give us the energy we need to keep up the fight."

The members of Pentagram paused for a moment to think back on the adventurer who had taught them that all-too-valuable lesson. It happened about a month ago, during their first expedition into the thirty-second floor. They'd come in search of magic iron, but were thrashed so soundly that they'd only just managed to make it to a safe area with their lives.

That's when they met *him*: an adventurer with the sheer audacity to set up a magic stove and cook in the middle of a dungeon. He was an S-ranked tamer who commanded a host of powerful familiars, and his name was Mukohda.

The stereotype goes that most S-rankers are haughty and arrogant, but Mukohda was nothing of the sort. Not only was he generally good-natured, he even had the decency to share his meal with them. Not just any meal either. He'd cooked a strange, unfamiliar dish of fresh, fragrant bread stuffed to the point of bursting with meat. Pentagram's members had never tasted anything like it. Mukohda's cooking was indescribably delicious.

It was only after they'd said their goodbyes and set out on their trip back up to the surface that the true implications of their encounter struck them, though. Suddenly, they found themselves fighting on all but even terms with the iron golems that had almost been the end of them. By the time they left the thirty-second floor, they did so with a more than sufficient stock of the magic iron that they'd given up on less than a day before.

They were shocked, of course, and more than a little confused. When Pentagram finally reached the surface again, they took a moment to sit down and discuss the matter. Why had their return trip gone so inexplicably well? What in the world had changed? No matter how many times they went over the trip, only one event came to mind: their encounter with Mukohda and his delicious food.

Fátima was the one to put the pieces together, in the end. "Oh, of course!" she said with a satisfied nod. "It all makes sense now, and it's the easiest thing in the world. You can't live if you don't eat, that's a given, but what about *what* you eat? If I asked you to pick between tough, nasty trail rations and a nice, hot meal, you wouldn't even have to think about it, eh? And that goes double in a dungeon. Hell, the food being hot alone's a luxury down there! Seems like a given that a well-prepared meal would give us that extra boost."

The other members weren't convinced, at first. It was, after all, *just* a meal. The more they thought about it, though, the more they realized that Fátima might have hit the nail on the head.

Pentagram's members quickly agreed to conduct a trial run and add soup into their stock of dungeon provisions. Under normal conditions, *somebody* would have likely protested such an extravagance, but thanks to their

unexpected magic iron windfall, they'd been able to sell off some of the excess and secure a small magic bag to share among the party.

With the weight of their overall baggage drastically reduced, bringing along a used magic stove they bought on the cheap, a large pot, and a stock of onions, potatoes and other vegetables with lengthy shelf lives felt like a much more reasonable proposition. Pentagram delved back into the dungeon with a new provision plan, and lo and behold, their expedition was a massive success. Their rate of progress didn't exactly double, but their rate of earnings came *very* close.

"Sure wish I could thank Mukohda one of these days," said Alek. His party members nodded in agreement.

"Oh, by the way," said Fátima. "Think it's about time we replaced this magic stove? It'd be a real help if we could get one with a stronger flame."

"Can't expect much outta used goods, yeah," said Axel. "If it means our food gets better again, I'm all for it."

"If Axel agrees, then I do too," Adelmira chimed in. "A more powerful stove means that making the soup will be even faster, right?"

"No arguments here," added Samuel. "Hell, with the coin we've been making lately, why not get one of them fancy ones?"

"All right, then," said Alek. "Sounds like we're due for a trip back to the surface! I think we've got enough in us for one final push first, though, eh? If we're spending a small fortune on a magic stove, we've gotta earn it first!"

"I like the sound of that!"

"Arright, let's do this!"

"Yeah!"

"Agreed! We've been on such a roll lately, it'll be a snap!"

And so, Pentagram set off into the thirty-second floor once more, their morale at an all-time high.

Mukohda's Cooking Class: Eggs, Part Three

At Aija and Theresa's request—or really, insistence—I was once again roped into teaching a lesson on how to cook with eggs.

