

Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill

Karaage and the Mighty Dragon of Yore



Author: Ren Eguchi
Illustration: Masa

12

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D-D-D-D-Dragon...

???

The creature was so overwhelmingly massive, so tremendously intimidating, that my legs gave out and I fell over backward.

Mukohda

Fel

Dora-chan

Sui

Ninrir

If you have
that kind of
money, you
could use
it to boost
our budgets,
you know?

Rusalka

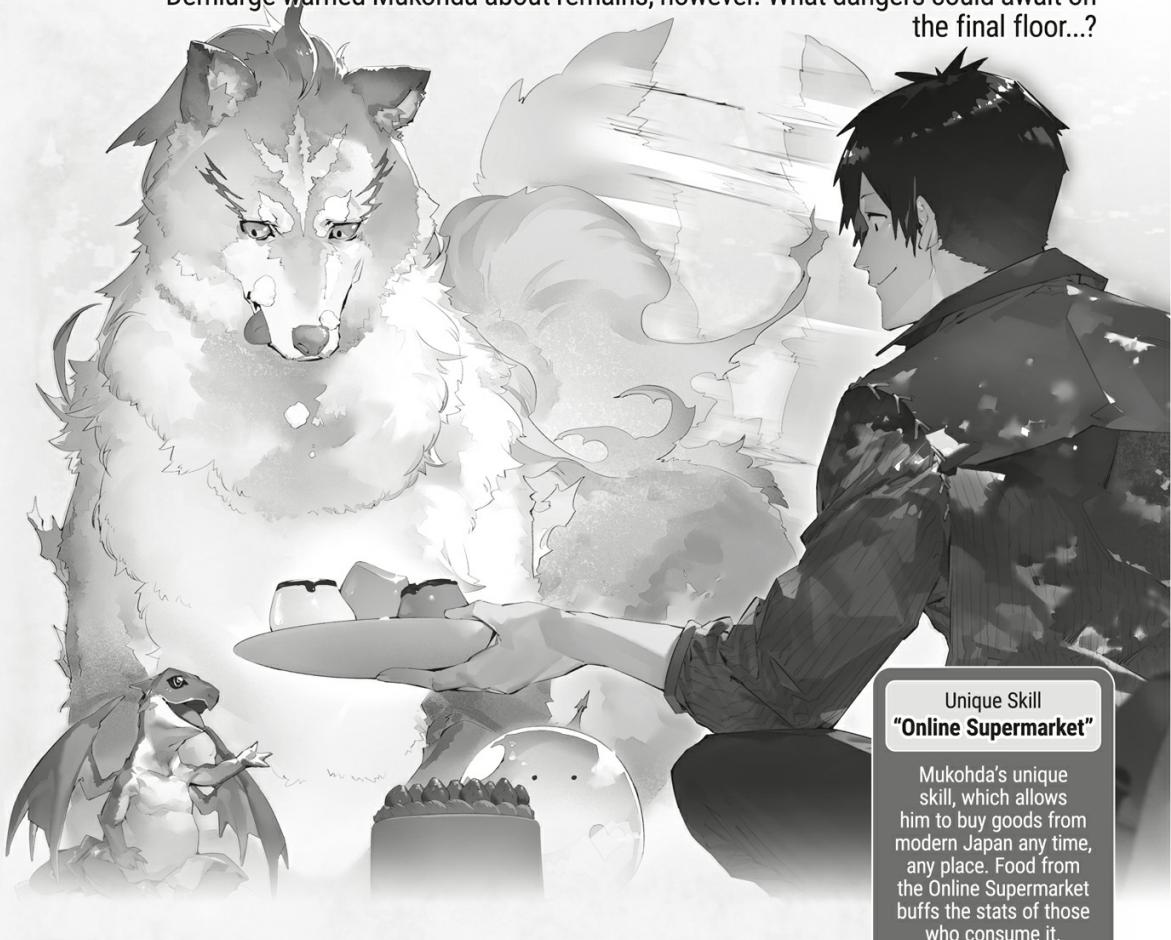
GonJie
ANCIENT DRAGON

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.

Their all too brief mid-expedition break complete, Mukohda and his party descend once more into the notoriously deadly Brixton dungeon! Resuming their journey on the fortieth floor, their sights are set on a single objective: clearing the dungeon once and for all! The ever-lurking issue of the creature that the God of all Creation Demiurge warned Mukohda about remains, however. What dangers could await on the final floor...?



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.

The Divine Realm

**Rusalka**

God

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

**Kisharle**

God

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

**Agni**

God

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

**Ninrir**

God

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

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Chapter 1: Mukohda's Party Braves the Wasteland

Once again, we set off into the depths of the Brixt Dungeon. My teleportation stone brought us to the start of the fortieth floor, and it took two days to make our way through the forest from there. In other words, we made much faster progress than we had the first time we tackled the floor, though we still somehow ended up obtaining an excess of items in the process. I could only shake my head in resignation.

And so I found myself once again staring down a zlatorog. No sooner had we sighted the creature than Dora-chan, who hadn't gotten to fight one the previous time we cleared the floor, shot out ahead of us, kicking things off with a burst of Ice magic. He must've been itching to take his turn ever since the last one we found.

The zlatorog let out a screeching shriek of pain and fury as Dora's attack slammed into it. Lightning immediately began to crackle around the pair of golden antlers on its head. The zlatorog set its sights on Dora-chan, carefully aiming its head at the tiny dragon as it prepared to atomize him with its Lightning magic. Unfortunately for it, Dora-chan was an order of magnitude faster and more nimble, and the time it took to line up an attack gave him a massive opening to launch a strike of his own.

Considering how huge the thing was, I had to imagine it made for a pretty easy target in Dora-chan's eyes. The pixie dragon wreathed himself in a veil of Fire magic and charged at the zlatorog, slamming into and *through* its body, then turning around to open a second hole, and a third. In the end, the zlatorog fell without getting the chance to launch a single attack of its own. It vanished a moment later, leaving behind...

『A pelt, a hoof, and a magic stone, eh? Peh—coulda had the decency to drop some meat, at least,』 Dora-chan grumbled as he surveyed the zlatorog's drops. For all his complaining, I knew for a fact that the pelt was quite literally an item fit for a king. We'd somehow ended up with *three* of the

things at that point, but it was still a luxury item among luxury items, so I made sure to snatch it up along with the rest of the zlatorog's stuff.

『Masteeer, let's go pick some more of those tasty purple fruits!』 said Sui as it looked out over the nearby field of shrubs. Each bush was once again packed with ripe and juicy-looking purple fruit.

That's a dungeon for you, I guess. Will the wonders never cease? We'd picked the entire field clean of violetberries just a few days earlier, but the whole crop seemed to have regrown in the intervening period.

“Violetberries, huh? Yeah, why not? We've had a lot of them lately, but that doesn't change the fact that they're great. Nothing wrong with stocking up either,” I said to myself. “Let's do it! You guys help out too, Fel, Dora-chan!”

『Hmph. Nuisance though it may be, I must admit the sauce we had with our meat recently was of *acceptable* quality. I will assist, though only under protest,』 Fel grumbled.

『Yeah, that stuff was real tasty. So was the sauce you put on that jiggly jelly stuff! I'll help too, why not?』 chimed in Dora-chan.

We ended up going with the same arrangement as last time: Fel stood guard, and the rest of us got down to business picking as many violetberries as we could. This was our second time harvesting the fruits, so thankfully we managed to work a bit faster and finish before another zlatorog could spawn to ruin our day. In the end we picked the field clean again, leaving me with another five sacks' worth of berries.

With that chore out of the way, it was finally time for us to head down to the forty-first floor! We proceeded through the cave, descended a staircase, and emerged on the next floor to find...

“First a forest, now *this*?” I moaned.

『Ha ha ha! Man, these dungeons never get old, do they?』 chortled Dora-chan.

『Indeed,』 Fel agreed. 『That sense of the unknown is why I will never tire of them.』

『Oh, wow! It's so *empty*, Master!』 said Sui.

A seemingly endless expanse of barren wasteland right out of a western spread out before us, stretching from one horizon to the other.



A full day later, we were still traversing the wasteland that was the forty-first floor. We'd spent the first day forging ahead, eventually stopped to bed down for the night, then got right back to it the next morning.

『This place really is *empty-empty*, huh? Not even a single monster,』 Dora-chan griped telepathically. He was flying along beside Fel, who was charging across the wastes in an all-out sprint. I was on Fel's back, as always, and Sui was in its usual place in my satchel, taking a nap.

『What are you talking about? There was a monster just yesterday!』 I beamed back to Dora-chan as I glanced upward.

Yesterday, right after we'd arrived on the new floor, we'd been attacked by a flying monster called a poison vulture. It looked pretty similar to the vultures I knew, except for the fact that it was huge, with a wingspan of something like three meters. Its feathers were also dark purple, and when it got close to us, it started emitting some sort of purplish haze from its whole body that I could tell at a glance would be really bad news.

According to Fel, it was a poisonous mist that the vultures surrounded themselves with when they went hunting. And they *did* hunt—they were just as carnivorous as normal vultures, but these ones would proactively kill their prey by way of poison, carry the bodies off somewhere safe, and wait for them to get nice and putrid before digging in.

『Didn't count!』 said Dora-chan. 『Those aren't even a fight! You just shoot 'em down with magic, and that's the end of it. We've barely seen any of 'em anyway.』

『Okay, I admit, you have a point there.』 I didn't know if the population on the floor was just small or what, but whatever the reason, only a few of them had actually tried to attack us. 『Just because there aren't many of them doesn't mean they can't catch us off guard when we're not paying attention, though! Keep an eye out!』 That was one of the nastier aspects of the poison vulture's hunting style.

『Sheesh, I know, already! Not like they drop anything other than magic stones when we beat 'em, though,』 Dora-chan grumbled. 『Hey, Fel, are those really the *only* monsters on this floor?』

『Indeed,』 replied Fel, 『at least within the range I can sense. Several more of them are present in the vicinity, but nothing else.』

『'Within the range you can sense'?』 I parroted. 『Does that mean that this floor's so big that you can't sense the whole thing?』

『It is most definitely larger than the forest above. That, I can say with certainty.』

『Ugh! I was already fed up with two floors of endless forest, and now we have something even *bigger* than those were?』 I scowled as I looked out across the utterly featureless wasteland from atop Fel's back.

『It seems this may well be one of *those* floors,』 Fel said cryptically as he glared at the wastes before us as well.

『One of what floors?』 I asked.

『Consider this: I take great pride in my speed, yet even I will need no small amount of time to reach the next floor. How would a group of ordinary adventurers fare in our place?』

『Oh, right... It could take them a solid two or three months to make it across. Maybe more.』

『Quite. Note too that there are no sources of food or water to be found.』

I hadn't considered that until Fel brought it up, but he was right. I'd noticed a few of what looked like springs on the thirty-ninth and fortieth floors, and while they were few and far between, there were *some* monsters around that dropped meat as well. In a worst-case scenario it wouldn't have been *impossible* to find enough provisions to get by up there, but this floor was a whole different can of worms. After all, the only monsters around were poisonous, and only dropped magic stones to begin with—no meat to be seen.

『I guess when you put it that way, you wouldn't be able to make it through this floor at all without enough provisions,』 I said. *And considering how long it would take to get across the floor, I can only imagine how much food you'd need for that...* 『You'd just keep walking farther and farther as your food stores get lower and lower, with no sign of the path to the next floor to be seen... Not to mention how cold it gets here at night! This floor's kinda hellish, huh?』

I could easily see less strong-willed individuals breaking down long before they got anywhere near the end of the floor. The endless journey would have your spirit dangling by a fraying shoestring, and then the freezing-cold nights would set in the moment the sun went down to snap that last remaining thread. Speaking of the sun, I had no clue how it worked, but the larger, more open floors *did* light up in the daytime and get dark at night.

It only took me one night on this floor to realize how miserably cold the nights here were going to be. It wasn't so bad during the daytime, but when night came I could tell from feeling alone that it was below freezing out. I was so caught off guard by the cold I ended up throwing together a last-second kimchi hot pot for dinner to help warm us up, then had everyone cluster up together while we slept to try and share our body heat.

『A floor that's made to grind your spirit into the dirt, eh? Yeah, sounds like the sorta crap a dungeon would have in it,』 said Dora-chan.

I nodded in agreement.『Right? It's kind of ridiculous how malicious it is, but I'm not at all surprised to see a dungeon with a floor like this.』 Though on second thought, it occurred to me that the grinding-your-spirit thing was only part of what made the floor so nasty. It was *also* liable to kill you via starvation. "Malicious" barely did it justice.

『In our case, of course, provisions are hardly a concern and the distance we must travel is nothing more than an inconvenience,』 noted Fel.

『Ha ha, true 'nuff!』 chuckles Dora-chan.

Meanwhile, I was just thanking my lucky stars that I had my Item Box and Online Supermarket to get me through that awful place.

Six days later, we finally reached a cave—the entryway to the next floor. Normally there'd be a floor boss waiting around to keep us away from the passageway, but this time there was no sign of any such monster. I wasn't super surprised at that point, though. The whole floor had structured itself around beating you down psychologically without resorting to monster attacks, so not having a boss seemed like a reasonable enough extension of the theme.

I thought back on the experience of crossing the floor. The poison vultures had the most uncanny way of only attacking when you least expected them, and a treasure chest that Dora-chan had found partway through the trip let out a cloud of poison gas when I opened it. I'd appraised it beforehand and carefully opened it from a distance, of course, so I wasn't in any real danger, but looking inside after the gas dispersed and only finding a single gold coin was still a real letdown.

The farther into the wasteland we went, the less the four of us had bothered chatting with each other. It was a real relief to know that I'd finally be free of that endless expanse of nothingness. My familiars seemed just as

elated as I was too.

“All right, guys, let’s get a move on! Goodbye to this floor, and good riddance!”

《Well spoken.》

《Seriously.》

《Master, do you think there’ll be lots of monsters on the next floor? Sui hopes there are! Sui’ll beat them all up!》

And so we arrived on the forty-second floor...where my jaw dropped. “Oh, come ooon,” I moaned as I surveyed *another* wasteland, identical to the one we’d just been through.

“**Grrr**,” Fel growled, baring his teeth.

《Ha ha ha... Another one! Great...》 Dora-chan sarcastically chuckled.

《Mnhh, nothing *again*?》 grumbled Sui, who might’ve been the least pleased of all of us.

《We will make our way through this place as quickly as possible. Get on.》

“Wait, when you say ‘as quickly as possible,’ you don’t mean, like—”

《Enough talk. Get on.》

Fel was clearly not going to budge this time, so I shrugged and climbed up on his back.

《Dora, Sui, are you prepared?》

《You know it! Don’t underestimate how fast these wings can carry me. I’ll keep up just fine!》

《Sui’s okay too! Sui’s safe and sound in Master’s bag!》

“W-W-Wait a sec! What’re you planning, Fel?”

《Good. Then let us be off!》

“H-Hey, wait a—”

Before I could stop him, Fel blasted off through the wasteland at mach speed. My anguished “*Nooooooooo!*” must’ve resounded for miles around...not that there was anyone there to hear it.



“B-Bleeech,” I retched. I’d somehow managed to crawl my way off Fel’s back, only to double over with nausea and end up on all fours.

《Hey, you alive down there?》

《Master, are you okay?》

《Your frailty never ceases to astonish, truly.》

“Oh, screw you... Wh-Whose fault do you think this is, anyway?” I moaned, glaring up at Fel. It probably wasn’t much of a glare, though, considering how sickly I must’ve looked after three days of turbo travel.

《We had few options if we hoped to escape this fearsomely tedious floor in good time.》

“I said I was fine going slow...”

《And you were overruled by the will of the majority. You had your vote, as did the rest of us, meaning you have no right to complain.》

“Ugh...”

The first day was bad enough that I ended up proposing that we take our time going through the floor, but Fel had stubbornly insisted that we keep going as quickly as possible. I tried to pull Dora-chan and Sui onto my side in an effort to convince him, since they were usually willing to back me up when he was unreasonable, but they went and sided with *him* instead! Apparently an almost endless floor with nothing but poison vultures for company was so tortuously boring for them, they just couldn’t take it any longer.

And so Fel took command, leading us forward at a full sprint across the whole wasteland in a three-day forced march. My familiars were full of energy at the end of the excursion, but *I’d* spent the past three days clinging to Fel for dear life, and was basically skin and bones. Not to get gross, but I’d known for a fact that anything I ate would probably come right back up again the moment I got on Fel’s back, so I’d been subsisting on nutrient jelly packs that I bought from my Online Supermarket. My familiars, meanwhile, kept up their usual carnivorous diet the whole time.

《Very well, then. Let us spend the night here.》

“Yeah, that’d be great, thanks,” I managed to choke out. I was spent, and by the time we arrived at the cave that led to the forty-third floor, the day was already almost over. We decided to file into the cave and bed down there for the night.



“Urph,” I retched as I watched my familiars dig into the gigant minotaur

cutlet sandwiches I'd pulled out of storage for them and tried to endure the emptiness of my stomach.

『These are scrumptious indeed.』

『Right? The way the sauce soaks into the bread makes it go so well with the meat!』

『It's sooo tasty!』

Well, good for you guys... No way in hell I'm eating one of those tonight, I thought desolately. My stomach was still way too unsettled for me to keep much more than nutrient jelly down for long, so my meal came from a very different menu than theirs. I also didn't have the energy to stand, so I ended up sitting cross-legged on the ground and pulling out a tool I hadn't used in quite some time to cook my own food on: the portable camping burner I'd bought way back when.

I needed something that would be filling but nice and easy on my stomach, so I decided to make egg and rice gruel. All you have to do is fill a clay pot with some water, granulated dashi, soy sauce, mirin, and salt, then put it on your burner. You can scramble the eggs while the mixture comes to a boil.

When the mixture reaches a rolling boil you add the rice, and once the rice is mostly cooked you pour in the beaten egg. Let it sit for just a little while until it starts to go solid, then mix it all together, taste test for seasoning, and you're finished! Normally I'd put sliced green onions or seaweed on top for a little extra flavor, but I just couldn't be bothered tonight and skipped the finishing step.

I blew on the piping-hot gruel to cool it down a little, then slurped up a spoonful. "Ahhh, man, this stuff really warms you right up," I mumbled to myself. A nice, gentle gruel was exactly what my stomach needed, and I couldn't have been happier to have real food in me again for the first time in days.

As I went in for a second spoonful, I felt something prodding at my thigh. I looked down to find Sui poking me with its tentacle.

『Hey, Master, is that tasty?』

『I mean, I sure think it is,』 I replied. "Wanna try?"

『Yeah!』

I pulled out a small bowl for Sui and spooned in a helping of gruel. The slime gave it a taste right away.

“How is it?” I asked.

《Hmm... It's tasty, but Sui likes meat better, in the end.》

“Ha ha, yeah, I had a feeling you'd say that.” In an effort to go extra easy on my stomach, I'd made it so watery on that particular day that it was almost closer to rice soup than gruel. It was no wonder it wasn't up to Sui's standard for flavor.

《Hey! I have need of seconds!》 Fel called over.

《Make that two of us!》 added Dora-chan.

“Right, right! Do you want seconds too, Sui?”

《Yeah!》

After Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui finished their cutlet sandwiches and I finished my first real meal in ages, we all went to bed. That night, I slept like a log.



“We're just one staircase away from the forty-third floor now, huh?”

《Indeed, and I trust the next floor will *not* be another featureless plane. If it is, well...even one as even-tempered as I may lose myself to my anger.》

“Sorry—you, even-tempered? Was that a joke, Fel?”

《Why would it be? Hold your tongue, whelp! I am fully in control of my temper at all times.》

“Nope, nuh-uh, no way! If people pass down legends about how you destroyed kingdoms because they ticked you off, you don't get to call yourself that! Besides, you spend most of your time going out to hunt bloodthirsty monsters! How's *that* even-tempered?”

《That is a different matter entirely.》

“How?! How is that different at all?!”

At that point Dora-chan, who'd been flying ahead of us, pulled back to cut in between me and Fel. 《Okay, okay, simmer down, people. No more arguing —we've got places to be!》

《You guys are so slooow! Sui's gonna go on ahead!》 said the slime, bounding over Fel's head and landing on the ground in front of us. In the end Sui was the first to make it to the forty-third floor, though the rest of us followed along right behind it.

“I guess this *would* be next,” I sighed.

《There’s so much sand, Master!》

《A desert, eh? I think there was one of these in Dolan’s dungeon too.》

Everywhere I looked, all around us was just sand, sand, sand, as far as the eye could see. The last remaining member of our party, however, had a very different first impression of the new floor than the rest of us.

《Heh heh heh... Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha! Dora, Sui—rejoice! We have struck gold. This floor is full to the brim with monsters worth slaughtering!》

《Seriously?! Aw, *hell* yeah! We’re not gonna be bored on *this* floor!》

《It’s full of monsters?! Hurray! Sui’s gonna pew-pew all of them!》

What? Wait, wait, come on—what’s exciting about learning that you’re surrounded by a horde of bloodthirsty monsters?

《Look—one has arrived already,》 said Fel. I jumped in shock, then turned to look in the direction he gestured in. I could see a reddish-brown dot in the distance, moving gradually toward us.

“Huh—whatever that is, it looks kinda familiar,” I muttered.

《It is a swarm of sand scorpions,》 said Fel.

“Oh, right! *Those!*” We’d encountered them before in Dolan’s dungeon. They were more or less just normal reddish-brown scorpions, except for the part where they were a meter long. “Wait, if there’s a swarm of them, then doesn’t that mean...?”

《But of course. One of them lies nearby. There!》 Fel shouted, unleashing his trademark Rending Claws attack.

The blast shot forward, skimming the surface of the ground and raising a plume of sand in its wake until it landed around thirty meters or so ahead of us. When the dust finally cleared, I could see a truly enormous scorpion lying in the crater Fel’s attack had left. It had been split cleanly in two, and needless to say it was *very* dead, but I could still identify it at a glance: it was a giant sand scorpion.

With their extra-large leader out of the picture, the rest of the ordinary sand scorpions in the swarm immediately scattered in all directions. Unfortunately for them, their erstwhile targets weren’t about to let them escape that easily.

《Fel might’ve gotten the big one, but you little guys are *mine!*》

《Waaait! Take this! And this!》

Dora-chan's Ice magic and Sui's Acid Bullets laid waste to the swarm of overgrown insects as they skittered away, but they could only defeat so many before the remaining scorpions had left their effective range and faded off into the distance.

《Awww,》 moaned Sui, 《They got away!》

『Do not lose heart, Sui. There is still ample prey left to entertain us.』

《Yup, can't let those small fry distract us all day! Let's move on to the next one!》

I'm telling you guys, "we're still surrounded by monsters" is an awful way to console someone! I thought, then sighed. "A-Anyway, let's wait on that until we've collected all the scorpion drops, okay? Help me out, guys!"

We'd only just arrived on the forty-third floor, and the desert sands were already riddled with monster drops. We took the time to gather them all up, then set off through the dunes, kept cool by a barrier that Fel erected to ward off the desert's all-consuming heat.

Just as Fel predicted, we were jumped by one monster after another as we traveled. After that first course of sand scorpions, we were attacked by a creature that looked like an overgrown earthworm with a horrible, toothy maw, called a sandworm, followed by something that looked like a three-meter-long rattlesnake, which was apparently called a death sidewinder. We were also attacked by sand golems which rose up from the sands of the desert itself.

All in all, the monsters that showed up on this floor didn't strike me as all that different from the ones we'd encountered on the Dolan dungeon's desert floor—no huge surprise, considering how specific of an environment deserts were. The desert-themed monsters just kept on coming too, one after another. In fact, I quickly started suspecting that Fel was going out of his way to guide us *into* their ambushes as we moved forward.

Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui all seemed to have a lot of pent-up aggression going on after the nothingness of the forty-first and forty-second floors, so every time we *did* find a monster, they immediately brutalized it with their full arsenal of skills and attacks. It was such a merciless and one-sided way of fighting that honestly, I was a little repulsed. I understood how they felt, though, so I didn't try to stop them in spite of my horror. I just spent the whole time trailing along after them and picking up drops. The UV-resistant hooded jacket I'd bought from my Online Supermarket helped me stay

comfortable while I did so, at least.

Eventually, after who knows how long spent exuberantly culling the local monster population, I noticed something far off in the distance. I couldn't tell what it was, but I could tell that it was *huge*. My best guess was that it was some sort of big brown stone that had been shaped into a perfect sphere.

"Huh? What *is* that thing?" I mumbled. "Wait, is it *moving*?"

«**Yes, it is. That, too, is a monster.**»

"A monster? That big sphere thing? Seriously?"

«**Wrong. The monster is *behind* the sphere.**»

"Behind it?" This was getting more and more confusing by the second, but just as I took a closer look, a comparatively small black *something* poked its head out from behind the sphere. "Hmm?" I squinted, trying to figure out what I was looking at. Then it hit me. "Gah! That's a friggin' dung beetle!"

I remembered watching some sort of TV documentary special on desert fauna way back when. One of the creatures featured in the show was the dung beetle, and the thing I was looking at now bore an uncanny resemblance to them.

«**Fool! Your shouting has drawn its attention,**» grumbled Fel.

I clamped my hands over my mouth, but it was too late. The giant dung beetle and its eponymous orb were now advancing in our direction, and they were doing it really, *really* quickly!

"Oh god, no! Too close! *Way* too close!" I shrieked as the enormous bug bore down on us.

«**Oh, simmer down,**» sighed Dora-chan. «Wouldn't'a mattered if it noticed us or not—we'd do the same thing to it regardless! Right, Fel?»

«**Dora does make a valid point, indeed.**»

«**Master, it's okay! Sui'll beat it for you!**»

"Why are you being so *casual* about this?! Gah, oh god, there it is! It's so close! Aaaugh, grossss! I don't even care who—just *somebody* kill that thing already!"

«**You don't care who takes it? Then don't mind if I do!**» said Dora-chan as he zipped on ahead of us, then unleashed a fireball that had to be somewhere around two meters in diameter at the giant dung beetle. It was so huge that it made the fireballs *I* cast every once in a while look like they could barely light a match in comparison.

«**Awww, that's not fair, Dora-chan! Sui wanted to beat that one!**»

《There is still more than enough prey to satisfy us all, Sui. No need for impatience.》

《Really, Uncle Fel? In that case, Sui gets to fight the next one!》

《Ha ha ha—very well, then!》

While Sui and Fel were having their little chat, Dora-chan's fireball scored a direct hit on the giant dung beetle. It popped like a balloon...as did its dungball. The phrase "dirty fireworks" sprang instantly to mind, though frankly I would've been much happier to watch a little alien dude get splattered across the scenery than to witness what I'd just seen.

"Blech!" I retched, just barely resisting the urge to toss my cookies.

《Heh heh, how'd you like *that*?》 boasted Dora-chan.

I didn't, at all! Not even a little...

《Hey, you gonna pick up the drops, or what?》 Dora-chan added.

I grimaced. "Nope. I'm good," I replied, and left it at that.

I did end up appraising the giant dung beetle in the end, and found that it was an A-rank monster called a tyrant scarab. Its rank meant that at the absolute least it must have dropped a magic stone, but even if said stone *hadn't* come from a dung beetle, it had almost certainly been flung off to who knows where when the awful orb exploded. Dora-chan's fireball had probably sterilized it, sure, but I still wasn't about to touch the thing.

And so we set off through the desert once more. Desert-themed monsters continued to ambush us, and my familiars continued to take them down without mercy or hesitation. Sui was particularly gung-ho about its hunting on that particular day, and I collected quite a fair number of items as we meandered our way through the seemingly endless expanse of sandy dunes.

We weren't quite done encountering new monsters for the day yet, though. It happened just moments after one of Sui's Acid Bullets had drilled a hole through a sand worm that had jumped out to attack us. The sandworm disappeared, leaving a magic stone behind, and as I was picking up our spoils, I noticed something far off in the distance that the monster had been obscuring up to that point.

"Hey, guys?" I said. "Am I seeing things, or does that camel look normal-sized even though it's gotta be way far away from us?"



I rubbed my eyes. It had to just be a mirage or something, right? No matter how many times I blinked and squinted, though, the camel's distinctive two-humped silhouette remained unchanged.

『Your vision is unimpaired,』 said Fel.『The creature is simply massive.』

That settled it. If I wasn't seeing things, then the camel before us was almost as big as an ancient dragon. No wonder it was so easy to see from a distance—it was enormous beyond all possible reason!

『A monster! Sui's gonna beat it up!』 the slime shouted with glee as it bounced toward the mega-camel.

『No need to defeat *that* one, Sui. Let it be,』 Fel said with a sort of irritated scowl.

『But whyyy?』

『I have lived for an age, and over the course of those many long years, those creatures' meat still stands out in my memory. It is truly *that* foul,』 Fel explained, scrunching up his nose in distaste.

『Ha ha, dang! It must've been *real* bad for you to make a face like *that*, Fel!』 said Dora-chan.

『Indeed. I have no desire to ever taste it again.』

『But on the other hand,』 Dora-chan continued,『this *is* a dungeon! There's no guarantee that it'll drop the same stuff you ate back then, right? It might drop some totally different sorta meat, even!』

He had a point. The items that dungeon creatures dropped weren't necessarily equivalent to the meat and materials you'd get from butchering the same creature if you found it in the wild. Then again, it *was* still possible we'd end up with an enormous slab of meat so nasty that not even Fel would give it a second chance, which would be a pretty big pain in its own right.

『The only items of worth that defeating one of those creatures could gain us are magic stones. If you wish to slay it nevertheless, though, I will not stop you,』 said Fel.

I decided to appraise the camel, just to be on the safe side. It seemed that my recent level-ups had improved my appraisal abilities, incidentally, since the information the skill gave me had become quite detailed.

【Mountain Camel】

An A-ranked monster that is, as its name indicates, roughly the size of a

mountain. One of the ten largest earth-bound monsters in the world. While generally docile, their massive stature and inattentive nature leads to them regularly trampling smaller creatures underfoot. Though their meat is technically edible, its intensely gamey flavor renders it unpalatable, and while their skin can be made into leather armor, it tends to be fragile and carries the creature's distinctive and potent odor.

Hmm, hmm. Guess Fel was right on the money. The monster's meat was barely edible, and its pelt was more or less worthless. Being an A-ranked monster, it would almost certainly drop a magic stone, but more than anything else, I found my eyes drawn to the part about them being docile, but liable to squish you to death by accident. *"Trampling smaller creatures underfoot"? Seriously? Nope, I am not getting near that thing!*

In the end, I put my foot down and vetoed us hunting the mountain camel. Dora-chan and Sui didn't offer much resistance after I shared the results of my appraisal with them, and so we ignored it entirely, once again forging on and on into the desert.



We'd been traveling through the desert for five days, and my familiars had spent all five of them venting their pent-up wasteland resentment on the local monster populace. I couldn't even count how many monsters they'd hunted by the time we finally reached the end of the forty-third floor, where its boss awaited us.

Or at least, I presumed that the stairs down to the next floor were inside the box-like stone building that we eventually came across. I couldn't go in to check, though, on account of the enormous jet-black snake monster curled around the structure. I appraised it immediately.

【Apep】

An S-ranked monster. Feared as an emissary of death itself in desert cities. Its poison is especially potent, and it is said that those unfortunate enough to encounter one are erased from this world without leaving so much as a single strand of hair behind.

Okay, wow. That's one scary-as-hell appraisal, all right. And wait a second... "Is it just me, or has it already noticed us?" I asked.

《Of course it has. We could hardly hide ourselves in this terrain, even if we wished to.》

《Guess it's telling us that if we want a piece of it, we're gonna have to go get it ourselves?》

《Ooh, Sui wants a piece of it! Sui's gonna beat it so good!》

The black serpent—or rather, the apep—had already been staring at us, but now it uncurled itself from around the building, rearing up and spreading open a flap of skin that reminded me of a frill-necked lizard. Then it hissed, baring its enormous fangs at us in a show of intimidation.

《**No! Do not leave my side!**》 barked Fel, an unusual note of urgency coloring his tone.

“Wh-What? Why?” I asked.

《**I have fought one of these creatures long ago. They bear a poison that is powerful indeed,**》 Fel explained.

Apparently, the encounter had occurred before Ninrir had granted him her blessing and before his magic was as developed as it had eventually become. He had won the battle, of course, but supposedly it was quite a close contest. Anyway, when an apep reared up and spread its frills like that, it was supposedly a sign that it was about to spit its poison at you, and getting hit by said poison would make you crumble away in the blink of an eye.

When I asked Fel what “crumble away” was supposed to mean specifically, he explained that there had been some desert-native plants living in the vicinity of his previous apep fight. He described them as spiky, so I assumed they were cacti or something, not that it really mattered. Anyway, some of those plants got caught in one of the snake’s poison blasts, and they had instantly dissolved into dust, fading away into the sand around them.

“‘Fading away into the sand around them’? What the hell? And wait, this is supposed to be *poison*, right? Does that even count as poison anymore? I don’t really know how that stuff works, but all I can say is holy crap, I’m amazed you survived that!” I muttered in astonishment.

《**Hmph! Do not underestimate me. I perceived the danger its poison posed in an instant and withdrew to a safe distance,**》 Fel said.

My main takeaway from all this: fantasy world poisons could be *terrifying* sometimes! Fel could swap over to long-distance magic attacks these days,

but back then he'd been young enough that his magic wasn't as strong or accurate as it was now, and it had taken him quite a few blasts to bring it down.

『Of course, now that I bear Ninrir's blessing, I could bathe in that creature's poison and emerge with life and limb intact. Since you bear the blessings of a god, the same is true of you as well,』 Fel clarified.

“Okay, so why the panic, then? Wasn’t that kinda unnecessary?” I noted. Not that I was opposed to the extra precautions, mind you—Fel made that poison sound *really* nasty, and I certainly didn’t mind being in one of his barriers, just to give me some peace of mind.

『I acted for the sake of caution, and nothing more. I know, after all, what becomes of those who face the full brunt of that poison,』 said Fel.
『Moreover, though we ourselves would not perish, that is not to say you would suffer no loss were the poison to hit you without my barrier there to intercept it.』

“What do you mean, I’d ‘suffer loss’? And wait, just me?”

『Indeed. In all likelihood, the clothes that you wear would be destroyed.』

“Oh.” Right, that would *make sense*. I had the protection of the gods to keep me from dying of poison, but my clothes, bag, and other stuff were significantly less blessed, and I doubted my own blessing would extend to them. That meant that they’d probably crumble away if they got a poison bath, and let me tell you, I was *not* interested in running around a dungeon desert in the buff! “Thank you, Fel. You seriously saved me there.”

『I did indeed, and I will accept an especially opulent dinner tonight as gratitude for my timely warning.』

“Nice try, but not happening.”

Before Fel could reply, a pair of tiny creatures jumped in between us.

『Enough lip-flappin’, for crying out loud! Let’s kill that thing!』

『Masteeer, Sui wants to fight, already!』

As always, no matter how massive and powerful the foe, Dora-chan and Sui were itching to battle.

『From what Fel said, we don’t have to worry about that thing’s poison ’cause we have blessings, right? So what’s the hold up? Let’s go, already!』

 insisted Dora-chan.

“Well, yeah, I guess,” I reluctantly admitted. “But this thing’s called an

apep, and it's supposed to be *really* tough, so I think everyone should fight together this time.”

『That means we can fight now, right? Yay! Sui's gonna go beat it!』 said Sui, bouncing out ahead of the pack.

『Hey! Dangit, Sui, no stealing a march on us!』 shouted Dora-chan, flying after the slime in a fluster.

“Ah, guys, I said *everyone*, not just you two! Everyone means *all* of you!” I shouted after them, but Dora-chan and Sui kept charging forward without lending me an ear. “Fellll!”

『Spare me your pathetic whining. Dora and Sui are strong. They will not be slain so easily.』

“I mean, yeah, I know, but—”

『There, see? Look. It is already over.』

I spun around, looking back at the apep...to find that between one of Dora-chan's extra-large fireballs and one of Sui's Acid Bullets, its head had been blown away without a trace. The decapitated body crashed limply to the ground, raising a massive cloud of sand around it.

“Eeep...”

『See now? As I have told you time and time again, Dora and Sui are strong.』

“I mean, like I said, I *know* they're tough! I know, but, still...” I just hadn't been sure they could take out a monster *that* nasty without help. We walked over to find the two of them celebrating by the apep's corpse.

『Heh heh, that was nothing!』

『Yaaay, yipee! We beat it!』

“Ha ha! Yeah, you...you sure did,” I chuckled with a strained smile.

『You said one of these things gave you a tough time, right, Fel?』 asked Dora-chan.

『Hmph! Only when I was young,』 Fel grumbled.

『But it *did* give you a tough time, eh? And Sui and I just took one out in a second! Hah hah, look at us, Sui! We've gotten pretty tough ourselves!』

『Yeah! Sui's suupper tough!』

『Grrr! I had difficulty with one of these creatures when I was *truly* young! I was but a pup at the time!』

“Okay, settle down, Fel,” I said, trying to appease him.

『Hmph! Enough of this—let us move on!』 Fel said, trotting into the

stone building before the rest of us could get a word in edgewise.

“Oh, c’mon, don’t get all pouty on us!” I turned back to Dora-chan and Sui. “Okay, guys, let’s get a move on,” I said, then chased Fel into the building.

As a side note, the apep dropped a magic stone, its hide, and a vial containing some sort of black bubbling liquid that was obviously poison and also absolutely terrifying. Part of me wanted to question why the vial itself wasn’t getting melted away, but this was a dungeon, and I’d grown to understand that *nothing* made sense in these things. In any case, I stored the vial away in my Item Box and resolved myself to never, ever let it see the light of day again.

Chapter 2: From Sand to Snow

“Brr, it’s *freezing!*” I grumbled, blowing some warmth into my hands as I worked on getting dinner ready. We were on the forty-fourth floor, which was, as it turned out, another desert area. I’d sort of seen it coming, honestly —every theme so far had lasted for two floors in a row, so it only stood to reason that this one would as well.

We’d gone from a forest to a wasteland to a desert, and frankly, I was getting really sick of having to deal with one harsh and inhospitable environment after another. I had a real bone to pick with this stupid dungeon, especially considering that all of the recent floors had been so gratuitously huge. I rubbed my hands together to stave off the cold as I cursed the dungeon internally.

Just like the wastelands on the forty-first and forty-second floors, the deserts on the forty-third and forty-fourth got incredibly cold at nighttime. It felt even worse than it had in the wasteland since the desert got so insufferably *hot* during the day. The temperature contrast between day and night alone was nearly enough to drain my stamina entirely. Fel’s barrier helped mitigate those dramatic shifts a little, so it hadn’t impacted my health or anything, but cold was cold no matter how you sliced it. Dora-chan was having a particularly bad time handling the chill, by the way, and had already crawled into his bedding the second we stopped to rest. He wouldn’t be emerging until dinner was ready.

“Brr... I think it’s even chillier tonight than ever... Days like this have a way of really making me want to eat oden,” I muttered to myself. The moment that thought popped into my mind, it got stuck there. I’d been planning on serving the minotaur beef bowls that I’d made in advance for dinner tonight...but then I decided hey, why the heck not? I’d make a batch of oden to go along with it!

Of course, Fel and the others would consider the beef bowls the main course and the oden a side dish, at best. After all, oden generally doesn’t have meat in it. They couldn’t exactly complain about an extra side dish as long as

they got their meat main course, though, so I opened up my Online Supermarket and set about preparing to cook.

“Let’s see here... Ah, there it is!” I said as I located the item I was looking for: a pack of premade oden! All you had to do was heat it up, and it’d be ready to eat. Premade oden tasted pretty decent all around, and making it myself would’ve taken a long time, so it was a dish I could never really justify making from scratch when I was living on my own. These premade packs really changed things, though—they became something of a winter staple of mine because they were just so convenient. Their long shelf life added to the convenience factor as well. I pretty much always had a pack in stock in my fridge.

Aside from the oden, I also bought some sausages. Sausages weren’t exactly the most traditional oden ingredient, but I’d tried putting some in once on a whim and found they actually worked really nicely. With those two ingredients purchased, I was ready to cook!