The tomato, egg, and mayo stir-fry that I'd taught them last time had apparently been such a massive hit with their families, they were *still* getting a ton of mileage out of the general technique. They'd make it with cabbage or peppers in place of the tomatoes, or throw in some meat, like red boar, orc, cockatrice, or sausage. The technique itself was easy and it worked with just about any ingredients, so it had become a go-to for them when they needed a last-second panic meal.

Of course, eggs were a luxury item by this world's standards, so it also counted as something of a special treat, and their families always welcomed the dish. Anyway, since everyone's affection for eggs was readily apparent, I decided that I should teach them a recipe where the eggs played a starring role.

Hmm—a recipe where eggs are the main ingredient... It sounds like everyone really likes mayo, so maybe I could do something with that as well? They did say that their families have started asking for mayo on their salads instead of dressing.

As a side note, the salad dressing they were using came straight from my Online Supermarket. I couldn't blame them for sidelining it in favor of mayo, though. I had about the same chance of picking one option or the other when I had some of Alban's delicious homegrown salad. It was out of this world on his tomatoes too...not that any of my party members appreciated it. Good veggies were wasted on those carnivores, really.

Anyway, I was getting sidetracked. A recipe with eggs and mayo, huh? That narrows it down—in fact, there's only one answer I'll accept for this one! I'm teaching them how to make egg sandwiches!

Theresa had more or less mastered the art of baking perfectly soft bread with the white flour I'd bought from my Online Supermarket for her just recently, so it seemed like the perfect recipe in more ways than one. Egg sandwiches on whole wheat had a nice, rustic sort of appeal to them, sure, but in my mind, nothing beat an egg sandwich on white bread, especially if it was sourdough. The contrast between the crunchy crust and the soft, pillow-y

interior just couldn't be beat!

There was no doubt in my mind that Theresa's bread would make absolutely top-tier egg sandwiches, and I was starting to get genuinely excited for the lesson.



Before long, the day of my lesson arrived. This time around, Selja decided to participate along with Aija and Theresa.

"Okay, let's get cooking!" I prompted.

"Okay!" my three egg disciples yelled in unison. They were all giving me a look of intensely elevated expectations, which made me feel a little awkward. I was teaching them how to make egg sandwiches, after all, and it didn't get much more basic than that.

"Today, I'll be showing you how to make egg sandwiches. Did you bring the bread I asked for, Theresa?"

"Yes, of course!" she replied, pulling a loaf of sourdough out of her basket and setting it out on the counter.

"Oh, wow, that smells amazing!"

"I baked it just this morning!"

"Perfect! This'll make some great sandwiches, for sure. Okay, time to get to work! The first step is to boil the eggs, but before that..." I pulled out the eggs I'd gathered up beforehand. "Look closely. Do you see how one end of the eggs is a little wider and more rounded, and the other's sort of tapered?"

Aija, Theresa, and Selja gathered around and watched closely as I continued my explanation.

"You want to start by poking a tiny hole in the more rounded end. Something really small and sharp should do the trick, like this thumbtack. Just press it up against the eggshell and rotate it a bit to prick a hole! It's pretty easy, but be careful not to press too hard, or you could crack the egg wide open."

I'd bought a pack of thumbtacks from my Online Supermarket in advance, which I passed out to my students, who started poking holes in the eggs. They were really nervous about messing up and cracking the shells at first, but it wasn't long before they'd more or less gotten the hang of it.

"Okay, that's looking good! Doing this in advance makes it way easier to peel the eggs after they're boiled, so don't forget this step."

Next, you put the eggs in a pan and add just enough water to cover them

fully. We'd be hard-boiling the eggs this time, since they were for sandwiches, so I boiled them for about twelve minutes on a medium-high flame. I'd bought kitchen timers for each family's household a while back, by the way, so I figured they wouldn't have any trouble getting the eggs properly boiled on their own.