I started out by heating up the oden over a low flame. While it was coming to a simmer, I prepped the sausages, slicing them diagonally and then parboiling them for just about a minute or so to make sure they didn’t get the oden all oily. Then I just dumped the sausages into the oden, heated it for a little while longer, and that’s all it took!

“All right, nice and hot!” I was ecstatic to dig into my first bowl of piping hot oden in who even knows how long.

『What is that?』 asked Fell.

『Whatever it is, it smells pretty darn tasty!』 added Dora-chan.

『It does! It smells sooo good!』 said Sui. The smell of the oden had lured all three of them over—or in Dora-chan’s case, lured him out of his bedding. “This is called oden,” I explained. “It’s not super meaty, I know, but one sec...okay, here! This is your main dish: minotaur beef bowls. The oden’s a side dish. It’s great for cold days like this, trust me—it’ll warm you right up!”

I served my familiars their beef bowls piled high with minotaur meat, plus bowls of oden on the side.

『Hmm, yes, this is delectable indeed. I recall having this ‘beef bowl’ dish with other meats in the past, but *this* meat suits it better than all the rest,』 declared Fel.

『You think? This is pretty good, don’t get me wrong, but I’m gonna have to say the ones he made with wyvern meat were even better,』 said Dora-chan.

『Hmm. When you put it that way, those *were* remarkable...』

『Sui thinks that *everything* Master makes is delicious!』

“Ha ha ha, thanks, Sui. The oden’s great too, and it’ll warm you up, so give it a try!” I said, urging my familiars to sample the new dish. They finally took me up on it.

『Oh? Yes, this *does* have a pleasing warmth to it. The lack of meat is regrettable, though.』

『Yeah, I’m with you there! This stuff makes me feel all nice and warm, and it’s like it’s filling my whole body with energy!』

Hm? Filling his whole body with what, now?

『Nice and waaarm!』 added Sui with a happy jiggle.

Hmm? Wait... Oh. I’d bought everything in the oden from my Online Supermarket, which meant that it was certifiable otherworld food. I gave it a slightly nervous appraisal.

【Oden】

A dashi-based soup from another world. Increases max HP and MP by 12% for roughly twenty minutes.

*Whooops. W-Well, it’s only a twenty minute duration, right? That shouldn’t be a huge problem! As long as I make sure they don’t eat any more of it, that is. “H-Hey, guys, want seconds of the beef bowls? Oden’s great and all, but I bet what you *really* want is a nice, big pile of meat to sink your teeth into, right?” I hopefully suggested.*

『Yes, I suppose so. That said, I find it more than a little suspect that you would urge us to ask for seconds,』 said Fel, giving me an incredulous glare.

“Wh-What’re you talking about? I just know how much you guys love meat, so I figured you’d like the beef bowls better!” I replied, doing my absolute best to keep a calm, neutral look on my face.

『Hmph! Very well, then. Another beef bowl for me.』

『Same here, thanks! This oden stuff’s not bad at all, but yeah, meat beats it out in the end.』

『Sui wants more beef bowl too!』

I heaved a sigh of relief as everyone asked for seconds.

“All right, guess I should dig in as well,” I said once I was finished

serving the others. I was having the side dish as my main dish, personally. Eating oden *and* a beef bowl like the others would be too much for my stomach, so I figured I'd stick to the soup. I did also serve myself some pickled cabbage and a bowl of white rice, though!

The cabbage was something I'd made for myself a while back—I pickled it using a store-bought pickling mix, so it was a fairly easy process all around, and I used the same stuff on some cucumbers as well. I was pretty much the only one who ate them, but they were really nice at breakfast time or as a side dish.

The oden was, of course, delicious. The chunks of daikon had been thoroughly steeped in the soup, and the eggs were as tasty as eggs always are. It really had been ages since I'd had oden, so I took my time to savor the chunky bits before finally taking a sip of the soup, then letting out a sigh.

“Man, that really does warm you right up,” I said to myself. Then I crunched on some pickled cabbage, and went in for a few big bites of rice. It was only when I reached for a chunk of sausage that I realized that I was missing something, and opened up my Item Box.

“Yeah, can’t have sausage without some of this stuff!” I said, pulling out a tube of whole-grain mustard. I smeared some of it onto the chunk of sausage, then popped it into my mouth. “Now *that’s* good!”

As I chewed the sausage, I pondered what I'd do with the rest of the oden. I'd heated up a little more than I probably should have, and it seemed that I'd have to eat through the rest of it on my own. Thankfully, stowing it in my item box would keep it good indefinitely, so I'd just have to have oden for dinner again sometime in the future. *Hopefully when I'm back on the surface I can enjoy it at my own pace with a can of beer.*



We spent four days crossing the desert, killing monsters all along the way, and finally arrived at the floor's boss.

“I guess it wasn’t quite as bad as the two wasteland floors, but this desert was pretty darn big too,” I observed as we approached our destination.

《Quite. Several floors in a row that take several days for me to traverse would prove an almost insurmountable obstacle for the average adventurer, in all likelihood.》

“Yeah, I could see that.”

The wasteland floors had come distressingly close to breaking my spirit, not to mention exhausting my energy reserves. Thinking back on it, it had taken even my well-prepared and ridiculously overpowered party about two weeks to make it through the past three floors.

I guess canceling my booking for the house I rented was the right call after all. I’d initially rented the house for two weeks, and we’d emerged from the dungeon after our last venture right at the end of that period. I’d extended my stay by a week, and that week hadn’t quite finished by the time we started our second expedition, but we were going to be starting from the fortieth floor this time and it seemed natural to assume that the difficulty level was going to spike harshly. There was basically no chance that our second trip would take *less* time than the first one had, so I made the call to cancel the rental before we went down into the dungeon.

Of course, the people at the Merchant’s guild told me that they couldn’t return any of the money I’d paid to book the place, even though I was leaving early. They *also* said that, in my case, they’d be perfectly willing to extend the booking indefinitely and settle the bill after I got back from the dungeon. That would’ve meant that I’d be paying rent for a house I wasn’t even using, though, so I wasn’t exactly eager to take them up on the offer. There was no telling when I’d actually be getting back, so canceling the booking seemed like the better option, and I did just that. Searching for another house to rent after we returned would be a pain, as always, but I figured that in the worst case I could ask Tristan to let us shack up in the Adventurer’s guild’s training grounds.

Obviously, none of that really mattered at the moment. What mattered was the forty-fourth floor’s boss, which was currently looming before us. It was guarding a box-like stone building, just like the apep on the previous floor had been and once again there was only one of them.

“Man, though, that thing looks *ridiculously* tough,” I groaned. The creature had the head of a crocodile, the upper body of a lion, and the lower body of...I didn’t even *know* what, but I could at least see that it was hairless. My best guess was a hippo, or something. The fact that we could make it out clearly even though it and the building were still a fair ways off meant that it was once again ridiculously huge as well.

《I have never seen a monster like this before,》 said Fel. 《Heh heh heh

—discoveries such as these are the true joy of exploring a dungeon.» He was practically trembling with excitement.

«That's a new one for me too. Not like you get many chances to fight desert monsters in general, I guess,» said Dora-chan. In spite of his diminutive size, he was over a hundred years old and the fact that he'd never seen one either was actually saying something.

«It looks strong, but Sui's even stronger!» my favorite slime said, eager as ever for a tough foe to fight.

Seeing it get all bloodthirsty like that always made me more than a little worried about Sui's future, but at that particular moment I was much more worried about the concept of a monster that Fel and Dora-chan didn't even know about. I quickly appraised the creature.

【Ammut】

An S-ranked monster that dwells in the desert. Ferocious beyond all reason, and ravenous to boot. Those who live in desert societies tell tales of them in terrified whispers, referring to them as “the devourers,” and it is said that encountering one spells the end of your life, no matter who you may be.

Ha ha haaa... And yup, a pained laugh is pretty much all I have to say about that thing. The bosses of these last two floors had both had really unsettling descriptions, and I wasn't a fan of the trend. “Ferocious beyond all reason, and ravenous to boot”? “The devourers”? “Encountering one spells the end of your life”?! This was one of those monsters you prayed to never, ever run afoul of, no question about it! *Why have we been getting these things sent after us one after another?!* What is this dungeon's problem?!

“S-So, hey, what's the plan?” I asked nervously. “That thing's called an ammut, and it's supposed to be *really* bad news. Like, ravenous and incredibly vicious bad news! The appraisal even said something about meeting one being a guaranteed death sentence!”

«**A death sentence, you say? Hmph—I shall take that as a challenge. Let us find out which of us is most worthy of such a warning. Dora, Sui, you fought the last floor boss on your own. I will claim this one as mine in exchange!**» Fel announced. He was already in battle-mode before he'd even finished speaking, his teeth bared and his eyes glittering with anticipation.

《Peh! Fine, have it your way,》 said Dora-chan.
《Aww. Okaaay,》 said Sui. 《Good luck, Uncle Fel!》
《Hmph! Luck will not play a factor. Watch, and see for yourselves who is truly stronger,》 said Fel as he set off at a sprint.

In the same moment, the ammut let out a piercing war cry and took off in a loping charge toward us. Fel opened his mouth wide, fully prepared to take a bite out of a monster that *had* to be at least three times his size...but then it charged right *past* him, paying him no mind whatsoever.

“Huh? Wait, wha—*oh god!*” I shrieked as the ammut bore down on us. Or at least, I assumed that was what was happening. I’d reflexively turned away and crouched down to cover my vital areas and cower in fear, so I couldn’t actually *see* what was happening. A second later, I heard a hefty *thud*, and the whole area was engulfed in a cloud of sand.

“Wh-What happened?!?” I shouted between hacking coughs as I got a lungful of desert. I timidly opened my eyes and looked up to find the ammut lying right in front of us, conspicuously expired. A gash ran down the beast’s left side, so deep its organs were starting to spill out from its gut.

《**I was stronger,**》 Fel said with an obnoxious smirk.

《Hate to admit it, but yeah, no way that thing could’ve ever taken you down,》 Dora-chan said, shrugging.

《You’re amazing, Uncle Fel!》 added Sui.

《**This outcome was a given,**》 said Fel. He was doing his best to look impassive, but the way his tail was wagging up a storm sort of spoiled the effect.

“Sheesh,” I sighed. “Maybe try *not* to wait till the absolute last second next time?” The ammut had come so close to dismembering me, I’d seriously thought I was about to drop dead of a heart attack before it would even get the chance.

《**And so your cowardice rears its head once more. Why would you fear these creatures when you have me to slay them should worse come to worst? You’d do well to face them with confidence.**》

“Well, excuse me for being a coward! I spent most of my life living in a world where the most frightening animals out there didn’t even hold a candle to that thing! You can’t just get used to this stuff at the drop of a hat!” I grumbled as I collected the ammut’s drops. “Huh—I guess this blackish hide must be from the part that looked like a hippo? Plus a big magic stone, and...a

box?"

The ammut had indeed dropped a box alongside the more typical items it left behind. It had a vibrantly colored geometric pattern worked into its design that struck me as sort of Egyptian in theme. I opened it up...then instantly slammed it shut again, took a deep breath to collect myself, and cracked it open once more for a second look.

Within the box sat a blue gemstone that faintly shimmered with a pale light. Even more striking than its luster, though, was its size. It had to be at least as big as a golf ball, which made it far and away the biggest of all the gemstones I'd obtained up to that point. Just looking at the thing was starting to make me uncomfortable, and I decided to appraise it for good measure.

【Azure Diamond】

An exceptionally rare and precious gemstone. Legend has it that the queen of a nation was once so entranced by an azure diamond's beauty, she cajoled her husband the king into razing a small neighboring country in order to obtain one.

Welp. Okay. I'm just gonna pretend I never saw that. I shut the box without a word and sunk it deep into my Item Box.

『What is it?』 asked Fel, who must've noticed I was behaving oddly.

“Uh, nothing! Nothing at all,” I replied. *Why is it that all the loot we've been finding lately is the sort of stuff that could bring down nations in the worst case?*

『Then let us be off. The next floor awaits.』

And so we descended the staircase to the forty-fifth floor.



“Seriously? Come on, this is beyond the pale,” I groaned. We'd reached the bottom of the staircase to find a blindingly white snowscape spreading out before us. Even my familiars, who were usually fearless to a fault, seemed completely taken aback by this one. “And it’s *freezing!*” I added. It was so cold, in fact, that I actually spun around and sprinted right back up the stairs.

『Hey! Why are you returning the way we came?』 growled Fel as he

followed me up to the previous floor.

『What's wrong, Master?』 asked Sui, who just sounded confused. The slime didn't seem to be particularly bothered by extreme temperatures in general. *I*, on the other hand, was a very different story.

“I am *not* going through a floor that cold in this outfit! I’d literally freeze to death!” I explained. Just thinking about the snowy nightmare before me was making me shiver.

『Yeah, I’m really not looking forward to this one either,』 said Dora-chan, who was just as much of a cold-hater as I was. His usual enthusiasm for adventure was nowhere to be seen.

“You know, guys, we could always call it quits here and go back to the —” I began, hoping against hope that I’d be able to put this dungeon behind me.

But Fel cut me off with a flat 『No』 before I could even finish.

Yeah, figured as much. He’s not gonna be satisfied until we’ve cleared every floor in the dungeon.

『Steel yourself, Dora,』 said Fel. 『Or do you intend to abandon our goal on account of a chill? Do as you wish, but know that Sui and I will carry on, with or without you.』

『Peh! Easy for you to say, mister built-in fur coat! But fine, you’re on—I’ll show you I’m man enough to make it through the cold, just watch!』 Dora-chan shouted back. Fel’s obvious provocation had done its job, and he was now suddenly full of motivation again.

『Good! We march!』 said Fel, and with that, both of them made to once again sprint down the staircase.

I just barely managed to leap in front of them in time. “Hey! Wait, wait, wait! Fel might be fine if we go down there again without preparing, but you’ll be a popsicle within an hour, Dora-chan!” As best as I could tell, pixie dragons like him were probably cold-blooded, and you couldn’t just power your way through a tundra with a constitution like that. He’d already griped up a storm about how cold it was at night on the wasteland and desert floors. “We’re not cold-proof like Fel and Sui, you know? If we’re going to do this, we need to make sure we’re ready for it first!”

『Hmph! Very well, then. Make your preparations quickly, and let us be off.』

“I know, I know! You don’t have to tell me, sheesh. *I’m* the one who’ll be

putting his life on the line here. I think there was a cold weather section in my Online Supermarket somewhere..." I opened up my skill's menu. "Ah, yup, there it is! I don't know how I'd get by without this skill, seriously. I'd *definitely* freeze to death down there without winter clothes. Okay, let's get one of these, one of these...ooh, *definitely* one of these. Ah, and this too!" I muttered as I indiscriminately plopped one piece of cold-weather gear after another into my shopping cart.



"Ugggh, yeah, this is exactly what I'd expect negative twenty to feel like," I mumbled. "No amount of clothing could make me feel warm in *this* weather."

After I'd finished buying up all the gear we'd need, we had once again descended into the intense cold of the snow-swept forty-fifth floor. I'd been a little curious about exactly how cold it really was, so I picked up a thermometer on my shopping spree, and was horrified to find that the air temperature was sitting around negative twenty degrees Celsius. There was cold, and then there was *intense* cold, and this was intense enough that it made me want to scream and holler in rage at whoever had dreamed this stupid floor up.

«**My barrier is keeping out the worst of the cold. Endure it,**» chided Fel.

"I mean, you've got a point, and I *am* really glad we have your barriers here, don't get me wrong," I conceded. "But it's still really friggin' cold!"

Here's a piece of trivia for you: when you go out in negative-twenty-degree weather, just *breathing* is physically painful. Fel had put up his barrier immediately, saving my life in the process, but even inside his magical bubble the temperature was still sitting around negative five or so. It was a lot better than negative twenty, for sure, but "better" was still a far cry from "comfortable."

It took all sorts of gear from my Online Supermarket to make that sort of ambient temperature bearable. I was wearing a tight-fitting thermal undershirt, to start. I'd gone for one with a turtleneck and long sleeves, just to be extra warm. I had a shirt I'd bought in this world on over that, a fleece sweater over *that*, and a down jacket as my top layer. I was pretty sure that

my Online Supermarket hadn't actually had that sort of jacket in stock the last time I'd checked, but it seemed that its selection of apparel was seasonal in the same way that the grocery section was. Thankfully, I'd gotten lucky with that rotation and was able to snap up a nice, heavy coat.

As for my lower body, I had leggings made out of the same material as my undershirt beneath everything else. I was wearing my normal pants over those, and a waterproof pair of nylon snow pants as my outer layer. Then I threw on the wyvernskin cloak that I'd had Lambert make for me over all my other gear. Oh, and I also swapped my socks out for a heavier pair and put on my wyvernskin boots, also made by Lambert. They were perfectly sized for me, felt really nice to walk around in, and above all else were completely waterproof thanks to the material they were made from.

I wore some gloves and a winter hat I'd bought from my Online Supermarket, plus a pair of fluffy earmuffs because they'd been selling them and I figured hey, why not? The finishing touch to my cold-weather ensemble was a box of adhesive body warmers I'd bought from my drugstore Tenant, which I slapped on pretty much everywhere I could fit them. I wasn't the only one taking advantage of them either.

"You doing okay, Dora-chan?" I asked.

《Brrr! The sooner we get outta this place, the better,》 the little dragon replied. His voice sounded sad and feeble, even through our telepathic link. He'd been all spirited after Fel's tough-love pep talk, but it seemed that his species' innate intolerance to cold wasn't so easy to overcome. I'd stuck body warmers to his stomach and back, and he'd curled up between my jacket and my cloak.

"Hear that, Fel?" I asked.

《Indeed. I might have told him to steel himself, but I must admit, this may well be a harsh environment for him. Would that he were an ice dragon,》 replied Fel.

Yeah, if he had a big, fluffy coat of fur like you, he'd probably be getting along just fine. A moment later, I blinked. Something about what Fel had just said was finally sinking in, and I had a *really* bad feeling about it. "W-Waaait, back up. What was that about ice dragons?"

《They are precisely what they sound like: dragons that are acclimated to live in frigid climates like this one.》

I knew it! I mean, what else would they be?!

《Oooh, dragons?!》 piped up Sui. The word “dragon” had grabbed the slime’s attention.《Hey, Uncle Fel, are ice dragons tasty?》

《Yes, their meat is rather scrumptious indeed,》 replied Fel.

Sui started bouncing around in circles on the snowy ground.《Oh, woooow! Sui wants to try ice dragon too! Sui hopes one shows up—Sui’ll beat it up and eat it!》

《Hah! An admirable attitude. We shall have to hope an ice dragon appears before us.》

Can we not, thanks?! I could really do without a dragon attack today! The environment here’s bad enough without a horrible monster attacking us on top of it! I’m serious here—please, no!

《Now then, time is wasting. Let us be off,》 said Fel.

“Right,” I agreed, then paused and muttered under my breath. “I’d *really* rather not do this at all, though...”

《What was that?》

“N-Nothing! A-Anyway, are *you* okay, Sui? You’re not feeling cold, or anything?” I asked, trying to change the topic before Fel pried further.

《Huh? Sui’s just fine! It’s a teeny tiny bit colder than usual, but it’s not bad at all!》

“Ha ha—a *teeny tiny* bit colder, huh?”

《Yeah!》

Fel’s barrier might’ve spared us the full brunt of the negative twenty degree weather, but negative five was still pretty darn cold, and I could only smile and shake my head at the fact that Sui registered that as the equivalent of a slightly chilly breeze.

《Hah! Ever the sturdy one, are you not?》 commented Fel.

“I mean, it is, yeah,” I said, “I don’t think Sui’s ever actually been super bothered by hot stuff, and it’s pretty obvious it’s totally fine with the cold. Plus it can make healing potions, forge weapons, and it’s really strong in a fight too. Isn’t Sui kinda, y’know...ridiculous?”

《Hah hah hah hah!》 Fel’s laughter boomed in my head.《Indeed, it is as you say. I would never have imagined such an exceptional slime could exist, had I not met it.》

《Hey, Master, Uncle Fel, are you talking about Sui?》 asked the slime.

“Yeah, we were just saying how amazing you are!” I replied.

《Indeed. You are a truly remarkable slime.》

『Hee hee hee! Master and Uncle Fel called Sui amazing! Sui's so happy!』 said the slime, jiggling rapidly with elation.