If you want the yolks to end up right at the center of the eggs, it helps to stir them around every once in a while while they're boiling. They'd be getting diced up before they went into the sandwiches, of course, so in this instance it was sort of pointless to go through the trouble, but eh, I sorta just felt like it.

Before too long, the timer started beeping and the eggs were ready.

"Okay, they're all boiled! Now you carry the pot over to the sink..."

I dumped the hot water out of the pot, then filled it back up with cold water to cool off the eggs. You can just keep the water running and peel the eggs under it—that also helps to get the shells off nice and clean.

"See how the shells are just sliding off? That's because of the hole we poked in them earlier! Give it a try!"

"Oh, you're right! They really do just come right off!"

"It's true!"

"Mine slid right off too!"

"Okay," I said some time later, "that's all the eggs peeled! Next, we put them in a big bowl and mash them up with a fork, like this. I mean, you don't have to do it *exactly* like this, really. Some people use a knife, and some people even just crush them with their hands—the point is just to get them diced up into nice, fine pieces."

The three of them nodded and voiced their understanding.

"When the eggs are finely minced, you just season them with a little salt and pepper, then add the mayo." I tend to like my egg salad on the fairly mayo-heavy side, so I put in quite a lot of the stuff. "Then you just mix it up... Oh, Theresa? Would you mind slicing the bread now?"

"All right!"

Theresa passed me the freshly sliced bread. I took a piece of it, piled on a helping of the egg salad, then sandwiched it with a second slice.

"And, that's all there is to it! That's how you make an egg sandwich."

Aija, Theresa, and Selja imitated my technique, quickly putting together egg sandwiches of their own, and then we finally dug in together. Of course,

it was delicious! You could always count on egg sandwiches in that regard.

“We didn’t do anything special with the bread this time,” I explained, “but you can also spread some butter or mustard on it first! Giving the bread a light toasting before you put the sandwich together works really well too. You should try out all sorts of techniques!”

I looked back over at my students, and... *Oh, wow. Those are certainly some faces they’re making I... kinda feel like I shouldn’t be watching this?* They looked downright enraptured by the egg sandwiches.

“Is this...the food of the gods...?”

“It’s *too* delicious...”

“Incredible...”

R-Really? It’s that good? These are just egg sandwiches, right...? I was bewildered, but Aija, Theresa, and Selja all told me that they knew they could always count on me and went on their way in the highest of spirits.

From what I heard later on, the combination of eggs and mayo had scored the same sort of critical hit on the rest of my employees’ taste buds as well. Thankfully, it seemed that egg sandwiches had become another indispensable tool in their cooking arsenal.

It was only a short while later that I realized my mistake. Specifically, after I overheard a conversation between Luke and Irvine, the former adventurers.

“Egg sandwiches are the *best*, seriously! They’re tasty, but that’s not all. When I eat them, it feels like I could take on *anyone* and win!”

“You too?! I know *exactly* what you mean!”

Wait. Oh, crap!

I’d gone and made the sandwiches exclusively from Online Supermarket ingredients. *Whoops.*

Garlic Butter Is the Ultimate Shortcut

“Hey, guys, what do you wanna have for lunch?”

《Meat!》

《Yeah, meat.》

《Meeeat!》

Why do I even bother? Clearly, that was the wrong question.

“Yes, of course you want meat, what else is new? I meant what *kind* of

meat.”

《In that case, gigant minotaur.》

《What he said. Stuff's tasty as hell.》

《Sui wants the big cow meat too!》

My familiars had gotten a taste for gigant minotaur meat in the Brixt dungeon, and that was pretty much all they'd asked for ever since. “Gigant minotaur again, huh? What to make with it, though...?”

If I wanted to whip up something quick, making a rice bowl was definitely the way to go. As for what sort of rice bowl... *Ah ha! Got it!*

“Okay, I’ll get that cooked up nice and fast!” I made my way into the kitchen.

“All right, time to get cooking! Time to make some beef—I mean, gigant minotaur garlic butter bowls!”