It was a nice and heartwarming conversation, which I for one really appreciated considering that *any* sort of warmth was a welcome reprieve from our surroundings. One of my party members seemed a lot less charmed than the rest of us, though.

『Hey, think you could quit jabbering and get a move on already?』 Dora-chan moaned, his voice tragically feeble. 『I just wanna get off this floor, please...』

“Oh, right! My bad. We’ll get going right away. Fel, Sui—let’s move!”

『Very well!』

『Yeah!』

Sui and I jumped onto Fel’s back and he set off as a sprint, plunging headfirst into the frozen expanse that was the forty-fifth floor.

Chapter 3: Lightly Seasoned Hot Pot to Warm the Heart and Soul

『That is enough. We shall go no further today,』 declared Fel.

『Sounds good,』 I replied telepathically. 『It's getting dark anyway, so seems like a good time to bed down for the night.』

I looked around as Fel slowed to a stop. This was our third day on the forty-fifth floor, and our surroundings were still dominated by snow, snow, and more snow, without a remarkable feature to be seen. We'd been proceeding at a breakneck pace to get Dora-chan out of the cold as soon as possible, but the end was still nowhere in sight.

I slid off Fel's back and groaned as I stretched my own. Sui, who'd been riding alongside me, bounced off and imitated the gesture, jiggling as it stretched its body upward. Considering it didn't have bones *or* muscles I couldn't imagine it was accomplishing much with the stretch, but it was still adorable and I couldn't help but snicker as I watched it.

Dora-chan, by the way, had gotten so cold over the course of the trip that he'd almost passed out and fallen off my back to the ground. He'd ended up bedding down in Sui's usual spot in my bag, bundled up in a fleece jacket that I bought from my Online Supermarket in lieu of a blanket. It seemed a little cramped for him, but apparently, it was good enough for the moment and he'd fallen right asleep.

“All right, let's set up camp! Can you handle the barrier, Fel?” I said.

『Consider it done,』 replied Fel.

Once the barrier was up, I quickly got to work preparing our campground. First off, I spread a camping sheet I'd bought from my Online Supermarket a while back out on the ground. Next was a much more recent acquisition: several pelts that had been dropped by monsters we'd encountered on this floor called giant snowy horn rabbits, which I spread out on top of the sheet.

We'd run into quite a few giant snowy horn rabbits, actually—they had an obnoxious way of hopping out and trying to block our path every once in a

while. They looked about like you'd expect them to, given the name: they were snow-white from horn to tail, and around the size of a large dog. They were B-ranked monsters and didn't pose any challenge to Fel or my other familiars, but their coloration let them perfectly blend in with the snowy environment. I think they must've had some sort of stealth skill as well, since we never noticed the things until we were practically right on top of them. Whether or not they were *really* dangerous, having one of those things come leaping at you out of nowhere horn-first was a real jumpscare...until Fel or Sui swatted it out of the air like it was nothing, of course.

In any case, this floor was apparently some sort of giant snowy horn rabbit paradise. There were an awful lot of them and they weren't shy about trying to take us on, so we ended up with quite a few of their drop items as we progressed through the floor. They dropped pelts, horns, meat, and a magical stone every once in a while, but the pelts dropped significantly more often than all the other options, and I'd ended up with quite a stock of them. Just a small portion of my overall hoard was enough to cover the camping sheet entirely and make the whole campsite feel at least a little cozier.

The pelts were handy for more than just aesthetics—they were also water-resistant, and quite warm to boot. Just spreading them out was enough to make the area substantially more comfortable, so as far as drop items went, they were really handy. Conveniently, Sui could clean the pelts just by scooting across them, so they were perpetually nice and fluffy to the touch. Spreading a couple of them out on top of my futon made for fantastic bedding, and that plus a few blankets and a comforter kept us relatively warm at night, at least when we slept all bundled up together.

Once I'd finished setting up our campsite, I tried to rouse Dora-chan, who was still sleeping in my bag. "Hey, Dora-chan, your actual bed's ready for you!"

『Kaaay,』 Dora-chan mumbled as he squirmed his way out of the jacket, and right *into* his new bedding without pausing for a second.

"We've really gotta get off this floor soon. For Dora-chan's sake, if nothing else," I sighed.

『We will reach the end of the floor either tomorrow or the day after, at the latest,』 replied Fel. 『However, considering the progression of the previous floors...』

"You think the next floor's probably gonna be another tundra?"

《Indeed.》

I'd been thinking along the same lines. The environments in this dungeon *had* been pretty consistently coming in sets of two. "Well, I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

《That we will. Now then—what of tonight's dinner?》

"Haven't started on it yet. Setting up the beds took a while. I'll get to work now, though," I replied. *Sheesh, Fel, you could really do to learn some patience one of these days.* "Anyway, I was thinking about what to cook, and I'm leaning toward hot pot again tonight. It's quick, easy, and warms you up like nothing else, so why not?" I suggested.

I'd made hot pot every evening since we arrived on this floor, but it was hard to resist the urge to make it again, given how important keeping warm was for us. And—more importantly, in my mind—it was also delicious and easy to make.

《Hot pot, you say? It is warming and delicious, yes, so I will not object. I would be partial to the turtle meat hot pot, the same as yesterday.》

《Sui thinks hot pot sounds great too! The turtle meat's super tasty!》

"Soft shelled turtle hot pot, eh? That stuff *is* great, don't get me wrong, but do we really want to eat the *exact* same thing as last night? We don't have all that much turtle meat left either, so I figure it'll be best to keep it as a special occasion sorta thing—it'll taste better that way."

《Then what sort of hot pot do you propose? Whatever it is, it must contain meat. On that, I shall offer no compromise.》

"Surprise surprise," I replied. *Meat's your staple food, so I kinda figured that out myself.* "Let me check what would work well for a hot pot," I said, sifting through my Item Box. "Hmm... Yeah, this should do!"

I pulled out a fresh cut of meat that had dropped from a monster on this floor. Specifically, it was the meat of a sort of monster that had attacked us almost as often as the giant snowy horn rabbits: a species of chicken-like monsters that stood about as tall as my waist called snow cuckoos. Snow cuckoos were also pure white, even their combs, and were also remarkably capable of blending into the snowy landscape.

《That is the meat of the white birds from this floor, is it not?》 asked Fel. 《Did you not claim you would use those to make yakitori?》

"Yeah, I'll do that too, of course! That should wait until we're back on the

surface, though. We've got plenty of it, so it won't hurt to use a little for a hot pot beforehand! I'm sure it'll be great." I'd taste-tested a bit of the meat earlier, and it pretty much just tasted like chicken, which meant it was very nearly all-purpose.

『Hmph—I do not much care for the idea of reducing our yakitori reserves. We shall have to focus our hunting on the white birds starting tomorrow. Understood, Sui?』

『Okaaay! Sui'll beat a ton of white birds tomorrow!』

I guess Fel's looking forward to the yakitori more than I expected, if he cares that much about having enough meat in reserve for it. The snow cuckoos would have to watch out if he and Sui were going to be specifically on the hunt for them. Tomorrow was going to be a bad day for the species' local population.

『So then, what variety of hot pot will you make?』

"There's a local variety called mizutaki hot pot that uses chicken and goes really light on the seasoning. I was thinking of making that—it's really refreshing and *really* good, trust me!"



I purchased the ingredients I'd need for the hot pot from my Online Supermarket, then got right to cooking. Not that it would take much work on my part this time—the sort of hot pot I was making only really involved cutting up the ingredients and boiling them. It couldn't get any easier.

The first step is to fill a pot with water, add some kombu, and just let it sit for about thirty minutes. In the meantime, you can chop up your meat and vegetables! I left the skin on the snow cuckoo meat and sliced it into bite-sized pieces, then chunked a Chinese cabbage and sliced some mustard greens into five-centimeter-long strips. I also sliced some green onions, and diced a block of tofu into three-centimeter cubes. The last ingredients were shimeji and enoki mushrooms, which I sliced the bases off of and separated into their individual stalks.

Once the ingredients were all prepared, I crumbled a chicken bouillon cube into the pot and started heating it up. There were a few different ways of making this sort of hot pot, and the way they made it at specialty restaurants in Hakata involved cooking the chicken for ages to get a nice, cloudy soup,

but I didn't have that sort of time on my hands and the bouillon would add a little depth to the flavor to make up for it. That was good enough for a home-cooking version of the dish, as far as I was concerned.

Pull the piece of kombu out from the pot before the water reaches a rolling boil, and add the snow cuckoo meat right after it hits that point. The rest is easy—you just boil the meat until it's cooked through, occasionally skimming the scum off the top of the soup, and add in all the remaining ingredients at once afterward. Once they're cooked to your liking, the hot pot's done!

“Okay, dinner’s ready!” I called out. My familiars all slowly emerged from the bedding they’d curled up in as I cooked. “This stuff’s best if you put a little ponzu on it before you eat,” I explained. “Give me just a second to dish it up.”

I ladled out the simmering, steaming hot pot into bowls for everyone. Then I splashed a bit of ponzu onto each serving. “Okay, here you go!” I said as I passed them out.

My familiars dug in without hesitation. Fel and Dora-chan quickly regretted that decision, and took a moment to blow on their helpings before trying again.

《This is really tasty!》 said Sui, who was perfectly fine with eating boiling hot food and stole a march on the other two for once. 《The bird meat and the sour sauce are so good together!》

《Yes, they certainly are. I could gorge myself on this endlessly without tiring of its flavor,》 said Fel when his helping finally cooled down enough for him to eat it. It wasn’t long before he was stuffing his face again.

《Yeah, hot pot really is the best for warming yourself up!》 Dora-chan agreed as he savored his serving.

I finally tried some of mine as well. “Ouch, hot! But man, this *is* great! Nothing beats a good hot pot on a cold day,” I muttered as I almost scalded myself on a piece of lightly-boiled cabbage. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui all agreed with me without hesitation.

《I am nowhere near done eating! Seconds! And with only meat this time!》 shouted Fel.

《Seconds for me too, but leave the veggies in mine,》 said Dora-chan. 《Something about having a buncha them in there makes me feel even warmer!》

《Sui wants seconds too! Sui'll take some vegetables, but Sui wants mostly meat!》

“Coming right up,” I said, dishing out seconds per everyone’s liking. The instant I set the refilled bowls down, everyone was already munching away at them.

“Think I’ll grab seconds too! But this time...” I pulled a little bottle out from my Item Box. “I’ll try it with some of this yuzu chili paste! This stuff’ll draw out even more of the hot pot’s flavor for sure!”

I dabbed just a little bit of the yuzu chili paste on a piece of snow cuckoo meat, blew on it for a moment, then wolfed it down once it was cool enough to eat. “Yeah, that hits the spot! Ponzu’s nice and all, but something about the mellow citrus flavor and spicy kick that this stuff gives it is even better.”

As I enjoyed my new condiment, I suddenly realized that a certain someone was staring right at me. 《Hey. What is that?》 asked Fel.

Yup, figures he’d pick up on this. Fel’s got a nose for tasty food like no other. “It’s called yuzu chili paste,” I explained. “It’s a condiment. It’s sorta spicy, but it also has some of that classic yuzu mellowness to it.”

《Oh? And it suits this dish well, does it?》

“Yeah,” I said with a nod.

Fel didn’t even say anything. He just pushed his dish toward me with his nose, and I scooped a bit of the paste onto his meal.

《More.》

“Right, right. Is this enough?” I asked, adding another scoop.

《More.》

“More than *this*? Seriously? You know this stuff’s spicy, right?”

《I am aware, and I want more,》 Fel insisted. I shrugged and piled even more yuzu chili paste onto his food, then pushed it back to him. Fel immediately took a big bite. 《Spicy indeed—but delicious!》 he said.

“Seriously, that *has* to be too much,” I grumbled, but Fel paid me no mind. He must’ve developed a taste for spicy food at some point, because by the time he was done he’d eaten all the paste that was left in my jar. At that point, Dora-chan piped up to say that he wanted to try some too, so I had to open my Online Supermarket and pick up another jar. The two of us, of course, enjoyed our meals with a *reasonable* amount of paste on top. Sui, meanwhile, couldn’t stand spicy food and stuck to the ponzu.

I had a hard time deciding what to do with the leftover soup once we’d

eaten all the meat and veggies, but eventually settled on making rice gruel instead of udon. The snow cuckoo meat and the vegetables had worked together to infuse the soup with an incredible amount of umami, and the rice gruel I made with it was both delicious and also warmed me to the core. By the time we were finished eating and crawled into bed, the four of us could barely even feel the cold at all.



Aside from the giant snowy horn rabbits and snow cuckoos, both of which seemed to have a really high encounter rate, we also occasionally came across and defeated snow caribou, which looked sort of like reindeer the size of elephants; snow panthers, which were incredibly agile and looked like pure-white leopards; and giant snow tigers, which were mostly-white tiger monsters that had black stripes and were easily the size of two Fels. Most of the monsters were ranked anywhere from A to S, and we took out quite a few of them over the course of our next two days in the snow field.

At long last, we sighted the floor's boss in the distance. It was standing in an imposing stance before another of those cube-shaped buildings, this one mostly covered in snow.

"I-Is that some sort of abominable snowman?" I asked, taken aback by what I was seeing. It was humanoid, bipedal, and covered in white fur. The spitting image of the classic cryptid. Of course, once again, the fact that I could see it clearly from this sort of distance implied that it was pretty darn huge. I appraised it right away.

【Yeti】

An S-ranked monster that lives in frigid climates. Possesses the sheer brute strength to tear its prey apart with its bare hands. These highly territorial monsters are known to viciously attack anything and everything that dares to enter their domain.

O-Okay, then. I think that's what they call abominable snowmen in the Himalayas, if memory serves? Guess I was right on the mark, then. That's cool and all, but "the sheer brute strength to tear its prey apart with its bare hands"....? Just imagining it sent a chill running down my spine.

“Hey, Fel, have you ever...?”

《Yes. I have seen one of these creatures before, though only once, and I did not fight it,》 said Fel. He explained that he'd seen one up on a mountain once in wintery conditions quite similar to those on this floor, but since bipedal monsters are generally less tasty than those with more or fewer legs, he had just ignored it. 《At the time, finding shelter for the night was of greater interest to me,》 he noted.

I guess when he puts it that way, the only bipedal monsters I've eaten that have actually been tasty are the orcs and minotaurs. Even those weren't exactly high-class meat by Fel's standards, though the gigant minotaurs were a bit of a special case. I could easily understand why the prospect of eating an unidentified two-legger was less appealing than that of finding a warm place to bed down, if it really was as miserably cold as this floor had been.

“Well, I appraised it, and apparently it can tear people to pieces with its bare hands and is super territorial,” I explained.

《Indeed. My appraisal of the creature said much the same. It clearly intends to menace us, but has made no move to attack. It would seem we have yet to enter its territory.》

“So, what's the plan?” I asked.

《Is it not obvious? We do as we always do, and slay the beast.》

Maybe that's obvious for you, but...okay, I guess we do have to beat it to get to the next floor, so maybe it is actually a little obvious this time.

《Oooh, oh oh oh! Sui wants to beat it!》

《Oh? You believe you would be able?》

《Yeah! It'll be fine!》

《Very well, then. This foe is yours to vanquish, Sui. Go on!》

Somebody had to put a stop to this, and it was clearly not going to be either of those two. “Nope, nuh-uh, no way! Stop right there! What do you mean, ‘go on’?! You can’t just send Sui out to do it all itself! Did you forget that it *tears its foes apart with its bare hands*?! It’ll pop Sui like a water balloon!”

《Cease your incessant shouting. Sui would never be defeated by the likes of that creature. Surely you understand this.》

“No, I don’t, and neither do you! You’ve never even fought one of those things! You don’t even know how strong it is, do you?!”

《O-Of course I do. And besides, Sui is strong enough to defeat even

the mightiest of foes...probably.»

“‘Probably’? ‘Probably’?!” I knew Sui was tough, sure, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to worry about it going off to fight an ultra-strong boss monster one-on-one. I always preferred for Sui to fight with the others backing it up for precisely that reason. “Just go fight with Sui, okay, Fel? For my peace of mind, if nothing else.”

《Don’t worry, Master, it’s okay! Sui’ll go beat it right now!》

“Wha—Wait, Sui!” But it was too late. Sui was way too nimble for me to stop it from bouncing straight toward the yeti. “Gaaahhh! Sui, noooooo!”

《Have some dignity, please. If the fight takes a turn for the worse, rest assured that I shall intervene,》 said Fel, but that didn’t make me feel much better about a slime who was technically still a child going off to fight on its own. **《Hmh—it seems the creature has noticed Sui,》** Fel observed a moment later. No sooner had he said it than the yeti’s massive hand shot forward to grab Sui...but missed, and ended up with a handful of snow instead.

《You’re way too slow to catch Sui!》 yelled the slime as it swiftly dodged away from the monster. The yeti let out a bloodcurdling howl as it reached out again and again, but Sui darted away each time, diving into the snow and tunneling about faster than the yeti could follow. **《Take this!》**

Pew!

“Graaaaaaugh!”

One of Sui’s Acid Bullets burst out from a snow drift, slamming into the right side of the yeti’s abdomen. It seemed unable to bear the pain and clasped a hand to its injury as it fell to one knee.

《Hurray!》 yelped Sui, bouncing with glee. It must’ve thought that it had dealt a killing blow, but a moment later...

“ROOOAAAAAAUUUUGGGHHH!” the yeti bellowed as it stood once more, mustering the last of its strength to deal one final, desperate attack. Its hand shot forward once more—and this time, it managed to catch Sui in its grasp.

“Sui!” I shouted as the yeti squeezed with all its might and the slime deformed in its grasp. It looked like it might be torn in two from the pressure alone. “Sui! Suiii! Fel, *help* it!”

The instant I shouted at him, Fel sprang into motion, but in the end, he didn’t get far.

《Raaaaah! Let! Sui! Go!》Sui shouted, then sprayed a jet of acid directly into the yeti's face.

“GRAAAAAAAAUUUUUUGGGHHH!” the beast wailed, so loudly that I had a feeling my ears would be ringing for the rest of the day. It dropped Sui to clasp its hands to its face, for all the good that did it. A few shaky steps later, and it toppled over dead.

《Sui was stronger! Hah!》declared the slime. If it could've transmitted a proud little telepathic “hmpf,” I’d bet it would’ve. In any case, I was already sprinting over to its side.

“Suiiiii!” I yelled, running as fast as my legs could carry me and hurling myself at the slime to clasp it in a bear hug. “Sui! Are you okay? Did that horrible creature hurt you?!”

《Sui’s just fine!》replied the slime.

“Really? You’re really okay?”

《Yeah! It doesn’t hurt at all!》said Sui. I was beyond relieved to see it as happy and healthy as ever.

“Come *on*, Sui, don’t make me worry like that!” I scolded.

《Hee hee, sorry, Master!》said Sui as I gave it an affectionate pat.

《**Sui,**》said Fel. **《You believed you had finished the creature off, and let your guard down.》**

《Yeah,》admitted Sui. 《Sui thought Sui had beaten it already. Sui was so surprised when it grabbed Sui!》

《Take care to learn from this mistake: no matter what foe you face, you must never grow careless. When you finish off an enemy, ensure they are *truly* finished. Understood?》

《Yeah!》

I finally let out a sigh of relief. Somehow, Sui had come out on the other end of its battle unscathed. With that worry out of the way, I turned my attention to another matter: that of the items that the yeti had dropped. It had left behind a huge magic stone, like most S-ranked monsters, but what really caught my eye was the other object that had appeared as it vanished.

“That’s definitely another treasure chest, huh?” I observed.

《It is indeed. And quite a large one,》agreed Fel.

The treasure chest was made out of some sort of white material, and while this one wasn’t gem-studded, it *did* have a snowflake pattern engraved into it. I felt an impulse to open it right away, but I’d seen enough trapped chests to

restrain myself and appraise it first.

“Appraise!”

【Floor Boss’s Treasure Chest】

A treasure chest rarely dropped by the boss of a floor in a dungeon. Not trapped.

“Looks like it’s safe to open,” I reported. I could feel my heart pounding with excitement as I cracked the chest open and Fel, Sui, and I all peered inside.

『What is it?』

『It looks super fluffy!』

Whatever was in the chest was white, fluffy, and looked sort of like it was made out of some kind of boa fabric. I lifted it out and spread it open.

“Oh, isn’t this a cloak?” I guessed. It looked just about the same size and shape as the wyvernskin cloak I’d been wearing.

『Oh? That is quite the find indeed,』 said Fel.

“You think?”

『Appraise it and see for yourself.』

I took Fel up on his suggestion.

【Cloak of the Yeti】

A cloak crafted from yeti fur. Incredibly warm, allowing the wearer to stay comfortable in even the most frigid of climates.

“Oh wow, yeah, this *is* a good find! Especially if the next floor really is another snow area. I might be getting some use out of this thing right away!”

『And Dora’s suffering will perhaps be eased as well,』 suggested Fel.

“Right, good point,” I agreed with a nod. Dora-chan was usually so energetic, but he’d spent pretty much the entire floor curled up in my bag in an effort to withstand the cold. I didn’t know if he’d been sleeping or if he was just staying still, but either way, I felt pretty sorry for him. *Hopefully this cloak will make it at least a little less miserable for him.*

“Okay, let’s get going!”

We bid the forty-fifth floor farewell and set off down the staircase to the forty-sixth.



“Ugh, of course,” I groaned.

《Indeed,》 said Fel. 《This was rather predictable.》

《It’s all white again!》 exclaimed Sui.

We’d reached the bottom of the staircase to the forty-sixth floor and found, to literally nobody’s surprise, another pure white canvas of a snowscape spreading out before us.

《Ugggh, *another* cold one...?》 Dora-chan’s voice rang out in my mind, and he sounded downright despondent at the thought of going through another floor with the same frigid climate.

“You shouldn’t write off this floor so quickly, Dora-chan! It might not be a total wash!” I reassured him, then turned around to climb about halfway back up the staircase we’d just descended. It wasn’t quite as frigid in between floors as it was out in the open. Fel and Sui waited downstairs, while Dora-chan (who was still curled up in my bag) accompanied me.

Once I was in a slightly warmer environment, I pulled the Cloak of the Yeti that I’d just obtained out from my Item Box, shrugging off my wyvernskin cloak and throwing the new one on instead.

“What do you think, Dora-chan? How’s this stack up against the wyvernskin cloak?” I asked. “This Cloak of the Yeti’s supposed to be incredible at retaining heat, and supposedly keeps you nice and warm even in the middle of a tundra!”

《Hmm... I think this might be a little better than the other one,》 said Dora-chan.

“Good to hear! In that case, let’s head back down to the next floor and give it a test.”

《Works for me.》

I returned to the bottom of the stairs and emerged once more into the snowy wasteland. Fel quickly trotted up to us with Sui.

《Well, Dora? How do you fare?》 asked Fel.

《Is it nice and warm?》 added Sui.

“Hey, Dora-chan? Think this’ll work out?” I asked as well, looking down into the folds of my cloak.

Finally, Dora-chan ever so slowly poked his head out from my bag.

《It's...not cold. Whoa, it's *actually* not cold!》 he shouted excitedly, emerging most of the way.

“Whoa, careful there! That’s great, though. Good for you, Dora-chan,” I said. I was feeling pretty darn warm and comfy as well, so I could relate. *Seriously, thank goodness this thing dropped. I couldn’t have gotten my hands on a better item at a more perfect time.*

《Good for you, Dora-chan!》 Sui repeated after me.

《Yes, I imagine this will make coping with these circumstances less of a burden. Take care, though—the air outside of the cloak will remain as cold as ever. Do not make any poor decisions, Dora,》 cautioned Fel.

《Yeah, of course I know that, Fel,》 said Dora-chan. 《At least I’ll be able to help out a little from now on, though! I can use my magic to attack from here, no problem!》

That little bit of extra mobility afforded by my new cloak was enough to put Dora-chan back in the game, and it seemed like he was starting to regain his usual vigor already.





As promised, Dora-chan pitched in to help with the fighting as we advanced through the forty-sixth floor, and as a result, our journey felt like it went a lot more smoothly overall. Even though he was only capable of launching magical attacks from underneath my cloak, having that extra source of offensive power made all the difference when it came to clearing out swarms of creatures in short order.

In the end, we reached the boss of the floor a fair bit faster than we had on the forty-fifth—it only took around four days, this time. Instead of one of those square buildings, the boss arena was an enormous snowy mountain—maybe more of a giant block of ice, actually?—that towered over the surroundings. In front of that oversized icicle stood the boss: massive, majestic, and incredibly predictable.

“I knew you were going to jinx us, Fel,” I groaned.

《In what way?》

“You just *had* to go and blab about ice dragons, didn’t you?!”

Indeed: as Fel had so expertly foreshadowed, the floor’s boss was, in fact, an ice dragon. Its scaly skin was colored silvery-white, with an ever so slight iridescent blue sheen, and if I were judging it by its looks alone, it was actually quite beautiful. The fact that we’d have to take it on in mortal combat if we wanted to proceed to the next floor sorta spoiled the effect, though.

“So, what are we supposed to do about *that*?” I asked.

《I believe it quite obvious: we defeat it,》 said Fel.

“Okay, but *is* it gonna be that easy this time? Because it looks a lot bigger to me than the earth dragon and the red dragon that you guys beat before!”

《Your concern is unwarranted. I have fought ice dragons twice and, needless to say, emerged victorious both times,》 Fel said with an air of smug superiority.

“Well, all yours, then,” I replied. *Not like I’d be any help against any sort of dragon, so I guess that was the plan from the very start.*

《Sui wants to fight the ice dragon too, Uncle Fel!》 shouted the slime.

《Oh? You wish to test your skills against it?》

《Yeah! ’Cause ice dragons are probably really yummy, right?》

『Indeed. Their meat is unlike that of other dragons—it is crisp, refreshing, and altogether delicious. I could never tire of it,』 said Fel, his eyes drifting closed. I assumed he was reminiscing about the flavor of the dragon meat. I mean, he wouldn't have been drooling otherwise.

『Sui loves tasty meat! Sui wants to try ice dragon meat too, so Sui'll fight!』

『Very well, then! This shall be a simple battle indeed. Go forth, Sui!』
『Okaaay!』

“Wait, wait, *wait!* Why’re you sending Sui off to war without a second thought?! It’s a *dragon*, for god’s sake!” I turned toward Sui and crouched down. “Sui, are you sure about this? Fel’s beaten these things before, so I’m sure *he’ll* be fine, but there’s no reason why you have to fight it too! Can’t you just wait back here with the rest of us while he handles it?”

『But Sui *wants* to fight!』 the slime insisted. 『And Sui wants to eat tasty dragon meat!』

“Okay, but we’ll only get to eat it if it *drops* meat, and there’s no guarantee that it will!”

『Hmm?』 Fel grunted as a look of displeased realization crossed his face.
『Oh, yes—this *is* a dungeon, and meat drops are not guaranteed. Perhaps we shall have to fight it a second time...』

“A *second* time? No way, not happening!”

『I reiterate: ice dragon meat is *delicious*, and is also extraordinarily rare to come across! We cannot allow this chance to slip by!』

『Uncle Fel’s right, Master! Sui wants to try the tasty meat!』

『Ugh! Not you too, Sui!』 “Right, okay, but...but think of Dora-chan! The poor little guy’s freezing his wings off! Are you really gonna stick around on this floor while he suffers?!” I said, blatantly throwing the pixie dragon under the bus.

『Nah, no issues here,』 Dora-chan’s voice rang out. 『Things are nice and warm in this cloak—I could stay here all day.』

Dora-chaaan, come on! Of all the moments to jump into the conversation!

『Then it seems there are no further obstacles in our path. Should the ice dragon not drop its meat, we shall fight it a second time.』

Arrrgh, I knew this would happen the second Dora-chan killed off my only good excuse!

『And we shall *keep* fighting it until it drops meat,』 Fel added.

“We what?!”

《C’mon, Uncle Fel, let’s gooo!》

《Indeed, no sense in wasting time. We will fight until our meat is dropped, Sui!》

《Yaaay! Ice dragon meat!》

Fel and Sui set off toward the dragon, leaving me standing flabbergasted in their wake. “Wait, how many times are you two planning on fighting this thing?! I’m putting my foot down this time, I swear! One fight, and we’re moving on!” I shouted. Aaand, they didn’t hear me, or at least they did a pretty good job of pretending not to.

《I mean, come on, you didn’t *really* think you could stop them, right?》 asked Dora-chan. 《Those two aren’t gonna listen to a word we say till the meat drops, so we might as well get comfy and wait it out. I mean, unless it drops on the first battle. That’d be nice.》

He was right, and I knew it. All I could do was sigh in resignation and watch their fight play out. Speaking of which, over the course of that exchange, Fel and Sui had gotten close enough to the ice dragon to get its attention, and were squaring off against it. The dragon made the first move in the end, its throat inflating dramatically.

《Dragon breath incoming!》 shouted Dora-chan, who was peeking out from my cloak to watch the fight.

“What? Wait, whoa! They’re standing right between us and it! We’re *directly in the line of fire!*” I shrieked, then dove *out* of the line of fire with all the speed and grace of a spooked rabbit.

A second later, the dragon opened its mouth wide, let out a deep, rumbling roar, and unleashed what looked like a beam of white light from its gaping maw. It was so bright that I reflexively looked away and covered my eyes. A few seconds later, when the light had faded, I looked up again and was greeted by a sight that made my face spasm with horror.

“Th-The trees are *frozen solid*,” I muttered with disbelief. A small copse of them had been unfortunate enough to be standing directly behind us, and had been turned into tree-shaped icicles by the dragon’s breath.

A moment later, I *felt* a series of heavy impacts more than I heard them. While I was distracted, Fel and Sui had engaged the dragon. It flailed its massive body around, chomping at Fel while attempting to trample Sui with its enormous forelegs. Sui dodged each strike, fighting back with repeated

Acid Bullets, but unlike most foes the slime had encountered, the dragon proved resilient enough to resist their effects. Each blast left a blackish stain on its hide, but none of them quite managed to pierce it. It clearly didn't *like* getting hit by them, so they were probably doing *some* damage, but they didn't stop it from keeping up the attack and doing its best to stomp Sui flat.

Fel, on the other hand, dodged each and every one of the dragon's bites with ease, then returned the favor with his Rending Claws whenever an opening presented itself. The dragon roared with pain as Fel's attacks carved bloody trenches out of its hide, and even severed one of its wings at the base. None of his attacks, however, had inflicted a fatal wound, and each injury just made the dragon flail about more and more furiously. I could feel the ground shaking, and we weren't even standing particularly close by.

Then, all of a sudden, I heard what I can only describe as a sharp tinkling noise. It really didn't sound like anything important or attention-grabbing, but it turned out to be coming from all the frozen trees in the copse as they shattered into a billion pieces from the tremors.

«*Damn. Now that's a breath weapon,*» muttered Dora-chan. I wordlessly nodded in emphatic agreement.

Meanwhile, Fel and Sui's battle continued! The dragon had finally concluded that its flailing was never going to pin the two of them down, and instead it reared up and inflated its throat once more. «*Breath incoming!*» shouted Dora-chan, who'd picked up on its intentions just a moment before I did.

«**Hmph—I think not!**»

Shwick!

«**Taaake this!**»

Pew!

Before the dragon could unleash its breath, Fel's claws rent open its throat at the same moment that one of Sui's extra-large Acid Bullets melted a hole through its breast. Finally, the killing blow had been struck, and the dragon toppled over to its side.

I ran up to Fel and Sui, carrying Dora-chan along for the ride. “Fel, Sui! You guys okay?!” I asked.

«**Of course. I would never be defeated by the likes of this creature,**» huffed Fel.

«*Sui's just fine!*» said the slime. «*Hey, Master, you know what?* Sui pew-

pewed the dragon, but it wouldn't fall over until Sui used one of the *big* ones instead! Sui fought hard with Uncle Fel! Isn't Sui amazing?!»

“You *really* are,” I replied honestly, taking Sui’s bait and giving it the praise it so obviously wanted for its hard work. “It’s incredible that you managed to take down something this huge!” I added with a sigh of relief.

A moment later, the dragon disappeared, leaving behind...

『**Oh ho! Dragon meat!**』 Fel happily exclaimed as he trotted over to a huge white lump of flesh. He’d described the stuff as delicious, but at a glance, its coloration screamed “this is not food” to me above all else. It didn’t look *edible*, let alone tasty. My feelings must’ve shown through in my expression, since Fel gave me a glance and said 『**You will understand this meat’s appeal once you have tried it,**』 with an obnoxiously haughty look on his face.

I guess if he’s that confident, it probably really is pretty good, I told myself. Really, I was just relieved that we’d accomplished our objective after just one fight. It had also dropped a hide that shone with the same beautiful whitish-blue iridescence that the dragon itself had, an eyeball and some innards in off-white jars, an extremely sharp and hefty fang, and a truly enormous magic stone.

I scooped up all the drop items, urged Fel along in spite of his mutterings about staying behind to fight just one more for its meat, and led everyone into a hole in the side of the enormous snow-covered ice mountain.

“All right, next up’s the forty-seventh floor! Wonder what *this* one’s gonna look like...?” So far we’d been through forests, wastelands, deserts, and tundras, so I was more than a little anxious about whatever would be waiting for us at the bottom of this staircase.

『**Hmm...**』 grunted Fel. 『**It would seem this next floor is the last.**』

“For real?!” I shouted, unable to contain my glee. We’d finally, *finally* be saying goodbye to this dungeon! Unfortunately, that joy only lasted a moment before Demiurge’s words rang out in my mind. “O-Oh, right. Isn’t the final floor, where, y’know...?”

『**This presence...is it...him?**』 muttered Fel, ignoring me to glare down the staircase.

“Who’s ‘him’?” I asked, but Fel still wasn’t listening. He just plodded his way down the stairs, and the rest of us could only hustle along after him.

Chapter 4: A Much Bigger Dragon

We reached the bottom of the staircase and finally arrived at the forty-seventh and final floor of the dungeon. Even if Fel hadn't spoiled that fact, it would've been obvious that something was up—the floor felt nothing like the previous ones.

"Looks like that door's the only way forward," I observed apprehensively.

«And you know what's gonna be behind it—the big boss itself! Oh, I'm hyped up for this one!» shouted Dora-chan.

«Sui'll fight super hard!» added Sui with an energetic hop.

Fel, however, cut a sharp contrast to my other two familiars. Without saying a word, he simply walked up to the door and pushed it open with his foreleg. Beyond it lay an enormous dome-shaped cavern that I would've sworn had been carved out of a massive mountain if I didn't know where we were.

"Oh, wow, this place is huge," I marveled, a little taken aback, and then was startled by a booming sound from behind me.

«The door closed!» said Sui, probing at it with a little tentacle.

"Wait, seriously?" I spun around and gave the door a shove, but it didn't budge. "Hey, Fel, what're we supposed to do about this?" I asked, but Fel still didn't reply. He just scowled ahead of us, glaring at what looked like a huge black boulder. It was right in the center of the chamber, actually, towering over everything else around it.

"H-Hey, Fel? Is that boulder something I should be worried about?" I asked.

«Silence,» growled Fel. That sure shut me up pretty quickly. He just stood there, staring at the boulder without so much as twitching a single muscle.

«H-Hey, Dora-chan, Sui? Do you guys know what's going on?» I asked telepathically so as to not disturb Fel from whatever he was doing.

«Not a clue.»

«Sui doesn't know either!»

And, just when I was at the peak of my confusion...

Grrrrroooouuuuuuggghhhhhh!

A roar rang out as *something* leapt out from behind the boulder! “Wh-What is *that*?!?” I shouted.

《Gah! That’s a friggin’ black dragon!》 yelled Dora-chan.

“A b-black dragon?!” I rubbed my eyes, took another look, and saw it clearly this time: a dragon, pitch-black and thoroughly sinister-looking, standing between us and the boulder. “Is *that* what Fel’s been so worried about this whole time?!”

《Dunno, but that thing’s *bad* news!》 said Dora-chan. 《Y’know the red dragon we hunted before? Those things are a buncha stuck-up assholes, and black dragons are just as bad, but there’s one thing that makes the two of ‘em *very* different from each other: black dragons are *crazy* strong, even by dragon standards! I really don’t wanna admit it, but I couldn’t take one of those bastards on one-on-one, and that’s not even the worst of it—I’ve heard that black dragons can use up half of their magic to cast an instant death curse!》

“A-An instant death curse?!”

《Maybe that’s why that pendant of yours showed up in this dungeon —’cause the dungeon *knew* that there’d be a black dragon waiting for you on the last floor!》

I gasped as Dora-chan brought up the pendant, and reflexively laid a hand on my breast, where it was resting. It was a magic item called a Cursebreaker Pendant, and I’d found it on the thirty-ninth floor of this dungeon. That floor was a forest, where we’d wiped out a colony of giant ants and discovered a treasure chest with the pendant inside. It had the effect of nullifying exactly one magical spell cast upon its wearer.

I’d heard that the effects of my multiple small divine blessings would more or less combine together to form a normal blessing’s level of divine protection, but that didn’t stop the prospect of instant death from scaring the crap out of me, so I’d ended up holding onto the pendant to compensate for my blessings’ small nature. It would break after a single use, sure, but that single use could make all the difference for me. That meant I wasn’t *completely* pissing myself at the thought of being anywhere near a black dragon, but it didn’t change the fact that we were facing down a seriously terrifying foe.

“Wh-What should we do?” I asked. “That black dragon’s the dungeon’s

final boss, right? It *really* looks like it wants to throw down with us, that's for sure!"

The dragon was acting fairly calm and collected, to be clear, but the way it carried itself also made it very obvious that it had no intention of letting us leave. It stamped its front foot and let out a short, bark-like roar, almost as if to say "Hurry up and come at me!"

『What do you *mean*, what should we do?』 asked Dora-chan.『If that's the boss, then our only choice is to take it out, right?』

『That dragon looks strong, but Sui'll fight hard and beat it up!』 our party's slime chimed in.

The two of them sounded like they were ready to take the black dragon up on its challenge, but strangely enough, the member who was the *most* proud of his strength, Fel, still had yet to say a word.

"Hey, Fel! What are you *doing*!?" I shouted, trying to get *some* sort of reaction out of him, but he didn't have the chance to reply before everything changed.

Thwack!

Out of absolutely nowhere, something pitch-black and *very* big slammed into the black dragon and sent it flying across the chamber. It slammed into the stony wall and collapsed to the ground, twitching and spasming wildly. It was sort of a miracle that the monster was only *almost* dead. Dora-chan's mouth hung wide open, and Sui had frozen so completely I almost wondered for a second if it had evolved into a metal slime.

"How many times have I told you to *stay quiet*? Imbecile!" rang out a tremendously low and booming voice.

"Ha ha ha haaa! That voice—so it *is* you!" shouted Fel. **"I see defeating a black dragon is as easy for you as swatting a fly. You've grown ever so slightly stronger, old one!"**

"F-Fel?" I said, *completely* bewildered. Dora-chan and Sui were right along with me in confusion, for once.

"Hm? A familiar voice, with the gall to call me *old one*," rang out the same tremendously heavy voice as before. Then, a moment later...

"Huh? Huh!?" I exclaimed as the massive boulder—no, as what I had *thought* was a massive boulder in the center of the room began to move. It had been facing away from us, perfectly still, but now it slowly turned in our direction, revealing its true form in all its terrible glory: a breathtakingly

enormous dragon, large enough to make the black dragon from before look like an infant. “D-D-D-D-D-Dragon,” I said, my voice coming out in a horrified falsetto. The creature was so overwhelmingly massive, so tremendously intimidating, that my legs gave out and I fell over backward.

《An ancient dragon...》 whispered Dora-chan.

《A *really* big dragon,》 Sui added helpfully.

“*That’s* an ancient dragon?” I asked, though really, the question was rhetorical. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that *this* was what Demiurge had warned us about, and I deeply, *deeply* regretted letting myself get pressured into coming down here.

While Dora-chan, Sui, and I were rooted to the spot with dumbfounded amazement, though, Fel was carrying out a conversation with the thing!

“Yes, you are the Fenrir I met once. I never imagined I’d see *you* here,” said the ancient dragon.