The first step for this recipe is to prepare the veggies you’ll be using in the stir-fry. I decided to use potatoes on this particular occasion, since I’d received a ton of them from Alban the last time I stopped by my house. I peeled the potatoes, sliced them up into fine strips, and washed them off.

Next, you heat some oil in a frying pan, make sure the potatoes are totally drained, and toss them in to stir-fry for a little while. Once they’ve been cooked through enough to look slightly translucent, throw in the gigant minotaur meat, which should be sliced thin for this recipe. Follow that up immediately with a little sake, salt, and pepper, and stir-fry until the meat starts to brown.

Once it hits that stage, add in some soy sauce, mirin, salted butter, and garlic! As usual, I used the pre-grated stuff that comes in tubes. Stir-fry everything again until all the liquids come together into a nice sauce that coats the meat and potatoes, and you’re good to go!

I piled rice into my chowhounds’ enormous bowls, then topped them off with plenty of meat. I also added some finely sliced green onions and sesame seeds on top as a final garnish. You can also top them with pepper, a soft-boiled egg, or a raw egg yolk. This dish is delicious no matter how you serve it, really!

In any case, lunch was ready and my familiars were probably starving, so I brought their meal out to them right away.



“So, what do you think?”

《Not bad at all. Indeed, this is quite scrumptious!》

《Yeah, whatever you seasoned this with suits the gigant minotaur meat ridiculously well!》

《Sui loves it!》

The garlic butter bowls were a hit, and my familiars were devouring them at an incredibly rapid pace.

“Nice! Glad to hear it!” There was something almost magical about how you could whip up a garlic butter bowl in mere minutes and have it turn out *this* tasty. The butter gives the stir-fry an incredible richness that goes fantastically with rice. I couldn’t wait any longer and dug into my own portion as well.

《Seconds, now!》

《Same over here!》

《For Sui too!》

That was fast! Not that my trio of gluttons eating fast was anything new. *You know it’d taste better if you bothered to chew, right?*

《Hurry!》

《C’mon, get a move on!》

《Masteeer, Sui wants seconds, please!》

“Okay, okay! Just gimme a minute, jeez.” I quickly whipped up a second round of garlic butter bowls. This time I tried topping them with black pepper. “Here you go! I finished them with pepper this time. Should give them a nice kick that’ll make them even tastier,” I said, laying the bowls before my ever-impatient familiars.

《Indeed, it does have a hint of spice to it. This, too, is delicious.》

《It really is! I’m a fan of it this way!》

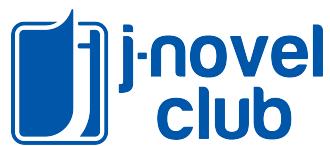
《It’s a *little* spicy, but not too bad! Sui really likes it too!》

Apparently I’d judged the pepper ratio just right, and had seasoned it well enough that even the childlike Sui could enjoy it. The pepper-topped garlic butter bowls were inhaled in a matter of seconds, and unsurprisingly, I was called upon to make a third batch, which I topped with soft-boiled eggs.

Using eggs as a topping gives the dish a more mellow, almost creamy sort of flavor, and my familiars very literally ate it right up. Then they asked for a *fourth* round, which I topped with egg yolks and sesame seeds. They loved it, ate it in seconds, and, well, you know the drill—I went right back to the start and prepared another round with green onions and sesame seeds.

Dora-chan, the lightest eater of the three, ended up tapping out after three rotations through the whole cycle. I lost count somewhere along the way, but Fel and Sui probably made it through five or six before they were finally finished. I actually ran out of meat partway through the process and had to sprint off into the kitchen to cook up a totally new batch.

In the end, I was left watching my familiars happily drift off to sleep for their afternoon nap, their bellies stuffed to the point of bursting. *Man, I thought, they're a real hassle sometimes, sure, but they're almost cute when I look at them like this.*



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by Ren Eguchi

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