“Hah! Well, here I am! What say we finish what we started during our last encounter?” said Fel with a fierce, toothy grin.

“Gra ha ha ha ha ha ha! Finish what we started, you say? I think I like the sound of that! I’ve grown weary of sleep, and I would not be opposed to using you as sport!” the dragon replied. It and Fel both looked completely ready to take each other on, and it felt like the battle could start at any second.

I, meanwhile, was starting to literally shiver with fear. “H-Hey,” I said, turning to Dora-chan. “If Fel and the ancient dragon start fighting, what are the odds of us making it out of here alive?” I asked as my cheek spasmed involuntarily.

《Wh-Who knows?》 Dora-chan answered. 《I mean, *if* Fel’s barrier can stand up to an ancient dragon’s attack, we’ll be fine. So...yeah, we’re kinda screwed.》

“I know, right?” I sighed, then remembered that I was facing down certain death. “Wait, no, seriously, what are we gonna do?! If Fel’s barriers can’t save us, *nothing* can! And the stupid door’s shut tight, so we can’t even run away!”

Fel’s barriers had always *seemed* just about unbreakable, but I had absolutely no basis to guess whether or not they could stand up to the sort of foe that could actually give him a run for his money in combat. I didn’t even know how much of Fel’s magic it took to put the things up, actually! He had magic for days, yes, but surely not even he could keep a barrier supplied for

long enough to keep us safe while also fighting an ancient friggin' dragon! My immediate solution *would've* been to get the heck out of there, of course, but thanks to a certain door, that wasn't even on the table to begin with!

"O-Oh god, they look like they're gonna start fighting at any second! Wh- What should we do? What should we *do*!?"

『D-Don't ask me! I'm just as clueless as you are!』 shouted Dora-chan. If Fel and the ancient dragon started brawling like a couple of giant monsters laying waste to downtown Tokyo, *we* were likely—actually, make that *guaranteed*—to end up as collateral damage. 『R-Right, duh! You go stop them!』

"Me? Why *me*?! Are you *insane*!?" I shouted back. This felt like the *worst* possible time for Dora-chan to be telling stupid jokes, and I was having none of it.

『You're supposed to be his master, aren't you?! He's *your* familiar, so stopping him is *your* responsibility!』 Dora-chan yelled.

"Oh, screw that noise! You people have *never* acted like I'm your master, and you don't get to start playing that card now that it's convenient for you!" I snapped back.

『It's not a card, it's a fact! You're Fel's master, so hurry up and stop him before he gets us all killed!』

"And just how the hell do you expect me to do that?! You want me to walk between *those* two and tell them to chill out?! Hey, I know—if you're so convinced somebody has to go, then *you* do it! Yeah, *that* sounds like a *way* better idea!"

『Huh?! Why would this be *my* job? No way in hell I'm going anywhere near that crap!』

While Dora-chan and I were busy shouting at each other, the last remaining member of our party was busy taking action on its own. 『Uncle Fel, Big Uncle Dragon, you're not allowed to fiiiiiight!』 Sui called out as it bounced right in between Fel and the ancient dragon, completely disregarding the sparks that were almost visibly flying between them.

"*Suiii*!?" I screamed. I hadn't even noticed it bounce away, and before I knew it, it was charging into the single most unsafe place on the planet!

"What is this tiny slime?" asked the ancient dragon.

"A comrade. Keep your claws off it," said Fel. **"Stand back, Sui. This will be far too dangerous for you."**

『Sui's not going anywhere!』 the slime stubbornly insisted.『Uncle Fel, Big Uncle Dragon, you can't fight! You're making Master sad, so you're not allowed to! Making Master sad is *bad*, so *stop!!!*』

“Sui...” I muttered in disbelief. Not only was the slime standing up to Fel and an *ancient friggin' dragon* for me, it didn't seem scared at all—no, it was indignant on my behalf! I couldn't help but feel a little touched.

“Master’?” repeated the ancient dragon. It sounded confused.

“We are the contracted familiars of the human who stands before you,” said Fel. **“The pixie dragon by the human’s side is his familiar as well.”**

The ancient dragon turned its scaly, timeworn face toward me, and I felt pretty much every muscle in my body that could clench do so reflexively in the face of its overwhelmingly intimidating presence. Dora-chan was frozen solid as well.

“You, a foe who stood on even ground with me, have become the familiar of this puny little human?” the dragon said with open disbelief.

Yeah, I guess a human would look pretty puny to an ancient dragon's eyes! It also rather belatedly struck me that the story Fel had told me way back whenever about ancient dragons speaking the human tongue was totally true after all. *Wait a second, though—how is it picking up on Sui's telepathy? I thought that was enabled by our familiar contract, and could only be used between the four of us? E-Eh, it's an ancient dragon—I could believe it's capable of pretty much anything.*

I'd also taken note of the fact that Fel, who was over a thousand years old, had called the creature “old one.” It *had* to be a fair bit older than even him, so it sort of stood to reason it'd have more than a few tricks up its sleeve. This whole line of thought, of course, was just my desperate attempt to escape from the reality of the situation, and that attempt was quickly spoiled as the dragon's low, booming laughter shook the chamber.

“Gra ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” the dragon bellowed, slapping the ground with its foreleg in mirth. “*You, the mighty Fenrir, familiar to a human?* Graaa ha ha! If you're going to lie to me, you could at least *try* to make it convincing!”

Uhh, excuse me, mister ancient dragon? Why exactly are you assuming he's lying? It's actually totally true, for your information! Even if the particulars of the situation are really stupid!

“Hmph!” snorted Fel. “Believe it, or do not—it matters little to me. You could never understand his value, so your thoughts on the matter are unworthy of my consideration.”

“A *human’s* value?” the ancient dragon said, openly staring at me now.

“I, uhh,” I stammered, then awkwardly looked away. The dragon’s gaze was just way too much for me to handle. I was timid by nature, and looking into the face of a monster like *that* was liable to give me a heart attack.

《Umm, Mister Old Man Dragon?》 said Sui. 《You know what? The food that Master cooks is really, really yummy! Uncle Fel told me once that he became a familiar ’cause Master makes such yummy food!》

“Sui! There is no need to share such information with this living fossil!” scolded Fel, but the cat was already out of the bag.

“Yummy food?” said the ancient dragon, who once again sounded incredulous. It turned to Fel once more. “Meaning, food that is delicious? A being as mighty as you would serve a piddling little human for the likes of food?”

Hey, uhh, mister ancient dragon? Again, I get the size difference and all, but do you think you could stop talking about me like I’m an insect?

“And what of it?” growled Fel. “It may be *the likes of* food, but his food is like nothing else! If I am going to eat at all, I desire to consume the best food I can come across! Of course, my taste buds have yet to atrophy as yours have,” Fel added. He just had to end on a provocative note.

“What was that?!” The ancient dragon roared indignantly. “There isn’t a dragon out there with a more discerning palate than mine!”

“Hah! A likely story, and rich, coming from a dragon that I am certain still eats his meat raw!”

Uhh, Fel? You know that you still ate your meat raw before we met, right? You haven’t forgotten about that? I really wanted to jump into the conversation and call Fel out, but I wasn’t even close to brave enough to stick my neck out into that conversation.

“Hmph! Meat is at its best when eaten fresh, raw, and dripping with blood! A better way to eat it doesn’t exist!” insisted the dragon.

“Heh! So much for your discerning palate. ‘Meat is best raw,’ really. If only you knew, old one...not that you will ever have the chance to learn how wrong you are.”

“*Grrrrrr!*!” The ancient dragon growled, glaring indignantly at Fel, before suddenly seeming to realize something and turning toward me again. “I see now—that is where the human comes into the picture! It’s been feeding you something more delicious than raw meat?”

Oooh, boy. Is it just me, or is that thing’s attention totally locked onto me now?

“Puny little human!” the ancient dragon bellowed. “What is it you cook that the Fenrir claims is so delicious? Feed it to me now!”

Oh yeah, sure, you make it sound so easy! I thought, then paused. *Wait. Oh god, seriously? Am I actually going to have to do this?*

While I started to descend into a panic, Fel stepped up to the plate once more. **“Feed it to you? And by what right do you lay claim to our master’s meals? You shall not taste so much as a scrap of his cooking, old one! The arrogance of demanding his food when you do not deign to make yourself his familiar is unconscionable, even for you!”**

I mean, okay, you have a point, Fel, but you also really don’t have the right to talk! You’ve got a pretty big arrogant streak yourself, y’know?!

“Ugh!” grunted the dragon. “Don’t be so stingy! If you won’t let me eat, then I won’t fight you!”

“What?! Why?!” bellowed Fel.

“Because you’re being a miser!” snapped the dragon. “If you want to fight me, then you’ll have to feed me that human’s cooking!”

“Grrr! Whatever happened to finishing what we started?!”

“Hmph—I don’t feel like it anymore!”

I’ve gotta say—standing there and watching Fel and an ancient dragon engage in the pettiest of arguments about who would get to eat my food was the *weirdest* feeling. They were both monstrously powerful, yes, but seeing them go at it over something *that* stupid was all it took to finally let all that nervous tension at the thought of my imminent death drain away. It wasn’t long before disappointment rushed in to take the place of the terror. Like, Fenrirs and ancient dragons were both supposed to be the stuff of legends, so why were they raising a kicking, screaming fit over a single meal?!

《Uhh. *This* is what ancient dragons are like? For real?》 Dora-chan telepathically transmitted to me. He seemed to be thinking along much the same lines as I was. It was just...seriously painful to watch them act like this, but watching them and pitying them in the weirdest possible way was

basically our only option.

“Hmph! If you refuse to fight, then fine! Have it your way!” Fel huffed, then spun about to plod his way back over to us.

“So, what’re we gonna do, Fel?” I asked.

《What do you mean?! We do nothing! What else is there to do?!》

“Hey, c’mon, calm down! I know you’re upset, but don’t take it out on me!” His exchange with the ancient dragon had clearly gotten under his skin really bad, and I tried to soothe him at least a little.

《Yeah, I second that,》 said Dora-chan. 《But seriously, we can’t just ‘do nothing.’ How’re we gonna get back up topside? By *walking* there? Not like we *couldn’t* go back the way we came, but climbing up to the fortieth floor to use the teleportation stone’s gonna be a real pain in the ass.》

I couldn’t have agreed more. We’d been keeping up a fast pace on the way down—a breakneck one, even—and it had still taken us an incredibly long time to reach the final floor. Plus, though I technically couldn’t guarantee it, precedent suggested that there was *probably* a teleportation circle that led to the surface somewhere in this room. If we could just use that, then getting out of the dungeon would be a snap, but that posed some potential difficulties.

“Actually, wait a sec—that black dragon from a minute ago was probably the dungeon’s final boss, right?” I asked, turning to look at the unfortunate lesser dragon. It was still crumpled into a pile by the wall, twitching pathetically.

《Yeah, that checks out,》 said Dora-chan.

《Indeed,》 agreed Fel. 《I have met the old one on the surface before, so he cannot be a spawn of this dungeon, and thus cannot be the boss.》

“Okay, so doesn’t that mean that if we finish the black dragon off, a teleportation circle will show up?” That was how it worked back in the Dolan and Aveling dungeons, at least.

《Perhaps, but do you believe that *he* will allow us to use it unmolested?》 countered Fel with a scowl.

“Oh, right. That makes sense.”

《Hey, Master? Sui’s hungry!》 piped up the party’s slime, who had bounced back to us at the same time that Fel returned.

“Sorry, Sui, but we’re talking about something really important right now. Can you wait for just a little longer?” I asked, but then an extremely simple

solution struck me. “Hey, Fel? I know you were being all stubborn about not letting that thing eat my cooking, but what if we just give in and feed it? Maybe then it’d let us use the teleportation circle!”

『**No! Never, under any circumstances! Absolutely *not!***』 Fel snapped without a second thought. 『**But that said, hmm... A meal...**』 I could tell that he was plotting something from the look on his face. 『**Ha ha ha ha ha! Very well, then—let us eat!**』

“Huh? Seriously?” I’d *just* told Sui to wait a little while, so Fel was really putting me on the spot by saying out of nowhere that we should eat.

『**You are hungry, are you not, Sui?**』

『**Yeah! Sui’s super hungry!**』

『**And you, Dora?**』

『**I mean, yeah, I guess I could go for some grub.**』

『**There you have it!**』 said Fel, turning back to me. 『**Prepare our meal at once!**』

“Look, just because you’re all in agreement about this doesn’t change the fact that it doesn’t make sense! Why would we eat *now*?” I asked.

『**For vengeance.**』

“For *vengeance*?!”

『**Yes. I shall enjoy a lavish feast before the old one’s eyes, and revel in his frustration.**』

“Are you *kidding* me?!” I snapped.

『**Of course not,**』 said Fel. 『**I would not joke about such matters.**』

“No, I mean, I *know* that—what I meant is, isn’t that a little too mean-spirited, even for you?” *Seriously, Fel, you should know better than anyone how nasty a grudge over food can get!*

『**What nonsense is this? The fossil’s behavior is a thousand times more mean-spirited than anything I have contemplated! Have you any idea how he made me suffer when last we fought?**』 Fel insisted, though I had a funny feeling that the ancient dragon would’ve probably said the exact same thing the other way around if we’d asked him. 『**In any case, all that you need to do is prepare us a feast. Oh, and make sure to prepare something with an especially appetizing aroma,**』 Fel added, then started cackling menacingly with a malicious sneer.

I sighed. There was nothing to do but give in and make Fel’s meal...though I decided to also prepare a little extra on the side to secretly

share with the ancient dragon while I was at it. A delicious, lavish feast with an appetizing odor was sort of a tall order, though. I gave it some thought, and kept coming back to one key ingredient that would have that effect: garlic. And if I was gonna make a garlic dish, I only knew one that would fit the bill perfectly.



I knew I'd have to use garlic for its appetite-stimulating aroma, and my trio of familiars would inevitably end up demanding meat for dinner. Those two conditions brought one particular dish to mind immediately.

"Yeah, garlic steaks really are the best choice here," I muttered to myself. Keeping it simple was always the best option in my book, and not only was the recipe easy, it was also a hearty, meaty, and satisfying dish that felt downright opulent in its own right.

What sort of meat should I use, though? I wondered as I glanced over at Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui. I had a feeling that the scent of garlic would do just as much to stimulate their appetites as it would the ancient dragon's, and I had to keep in mind that he would probably be a factor before this was over as well. *Actually, how big of a portion would an ancient dragon need? He's kinda huge! He could probably clean out the whole truckload of meat I have stashed in my Item Box right now in a single bite!*

I was starting to sweat. I couldn't *actually* let him eat literally all the meat I had on hand, of course, but just to be on the safe side I decided to use a type of meat that I had a particularly large amount of. It also had to be extravagant and delicious, and for just a moment I considered using dragon meat, but I just didn't have enough of it in stock to take that risk. Considering both the flavor I wanted from the meat and the stock I had available, I pretty much had two options: giant minotaur meat and high-quality dungeon beef.

Of course, Fel did say to make it an extra nice meal, so I guess I could always use both of them? Actually, yeah, that sounds perfect! I'll make garlic steaks out of giant minotaur and the really good dungeon beef! I decided to whip up some garlic rice while I was at it as well, mostly for my own sake.

With that decided, I pulled out my magic stove and started cooking. The first step was to lightly score the meat with a kitchen knife to help tenderize it. That was barely even necessary for the giant minotaur meat, honestly, but

it was a pretty important part of the process to ensure the best results possible with the dungeon beef. After that, I coated the steaks on all sides with salt and pepper. I went with a sun-dried sea salt packed with minerals that I'd bought from my Online Supermarket a while back, and used a mill to grind the pepper.

That did it for preparing the meat! I moved on to the garlic next, thinly slicing it and then gently heating it in a frying pan with a little vegetable oil. It wasn't long before the garlic started getting really fragrant and darkening in color, and I pulled it from the pan just as the slices were starting to get a little crispy.

That brought me to the final step: cooking the meat! I decided to start with the giant minotaur steaks. I turned the flame of my stove up to high, then plopped a steak down into the pan. To keep the steak from sticking and getting burned, I kept the pan moving, tilting it this way and that. I let the meat develop the early stages of a nice, brown sear before turning the heat down to medium and letting it cook until that side was done to my liking. Then I flipped the steak and ran through the same process on the other side until it was all ready to eat!

The smell of garlic and cooked meat wafting up from the pan was almost unbearably appetizing, and I couldn't stop myself from gulping.

"I-Is it not done yet?" rang out a voice from behind me. I looked over my shoulder to find Fel and Dora-chan drooling up a storm, while Sui sat beside them, quivering restlessly.

I'd been planning on frying up some garlic rice in the same pan after all the meat was ready, but it seemed I wouldn't have the time for that after all. Instead, I plated the giant minotaur steaks that I'd already cooked, sprinkled some crispy garlic slivers on top, and served them to my familiars. "Okay, here you go! Giant minotaur garlic steaks for everyone!"

No sooner had I set the steaks down than the three of them dug right in. For that matter, Fel actually ate his in a single bite, much to my horror.

"Delicious! But this is nowhere near enough—keep the steaks coming!"

«*Damn, is this ever tasty! I gotta say, this stuff...garlic, I think? Whatever you called it, it's stupidly good with meat! I'm with Fel—keep 'em coming!*»

«*This meat's super tasty! Sui wants to eat lots more!*»

All that exercise we'd been getting as we journeyed through the dungeon

seemed to have amplified my trio of gluttons' appetites, and the smell of the garlic on top of it had them absolutely ravenous. I was cooking as fast as I could, but that still wasn't quick enough for them as they demanded steak after steak after steak. I moved on to the high-quality dungeon beef before long, and since I figured they'd probably be getting tired of the basic seasonings I'd been using so far, I tried swapping the salt and pepper out and basting them in garlic butter instead, then doing a round seasoned with soy sauce.

No matter how many steaks I grilled, though, my familiars kept inhaling them without giving me so much as a second to rest. It felt like I'd never been busier. My familiars weren't the only ones who the garlicky aroma had enticed—I was just as ravenous as they were and had to resort to satisfying myself by snacking on bits and pieces of their steaks as I worked.

“Okay, next round’s done!” I called out. “These ones are garlic butter flavored!”

“Yes, this too is delicious indeed!”

《Using butter with the garlic like this just gives it so much *depth*, I swear! This couldn’t get any better!》

《Sui really likes this flavor too!》

And just like that, another helping of steaks disappeared into the black holes that were my familiars’ stomachs.

《Very good—another!》

“Would it kill you to slow down at least a little? Sheesh!”

“Cut that oooooout!!!”

Suddenly, a low, heavy, and conspicuously offended roar shook the chamber. I’d been so busy cooking that I’d somehow *completely* forgotten that the ancient dragon was even there! I slowly, gingerly turned to look at him and found a waterfall’s worth of drool leaking out from around his bared fangs, and boy oh boy, was he ever *pissed*.

Fel, of course, was completely unperturbed. **“What? Must you be so loud while we eat?”** he asked with an air of total indifference.

“I’m *not* loud!” the dragon shrieked, then took a couple moments to draw several loud, heaving breaths and collect itself. “How *dare* you eat something that smells this delicious in front of me! Damn and blast, this isn’t fair! Share some with me!” I had to wonder if all that panting was just making the smell of the garlic even harder to ignore.

Fel picked up another garlic steak in his mouth, looked up at the ancient dragon, and swallowed his prize whole without breaking eye contact. Then he smirked. **“Hmph! Unfair? It is nothing of the sort. As this human’s familiars, it is perfectly natural and reasonable for us to partake of the food he cooks. You have sworn no oath to him, and in fact share no relationship with him at all. You have no right to demand food from him in spite of that, old one!”**



A harsh grinding noise began to build in the background, and it took me a second to realize that the ancient dragon was gnashing his teeth with frustrated fury. *God, I can't stand to watch this... This is not how ancient dragons are supposed to be!*

When I first learned that ancient dragons existed, I had vaguely visualized them as being the sort of incredible, majestic creatures you heard about in legends and folklore. Then I actually met one and he turned out to be the sort of person that would throw a huge, screaming fit over not getting to join in a meal, then grind his teeth so hard I could hear them when he didn't get his way. I just felt so terribly disillusioned. Of course, I also felt a little sorry for him. Having to smell the garlic steaks I was cooking but *not* getting to eat them must've been downright torture.

"Hey, Fel, do you really have to be this stubborn about not letting him have *any*?" I asked. "It wouldn't kill you to let him try just a little piece, right?"

"Well said, human! At least *you're* a reasonable sort of fellow!" shouted the ancient dragon, whose mood seemed to have pivoted on a dime for the better.

"You are far too lenient, and far too trusting!" snapped Fel. **"Just look at him! Do you truly believe that one so massive could restrain himself to 'just a little piece'? He would devour our entire stock of meat if we allowed him the chance, and I have no intention of doing so!"**

『Yeah, honestly, I'm not really into that idea either,』 commented Dora-chan.

『What? The Old Man Dragon's gonna eat all the meat up?』 said Sui, sounding almost heartbroken. The two of them had joined the conversation only to jump right onto Fel's side.

"You don't *know* that he'd... I mean, well..." I began, but honestly, they had a point—he *was* huge. If I knew he'd only eat about as much as Fel, I'd feel comfortable giving him a serving, but I had a hard time imagining that would satisfy a creature of his size.

"Hmm? My size is a problem, is it?" asked the ancient dragon. "I *do* have to eat quite a lot in this form...but if that's your problem, then I have a solution! Watch and be amazed!"

A moment later the ancient dragon's body let out a bright flash of light, and then he started shrinking right before my eyes! He got smaller and

smaller, ultimately ending up just about as big as Fel was.

“Y-You can *shrink*?” I asked incredulously, my eyes wide with shock. I’d been *wondering* how a dragon as huge as he was could’ve fit through the dungeon—aside from the floors that were big and wide-open, it just didn’t make sense. The passageways on the other floors simply weren’t spacious enough to let something of his size pass through. His ability to shrink at will, however, explained everything.

“**When did you pick up *that* trick, old one?**” asked Fel. Judging by the way his jaw had dropped, he hadn’t known that the dragon could shrink either.

『Is there anything ancient dragons *can’t* do?』 Dora-chan marveled. It was an impressive feat even for a fellow dragon, it seemed.

“Hah hah!” chuckled the newly shrunk ancient dragon. He sounded very pleased with himself. “Well? Sharing your food won’t pose any problems now, will it?”

『Oh wooow! The Old Man Dragon’s just like Sui!』 shouted the slime, bursting into the conversation once more. 『You know what? Sui can get bigger and smaller too! Watch!』 it said, then started quivering as it prepared to grow, which I wasn’t about to let happen.

“Whoa! No, Sui, don’t! We get it, you can grow and shrink, we know, just don’t do it here!” I frantically shouted.

『Oh, okay. If you say so, Master!』 said Sui. I breathed a sigh of relief and thanked my lucky stars that my slime was so understanding. Things were already teetering on the brink of chaos thanks to the ancient dragon issue, and when Sui had enlarged itself in the past, it had also spawned a bunch of little Sui-clones when it shrunk back to its usual size. I didn’t even want to think about how much *that* could’ve complicated the situation.

“Now then, human,” said the ancient dragon. “I have shrunk, so feed me!”

“**Your arrogance astonishes me, old one,**” snapped Fel. “**Your size was only the beginning—so long as you are not one of our Master’s familiars, he is under no obligation to offer you his food.**”

“Hmph!” snorted the dragon. “That’s up to the human to decide, not you! Tell me, human—would *you* choose to feed me? Hmm?”

“Y-Yeah, sure, I can do that! Just give me a minute!” I quickly replied. He might’ve been smaller now, but that didn’t really make him all that much less intimidating, especially when he leaned in uncomfortably close to my face.

I started cooking up a new garlic steak for the dragon, ignoring Fel's muttered complaints about how I was "**far, far too soft**" for my own good.

"Here you go," I said after I'd finished the dish and set it out before the dragon. I cooked up fresh servings for all of my familiars as well, of course.

The ancient dragon gleefully sunk his fangs into the steak. He tore it to pieces in just a couple big, toothy bites, swallowing it all down in a matter of seconds, and then he simply stood there, faintly trembling.

"Huh? What's wrong? Did you not like it?" I asked. I was starting to worry that my cooking didn't suit an ancient dragon's tastes. Then, all of a sudden...

"DELICIOOOOOOUS!!!"

...the ancient dragon let out an *incredibly* loud shout that scared me half to death.

"Wh-What *is* this dish?! Since when has something so delicious existed in this world?!" rambled the dragon, his eyes practically bulging out of their sockets.

Fel, meanwhile, smirked at him. **"I told you, did I not? His cooking is beyond compare. A shame that this will be your first *and* last time experiencing it, old one. You would do well to savor each bite."**

"First and last'?! Why?!" exclaimed the ancient dragon.

"Is it not obvious? I have said it time and time again—you are nothing to him, and he has no obligation to share his food with one who is not even his familiar."

"Whaaaaat?! Well then, I'll do it! I'll be the whelp's familiar, if that's what it takes!"

Uh, what? Excuse me? Three familiars doing their best to eat me out of house and home is already plenty, thanks! Not to mention that having an ancient dragon as a familiar would be absurd, even by my standards! Nooo thank you!

"Surely you jest? That is out of the question!" snapped Fel. **"To begin with, one so driven by whims as you could never carry out a familiar's duties. When last we fought, you claimed you had just awoken from 'a quick nap,' which I later learned had lasted *twenty years* before I found you! That is why you were here as well, yes? To sleep? And it would**

appear this ‘nap’ was not a quick one either. How long has it been since you last awoke? Fifty years? Sixty?”

His naps last so long, you have to measure them in decades? I was on Fel’s side this time. There was absolutely no way I could handle having a familiar like *that*.

“Ugh!” grunted the ancient dragon. “I came here just a touch after we fought! I swung by another continent, came back here, spent a while wandering about... I can’t have been here for much longer than a hundred years. *Maybe two,*” muttered the ancient dragon. He was being surprisingly forthcoming about this.

“Unbelievable,” sighed Fel. “How does one casually ‘nap’ for close to two centuries?”

“Hmph,” the ancient dragon grunted uncomfortably. “W-Well...these things happen. B-But I’ve slept more than enough! Enough that I won’t need another nap for quite some time!”

“I have my doubts. You should know that this human has been granted the blessing of the God of All Creation, and has had his lifespan extended to somewhere near fifteen hundred years. Will you truly be capable of resisting your whims and serving as his faithful familiar until he meets his end?”

The ancient dragon gulped. “Fifteen hundred years? That’s not a *short* span, and spending it *all* as a familiar sounds...unappealing. But giving up on the human’s food is even harder to stomach,” he grumbled, mulling over the choice before him with more than a little difficulty.

“The choice is obvious. You have no hope of filling this role—give it up.”

“I’ll never give up! Look here, human, let’s make a deal—three hundred years! I’ll be your familiar for three hundred years to start, as a trial run! How about *that*?” asked the ancient dragon, leaning *way* in toward me.

“Wh-Wh-Whoa! Personal space!” I shouted.

“Do not trouble the human, old one!” Fel growled.

“*You* shut your mouth!” the ancient dragon snapped back. “I’m asking the *human*, not you! Three hundred years! That’s not too much to ask, is it?!” he pressed, at the same time literally pressing closer and closer. I ended up having to hold his face back with my hands as I racked my mind for a response.

“I, umm, well,” I stammered.

“Three hundred years might be a drop in the bucket, but you’ll have *me* as a familiar for that span! An ancient dragon, doing your bidding! Nobody would turn that down—*nobody*! What do you say?!”

You’re really strong-arming me here, you know that? I can’t exactly say no like this! Give me a break, please! And before I even really knew what was happening...

“Yes!” roared the ancient dragon. “Yes, yes, yes, yes! Graaa ha ha ha ha—I thank you, human! I will serve you well!”

“Uh, what? Huh? What’re you talking about?” I asked.

“Fool! Why would you give your consent?!” barked Fel. I still had no clue what was going on, though, and just stared at him in blank confusion. Fel sighed. **“Do you not see what you have done? You have accepted the old one as your temporary familiar.”**

“Huh? I’ve what?! How did that happen?!”

“You thought ‘I can’t take this anymore’ or ‘just let it end,’ or something to that tune, I am sure. And so, it comes to this. Would that you had a resolute bone in your body and could have explicitly denied his offer...though I would hardly expect better from one so weak-willed,” Fel sighed, shaking his head with disappointment. I really wanted to tell him that I wasn’t as spineless as he made it sound like I was, but unfortunately, in this particular case, he was absolutely right. I couldn’t bring myself to disagree.

“There, there,” said the ancient dragon. “What’s done is done, so let’s just make the best of our new partnership, eh? I’ll be part of your little team now—just for now, though! Gra ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Gra ha ha, my ass!

And that’s how I got saddled with a three hundred year long “temporary” familiar, and an ancient dragon joined my party.



“Really, though, I just can’t believe how *good* these things you call ‘garlic steaks’ are!” the ancient dragon said with an air of absolute delight as he gulped down a garlic- and soy-sauce-flavored dungeon beef steak.

“Hmph! A fine hypocrite you make. How long ago was it that you called the one who made it a ‘puny little human’? And that is not even

starting on you becoming his familiar,” grumbled Fel as he glared at our new party member. He didn’t let his distaste for the situation stop him from sinking his fangs into another steak, though—this one seasoned with the classic salt and pepper combo.

“Oh, don’t be so feisty with me,” said the ancient dragon. “I’ll be around for a mere three hundred years! And besides, *you* three have been living the good life without me for *how long*? You’ve been eating to your heart’s content ever since you became his familiar, haven’t you?” he asked, giving Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui an appraising glance.

『I mean, yeah, we’re eaten all sorts of stuff, sure,』 admitted Dora-chan. 『We had this stuff the other day called mizutaki hot pot that *really* hit the spot.』

Fel nodded emphatically. **“Indeed, it was truly delicious. Its flavor was subtle, but in that simplicity lay a remarkable depth that was all the more appealing with that ‘yuzu chili paste’ to add a note of spice.”**

『Yeah, that was sooo yummy! Everything that Master makes is delicious, but Sui likes his karaage best of all! It’s so crunchy and juicy and good!』 said Sui, happily bouncing up and down. I assumed remembering how good the karaage I’d made had been was putting it in a good mood.

『Oh, yeah, the karaage! I was really into that stuff too! Sui’s totally got the right idea—that crunchy crust and the juicy meat inside was outta this world! Man, I’m starting to want a plateful just thinking ’bout it!』

Careful, Dora-chan, you’re starting to drool. Which was actually impressive, considering how many steaks he’d just eaten.

“Yes, it was delicious indeed. There is precious little that is more delectable than a mouthful of karaage,” said Fel, who was drooling just as badly as Dora-chan. Karaage *is* just that good, though, so I couldn’t really blame them.

“Oh ho? If this ‘karaage’ is good enough to please *all* of you, it must really be quite the thing! I wouldn’t turn down a chance to give it a try too! In fact, I’ll make it a request—karaage for our next meal, my liege!” said the ancient dragon.

I guess our next meal’s already planned in his mind, huh? And wait, who’s he calling his “liege”? Pretty sure I remember him calling me a puny human just a minute ago! Blatantly opportunistic much?

“Much as it pains me to agree with the likes of him, I too would not

protest to having karaage for our next meal,” said Fel.

《You can put my vote down for karaage too,》 chimed in Dora-chan. 《I’m getting a serious hankering for the stuff now that it’s on my mind!》

《Sui wants to eat karaage too!》

The rest of my familiars were all enthusiastically in favor of our newest companion’s request, so there’d be no getting out of it for me. “Okay, okay! I’ll make some as soon as we get out of the dungeon,” I promised. “Anyway, aren’t you guys getting full by now? I haven’t gotten to stop and eat at all yet! Can’t I have a break for at least a moment?”

I’d been hunched over my magic stove cooking steak after steak for what felt like hours. Surely they’d had enough by now, or at least close to it? The snacking I’d managed to slip in between steaks had helped a little, but I was still really hungry by now.

“I’ve had plenty, yes. I’m more than satisfied!” said the ancient dragon.

“I could certainly eat more, but this shall suffice for now,” agreed Fel.

《Yeah, nah, I’m stuffed over here,》 said Dora-chan.

《Sui’s eaten a lot, so Sui can be done now!》 confirmed the party’s final member.

With that, it was finally time for me to have a proper meal myself. I got to work on both a garlic steak and also that garlic rice that I’d been looking forward to for what felt like ages. After all the garlic and steaks that I’d cooked for my familiars in my frying pan, there really wasn’t much left to do in the way of prep—all the fat that had rendered out of the steaks had been infused with the aroma of the garlic.

I tossed a pat of butter into the pan and stir-fried some more minced garlic in it over a low flame. Once the garlic was cooked enough to be nice and fragrant, I added some white rice and stir-fried that as well, taking care to break up the clumps. Once it was all broken up, I sprinkled on some of the same mineral-infused sea salt and freshly ground pepper that I’d used on the steaks. Then I pushed the rice off to one side of the pan, splashed some soy sauce onto it, and mixed it up, taking care to make sure that the sauce’s flavor was absorbed into all of the rice.

A taste-test and some final salt and pepper seasoning later, and the garlic rice was done! The trick is to turn up the heat nice and high once you put the rice in—it all comes together really quickly if you do it right.

I piled a plate high with garlic rice, laid some sliced garlic steak pieces on

top of it, and paused to admire my handiwork. “Yeah, that really *does* look awesome,” I muttered to myself, then prepared to take my first long-awaited bite...but felt the need to stop for a second before I could seal the deal.

“Umm, guys? You *just* said you were full, right?”

My trio—or rather, my quartet of gluttonous familiars all had their gazes fixed upon me.

“What is *that*?” asked the ancient dragon.

“It smells most appealing,” noted Fel.

《Yeah, we didn’t get to try *that* stuff!》 said Dora-chan.

《Master, that’s not fair!》 huffed Sui.

“What? No, but—you guys know this is *rice*, right? You were going on and on about how you only wanted meat!” I protested, but the spark of desire in their eyes didn’t so much as flicker. “Okay, okay, fine! I’ll make more for you! Are you happy now?”

And so I threw together platefuls of garlic rice with garlic steak on top for everyone, and they inhaled them in an instant. It was an after-dinner snack the size of a full meal, as far as they were concerned. I, on the other hand, took my time to savor my serving, and boy, was the combination of garlic steak and garlic rice just as dangerously delicious as I’d expected it to be.

As we basked in the satisfaction of a really excellent meal, I served my familiars some soda—which caught the ancient dragon by surprise on account of the carbonation, though he seemed to take a liking to it and was guzzling it down before I knew it—and got some coffee for myself. I took a sip and let out a sigh of relief, barely a second before the dragon let out an enormous belch.

“This sparkly stuff is *superb!* And it’s so *sweet!* Even your *drinks* are a cut above?! How do you *do* it?!” he shouted in between swigs of soda.

“Of course, this is far from the only ‘sparkly’ drink he has to offer,” interjected Fel.

“*What?!*” the ancient dragon shouted.

Fel rolled his eyes. **“Oh, calm yourself, old one. And come to think of it, have you decided upon a name for him?”**

It was only then that I remembered that naming the dragon was probably going to be my responsibility again. “Do I have to? Is my naming him really mandatory?”

“Temporary or not, he has sworn himself to you as your familiar. It

would not do for you to not grant him a name,” insisted Fel.

“A name, you say?” said the dragon. “The thought of getting one of those three thousand years into my life is a strange one...but not a *bad* one. I’ll trust in you to bequeath upon me a name as dignified and magnificent as I am, my liege!”

And just like that, his expectations were set higher than I could satisfy. Coming up with names had never been my strong suit. *And wait, did he just say he’s been alive for three thousand years?! No wonder Fel’s been calling him old! But whatever—I have to think! Hmm... An ancient dragon’s name...*

I was at a loss before I’d even really started. As I thought, though, my eyes happened to land on Dora-chan, who had flopped down onto his back after he’d finished his cider. Between that and all the steaks, his stomach was blown up like a balloon, so I figured he was taking a nap to help himself digest.

Hmm—Dora-chan... I’d chosen his name because “Dora” sounded sort of like the first half of “dragon” to me, somehow, and the “-chan” honorific just felt right since he was a cute little pixie dragon. Ancient dragons are dragons too, so I could go in the same sort of direction with him? Like, he’s really old, so...Dora the Elder? No, no, we can’t have two Doras in the party. That’d get way too confusing. I guess I could do something with the second half of “dragon” this time, though? Dragon...gon...actually, that sounds kind of like a name, doesn’t it? Gon. Gon the Elder. No—Old Man Gon!

That sounded like the perfect name for an ancient dragon if I’d ever heard one. On the other hand, though, I’d been told that I had terrible instincts for names more times than I could count, and it struck me that the fact that the name sounded perfect to me was probably a sign that it *wouldn’t* sound good at all to anyone else. He *had* asked for something “dignified and magnificent” too, and “Old Man Gon” was definitely neither of those things.

Gaaah, crap! The more I thought about it, the more “Gon” seemed to stick in my mind. Just as I decided that I needed to take a break and clear my head, though, Fel burst out laughing.

“Heh heh heh—aha ha ha ha ha ha ha! A fine name he has granted you indeed, old one! Aha ha ha ha ha!”

“Huh? Wait, don’t tell me...” I quickly appraised the ancient dragon.

【Name】 Old Man Gon

【Age】3024

【Race】Ancient Dragon

【Level】1334

【HP】10096 (14423)

【MP】14897 (21281)

【Attack】9987 (14267)

【Defense】10364 (14806)

【Agility】5459 (3895)

【Skills】Wind magic, Fire magic, Water magic, Earth magic, Ice magic, Lightning magic, Holy magic, Barrier magic, Ultimate Dragon's Breath, Breath of the Ancient Dragon, Body Reinforcement, Physical attack resistance, Magic attack resistance, MP Efficiency, Appraisal

【Ultimate Magic】Soul of the Ancient Dragon

“Whoops.” The name, it seemed, had stuck, and hard enough to show up on an appraisal. “Am I remembering this right? Once you name a familiar, then as long as they *stay* your familiar...”

“Their name will remain as well, yes. May our acquaintance be a long one, *Old Man Gon*. Heh heh heh—yes, I could hardly think of a more suitable name myself!”

Stop laughing, Fel! I mean, I think it's a really nice name that makes him sound super friendly, but still, not the right time! I turned back to the ancient dragon who I'd have to get used to calling Gon, and found him frozen in place. That only lasted a moment before he erupted, though.

“What in blazes were you thinking, my liege?!?” he roared. “I asked for a dignified and magnificent name! Where's the *dignity* and *magnificence* in a name like *this*?! Change it! Change it now!”

“You ask the impossible, *Old Man Gon*. Pff...ahem. Your name cannot be changed until you cease to be his familiar, as I am certain you already know.”

“I do, but he named me *Old Man Gon*! How could I tolerate a name like *this*?!”

Now, to be clear, I knew that it wasn't an *amazing* name, and I knew it didn't really have the qualities he'd been looking for, but I still couldn't help but wonder—“Is it really *that* awful of a name?”

I didn't say it very loudly, but Gon heard me anyway. “Of course it is! It's

rubbish! It doesn't have a *hint* of charm!" he fumed.

『Take it from me as a fellow dragon—asking for a decent name from this guy was a recipe for failure to begin with,』 Dora-chan said as he patted Gon on the shoulder. The racket we were kicking up must have woken him from his nap. 『I mean, he called me 'Dora-chan,' just 'cause I'm a pixie dragon! And I asked him for a *cool* name!』

"Did he really? What a monster! If you're a pixie dragon then you must be fully grown, yes? I don't know what this 'chan' means, but I can tell it is...not *right*." Gon almost sounded wistful at the end, there. He seemed to really sympathize with Dora-chan, though I didn't think it was the sort of thing worth *sympathizing* about at all.

"I must admit that I, too, found the choice appalling. Hence why I refer to him as Dora," said Fel.

"Yes," said Gon with a nod. "This 'chan'... I don't like it. I will call you Dora too, my fellow dragon. Lift your spirits."

『Thanks, you two,』 said Dora-chan. 『I've pretty much given up on all this name crap anyway, though. I just think of it as the price I've gotta pay for good grub. Makes it way easier to put up with.』

"Yes, expecting a good name from *him* was expecting the impossible. I have told Dora this before, but he came dangerously close to naming me 'Pochi' or 'Koro,' for reasons I cannot fathom. They were awful enough that even the *thought* of bearing such a name infuriated me."

『Yeah, right,』 said Dora-chan. 『Dunno what they mean, but you can just *tell* they're garbage names.』

"Did he, really? Those are even worse than Old Man Gon!" said Gon. "Just the sound of them makes the inexplicable urge to *kill* something well up within me!"

"Yes, truly. I refused to tolerate them, and was bequeathed the name 'Fel' instead. Of course, it would seem that he chose it because to his ears, 'Fel' and 'Fenrir' sound somehow alike," said Fel.

"Is *that* why?" gaped Gon. "But that doesn't make any sense! They *barely* sound anything like each other at all!"

『Yeah, he's just the worst when it comes to names. Seriously, they've *all* been like this. He called *it* 'Sui,'』 said Dora-chan, gesturing to the party slime, 『because *apparently* he thinks 'Sui' sounds like 'slime.' The 'Dora' part of my name's supposed to come from the first bit of 'dragon' too, if you

can believe it.»

“So then ‘Gon’ must have come from the *second* half of ‘dragon,’” sighed Gon. “Words can’t do his ineptitude with names justice.”

At that point Gon, Fel, and Dora-chan all turned to give me the most weirdly pitying glances. *Huh? Hey, quit looking at me like that, guys! And actually, I know I kind of suck at coming up with names, but is complaining about that seriously going to be the thing that brings the three of you together?* Fel and Gon had been just about ready to tear each other’s throats out barely a few minutes ago, and the implications were starting to offend me.

『Anyway,』 said Dora-chan, 『his knack for names is as bad as it gets, but his talent for cooking’s second to none! I can put up with a crappy name or two if it means I get to eat well. Plus, we’re his familiars, and that means we’ve all gotta be on his side, whatever happens. Good to party with you, Old Man Gon.』

“Indeed, Dora speaks true,” said Fel. **“I may not have been the most cordial with you so far, but we are indeed allies now. From today forth we travel together, Old Man Gon.”**

“Maybe you *were* rude, but I gave you a fair tongue-lashing myself,” admitted Gon. “Comrades we shall be, Fel and Dora.”

『Don’t forget Sui!』 shouted the slime, who was bouncing around Gon’s legs.

“Ah, right, of course. And the same goes for you, Sui.”

『You too, Old Man Gon!』

Everyone seemed to be getting along fabulously all of a sudden, and that was a good thing for sure, but... “Kinda feels like I’m getting left out here, huh?”

“Not at all, my liege,” said Gon. “I have high hopes for you—hopes that you’ll be feeding me well from now on, starting with that ‘karaage’ I’ve heard so much about!”

『He made us two types last time, remember? Like, one flavored with salt, and the other with soy sauce?』 said Dora-chan.

“A point well made, Dora. If we are to eat karaage, it only seems suitable to have both types once more.”

“What’s that? It comes in two flavors?!” asked Gon.

“Indeed. Which is better is a matter of taste, but both are undeniably

delicious. Something to look forward to.”

《Karaage, yay!》 shouted Sui.

“Okay, you’re excited, I know! Like I said earlier, I’ll make some once we’re out of the dungeon.” I sighed. I had the strangest sense that I was getting manipulated by my familiars, but as long as they were getting along, it seemed best to just shrug it off and move on. “And actually, what’re we waiting for? Let’s head back up, already.”

“Very well, my liege. Wait just a moment,” said Gon, who then spun about to face one of the chamber’s walls.

For a second I was confused, but then I looked over and remembered that we weren’t actually alone in here. “Gah! Th-The black dragon!”

The last time I’d checked in on it, the black dragon had been lying in a heap, twitching helplessly, but somewhere along the way it had recovered from Gon’s tail slam and was apparently prepared to unleash its dragon breath on us.

“Hmph!” snorted Gon. “You think you stand a chance because I’m smaller now? Shrinking to this size may reduce my power by almost a third, but that leaves more than enough might and magic to crush a whelp like you, *fool!*” he shouted, then opened his mouth wide and unleashed his own burst of dragon breath. The two blasts collided in midair.

“Agh, my eyes!” I yelped. Gon’s breath attack was blindingly bright, and I reflexively looked away and clenched my eyes shut. Before long I could tell that the light had faded, and I opened them again, then glanced around in confusion. “Huh? Where’d the black dragon go?”

《God damn, Old Man Gon, you’re *awesome!* You blew that black dragon away with a single breath!》 Dora-chan shouted. His little wings were flapping rapidly with excitement.

《Oh wow, wow, wow! You’re incredible, Old Man Gon!》 Sui shouted in agreement, hopping about at high speeds.

“**Hmm—a feat worthy of an ancient dragon, I suppose,**” said Fel. Even *he* sounded impressed, which was shocking, considering the attitude he’d been taking with Gon up to that point.

《Look! Drops!》 shouted Sui. The slime quickly skittered about, picking up all the items the black dragon had left behind and rushing over to me. 《Here you go, Master!》

“Ah, of course,” said Gon. “The items the monsters in this dungeon drop

have value to humans—I'd forgotten. In that case, I offer the spoils to you, my liege."

"R-Right, thanks," I replied, then accepted the items from Sui. It handed over an extra-large magic stone, a glossy, jet-black skin, an equally black and terribly sharp claw, and a single black bone that was long enough to come up to my waist when stood on end. "Hey, does anyone else think this black bone looks a little, I dunno...*sinister*, I guess?" I asked.

"That would be a black dragon's cursebone," said Gon.

At that point Fel, who was always a font of trivia, perked up his ears. "**A black dragon's cursebone, you say? I have heard tales of those being used as catalysts to fuel mighty incantations,**" he noted.

"Y-Yeah, okay, I sorta had a feeling we were dealing with *that* sort of item," I said. There was absolutely no chance in hell that *I'd* ever use an item like that, and considering its nature, it felt like trying to sell it could cause all sorts of problems by itself, so I dropped it in my Item Box with every intention of letting it stew there till the end of time.

"Oh, of course," said Fel. **"Old Man Gon—you have been here for an age, and have surely slain your fair share of monsters. If you have the items they left behind, I would suggest you hand them over to him. He will trade them for gold, and use that gold, in turn, to supply us with food."**

"Oh, *really*? In that case, come along this way!" said Gon. We followed him over to a hole in the wall of the cavern that led into a cave the size of a smallish room.

"Oh, huh. Wonder why the dungeon put a little cave here?" I mused.

"Oh, it didn't. I dug it out myself," said Gon, who went on to explain that he'd been killing black dragons that interrupted his sleep for a very long time now. Every time he beat one, though, it would drop all sorts of clutter around his cave, so he'd carved out a hole in the wall to use as a storage room. The drops would've disappeared on their own if he'd just ignored them, but apparently he'd thought that would be a waste.

"It's a dragon thing, see. We're driven to hoard shiny things—it's in our nature." He hadn't taken any interest in the magic stones, skins, or fangs, but treasure chests were an exception. When *those* dropped, he was careful to snap them up and store them in the cave where the dungeon wouldn't reabsorb them.

The end result of his habit was that the little cave was absolutely packed to the brim with gold and treasure of all varieties. I wasn't about to run a full inventory on the spot, so I had everyone help me shovel them into my magic bag. Among that heap of treasure were magic swords called Hrunting, Gram, and Eckesachs, but I decided to pretend that I hadn't noticed and immediately chucked them into the forbidden section of my Item Box.

"All right, that's everything!" I said. "I think it's time for us to head back topside."

Gon told us that the teleportation circle would appear in the center of the main chamber, so we all headed back in that direction. Part way there, though, I got curious about something and leaned in to whisper to Fel.

"Hey, Fel? Gon made digging out a hole in the wall sound like it was nothing, but is it really that easy to break the walls in a dungeon like that?"

"Of course it is not. He broke through with sheer, overpowering magical force, I am certain."

"Yeah, he said that shrinking reduced most of his abilities by about a third, but he *still* has more MP than you," I observed. "Speaking of, do you think the numbers in parenthesis are his normal stats?"

"Indeed."

"Wow. I know this is gonna sound kinda stupid, but he's a real monster, huh?"

"Perhaps."

"But you fought him to a draw, right? I can't believe you even survived, now that I've seen him myself."

"And so I demonstrated the extent of my skills. Though I was outclassed by leagues in the realms of HP, MP, Attack, and Defense, my Agility alone towered above his. That difference put him at my mercy."

Now that Fel mentions it, I guess Gon's Agility really is a lot lower than the rest of his stats. And unlike the rest of them, that one actually got higher when he shrunk himself! Guess it's just an issue with his normal form being too huge to be very fast.

"What are you lingering for? Let's be off!" shouted Gon.

"Yeah, hurry it up!" added Dora-chan.

"Masteeer, Uncle Fel, come on!" yelled Sui.

"Right, sorry! We'll be right there!" I shouted back, then hustled over to the magic circle that the others were waiting by. "Okay, everyone—next stop,

the surface!"

"I suppose I'll get to stroll about a human city in the open now," said Gon just before we stepped into the circle. "I'm actually looking forward to this."

Oh, right! I'll have to go get him registered as my familiar as soon as we get out of here, won't I? I could vividly imagine the sort of commotion *that* was going to cause, and sighed heavily as the magic circle whisked us away.

Chapter 5: Are You Planning on Conquering the Continent, or What?

“Now then—let us return to our lodgings and make karaage at once!”

“Indeed! This will be well worth the wait.”

《Yeah, no kidding! It’s been ages—I’m so excited, seriously!》

《Karaage, karaage, yippee!》

“Whoa, hold up a second, you four! I know you’re excited, but we have a lot of stuff to get done before I can start cooking!”

After a second of discomforting weightlessness, I had found myself transported to a small stone room. No sooner had we arrived than all of my familiars started going on and on about karaage this, karaage that, but unfortunately for all of us, I wasn’t as good at forgetting about our obligations as they were.

To start, I’d have to go get Gon registered as my new familiar at the Adventurer’s guild. I’d have to find a place for us to stay for the night after that, and since our little family wasn’t exactly all that little anymore, I was considering renting a slightly larger house than I had previously.

“Anyway, we have to go to the Adventurer’s guild before anything else,” I said, putting my foot down.

“Hmm? Why?”

“Because, Fel, we have to report that we cleared the dungeon! And we have to get Gon registered as a familiar while we’re at it.” I glanced over at Gon, and he gave me a “Wait, what? Me?” sort of look in exchange, so clearly he wasn’t following any of this.

“Ahh, yes. And if we fail to do so, we would again be forced to endure the sort of commotion I once provoked.”

“You got it. Actually, I have a feeling it might end up being an even worse uproar than the one you caused.”

“Perhaps. Defective though he may be, he is a dragon nonetheless.”

“Hey! What do you mean, *defective*?!” snapped Gon, but to be brutally

honest, I could understand where Fel was coming from.

«Yeah, dragons scare people stiff no matter *how* small they are. Even *I* get that treatment sometimes,» piped up Dora-chan.

“Right?” I agreed with a nod as I glanced over at Gon. Frankly, there was absolutely nothing cute about him. He was a big, scaly, terrifying dragon from top to bottom.

Sure, Fenrirs were scary too, but *they* were nice and fluffy, which added a bit of cuteness to blunt the edge of the terror they inspired. Dragons, on the other hand, had no such factor—their appearance was just plainly and purely intimidating. Dora-chan was a bit of an exception, on account of him being tiny and close enough to pink to basically count as cute, but Gon didn’t even have coloration on his side. His scales were a gray so dark, it was practically black, and when grown to his full size I estimated he had to be at least twenty stories tall. His shrinking act helped a *little*, but not enough.

“Anyway, no sense wasting time here. We’ve just gotta get out there and see what happens. Try to keep as low of a profile in town as you can, okay, Gon? You’re scary enough just standing there, and the last thing we want is to cause a panic. Oh, and no talking out loud in town, okay? Stick to telepathy.”

“I’m well aware, thank you. I’m not *that* stupid,” huffed Gon. There wasn’t much I could do other than take his word for it and hope for the best, so I led the party out of the teleportation chamber.

“Huh?! Where the hell did you—” shouted an adventurer as I almost ran right into him. He looked to be in his mid thirties or so, and was big and muscular in a way that just screamed “veteran adventurer,” with a party of four other adventurers standing behind him.

“Oh, sorry!” I said, turning back to look into the room. “Looks like some people were about to use the room, guys! Can you wait up just a second? We’ll let them in, then you can come out. Okay, you can go ahead now,” I said, turning back to face the adventurers, but found that they were frozen stiff.

“Umm, hello...?” I said, a little worried. I gave them a closer look, and noticed that they were all suddenly dripping with cold sweat, their eyes locked onto a point somewhere behind me. “Oh, right. Of course it would turn out this way,” I sighed.

As I’d feared, all the issues we’d had with Fel were applying to Gon as

well. Adventurers who were at a certain level of skill and experience could tell in an instant how dangerous he was, it seemed. As for what I could do about the situation, I only had one idea in mind: beat a hasty retreat before the problem escalated! Thankfully, teleporting up from the bottom floor had taken us to the same room as always, so the exit was conveniently nearby.

“Change of plans—let’s go, guys! Sorry, coming through, ’scuse us!” I said, doing my best to ignore the stunned adventurers as I slipped past them and hurried my way outdoors. “Man, it feels like it’s been *ages* since I felt real, natural sunlight!” I said, taking a moment to bask in the warm, comforting sensation of the sun on my skin.

“*Freeze!!!* What the *hell* did you bring out of the dungeon with you?!”

“I thought the Fenrir was your only familiar! What is *that*?!”

...Make that a *very brief* moment, as no sooner had I stepped outside than I found myself held at spearpoint by the guards posted by the dungeon’s entrance. The adventurers who were lined up and waiting to be admitted were all staring as well, the lower-rankers frozen in terror and the mid-to-upper-rankers keeping their eyes glued on us with their hands resting firmly on their weapons. The silence was deafening, and you could cut the tension with a knife. *Also, do you think you could maybe not tell everyone that Fel’s a Fenrir, mister gate guard? I know it’s kind of an open secret, but that doesn’t mean you’re supposed to go blabbing about it in front of just anyone!*

“So, I, uhh. Found a new familiar. Yup,” I bluntly explained, raising my hands *way* up overhead and doing my best to exude an aura of non-resistance.

“Oh, pull the other one!” shouted the guard. “First a Fenrir, and now a dragon?! That’s completely impossible!”

I mean, it really happened! I don’t know what to tell you!

“Humans,” Gon’s voice boomed from behind me. Everyone fell silent once more, which made his words sound even louder than ever. “My liege speaks the truth. I have indeed chosen to serve as his familiar.”

Suddenly, the eyes of virtually everyone present opened wide as their jaws dropped to the floor.

“**Oh, you utter fool,**” groaned Fel, raising one of his paws to rub his head with exasperation, then glaring at Gon. **“Have you already forgotten that you were not to speak out loud, Old Man Gon?”**

“Eh? Why not? We aren’t in town yet.”

“It is not a matter of *in* or *out* of town. It is a matter of there being

but a sparing few species that can speak the tongue of man. When one of our kind appears near a town, the humans within are all but guaranteed to fly into a panic.”

“Oooh, yes, that *would* make sense. All right, then! I’ll make an effort to use telepathy from now on, then.”

An effort? An effort?! For crying out loud, Old Man Gon! I know we’re technically not in town since we’re technically outside of the city’s walls, but did you really have to take what I said so literally?! And come on, Fel, if you’re going to scold him for talking out loud, don’t you think it might be a bad idea to talk out loud while you do it?! Everyone here could hear you! I clutched at my head in horror. It was like they were playing out some sort of comedy sketch, and one that *nobody* thought was funny. In fact, I was sort of starting to feel sorry for the poor, petrified adventurers.

『Wow, those two are morons,』 Dora-chan noted telepathically. Couldn’t have put it better myself.

『Hey, are we going soon, Master?』 asked Sui as it poked at my ankle with a little slime tentacle. That broke me out of my own stupor, and I realized that it was definitely time to take action.

I had a plan: running had gotten me into this situation, and running again, but faster this time, would hopefully get me out of it. “So yeah, they’re all my familiars, okay thanks bye!” I declared, then zoomed away before anyone could recover their presence of mind enough to stop me. I was *pretty* sure I heard somebody whisper the words “ancient dragon” in a tone of hushed awe as I rushed past, but I decided to pretend I was just hearing things.

The guards at the town’s main gate were also petrified by the sight of us as we approached, but I took action preemptively this time, shouting “It’s fine! They’re my familiars! Everything’s totally fine!” as soon as we were within earshot and just walked right on in, which got me into town without a fuss...well, more or less, anyway.

Of course, it was *after* I was inside the walls that the real trial was to begin. Town, after all, meant townsfolk. In the end, I spent the entire trek from the gates to the guild shouting “They’re my familiars! No danger here! Just familiars, everything’s fine!” at the top of my lungs.



“Well, I’m exhausted. And my throat’s a wreck,” I grumbled as I finally stepped into the Adventurer’s guild...and watched as the guild hall came to a dead stop, its usually clamorous atmosphere suddenly dominated by silence. *Oh, god, not again.* “It’s okay! They’re my familiars!” I shouted once more.

The silence in the guild didn’t grow any less tense, though. I could easily tell who the high-ranking adventurers were, on account of how they were glaring at me, on guard and truly prepared to draw their weapons and take me down if I so much as twitched in a way they found alarming.

I paused for a moment, considering my options, then looked over at one of the receptionists and said, “I’d like to speak with the guildmaster, thanks.” I felt a little bad for effectively cutting in line, but I think everyone would agree that this was an emergency situation.

“These humans are completely clueless. They have no idea that they could never hurt me with weapons like those,” muttered Gon in a whisper, looking out at the more combat-ready adventurers with something close to pity in his eyes.

“Do not scorn them so,” Fel muttered back to him. **“Pathetic though they are, the arms these humans bear are the best they are able to obtain.”**

“What, really?”

“Indeed. I have learned the ways of these so-called ‘adventurers’ throughout our travels. In their profession, a weapon is the tool of one’s trade, and it is customary to purchase the best arms one can possibly afford. The quality of one’s weapon can mean the difference between life and death, so obtaining the best weaponry available is, it would seem, a priority for them.”

“Oh? How very quaint! Shame that the best weapons they could buy wouldn’t put a scratch on me, even if they came at me all at once. They’d at least need a magical blade or two if they wanted to take me on! I’d bet you’re the same way, aren’t you, Fel?”

“That, I cannot deny. A blade of scarletite or adamantite, perhaps, could pierce my hide. One must nonetheless respect their pride—faced with a vile and fearsome dragon such as you, with no prospect of victory, they still stand strong and strive to protect their home, futile though the gesture may be. Such would seem to be the way of these adventurers.”

“Hey, wait a second. ‘Vile and fearsome’? If either of us looks vile and

fearsome, it's you without a doubt!"

"Me? Hah! No, I am afraid your visage is far worthier of the phrase."

"If you're trying to start something, you're doing a fine job of it!"

"I do not seek to *start* anything, but I would be more than happy to finish you!"

Gon and Fel were both figuratively *and* literally butting heads by that point, and for once I was just as upset as they were. In fact, I was positively fuming, and I think it goes without saying why!

"Fel? Gon? You're talking out loud."

"Hm?"

"Ah."

Fel and Gon finally regained *some* awareness of their surroundings and turned to look at me.

"And that's not even *starting* on what you were talking out loud about! You can't just *say* every little thing that pops into your heads!" I scolded. *Especially not when a whole guild's worth of adventurers are watching! They look so upset right now! It's almost tragic! I could barely stand to listen to you guys, and you weren't even talking about me!*

"Whoops—just force of habit, really!" said Gon. "I still haven't gotten the hang of this whole telepathy business."

"I, meanwhile, was lured into speaking out loud by way of the old man's example."

"Hey! Don't you go blaming this on me, Fel!"

"I will assign fault where it is due, and you are unmistakably the one who spoke first."

Once again, sparks were starting to fly as the two of them glared at each other.

"Oh, shut up, *please!*" I wailed. "You *promised* not to make a scene, didn't you?! Just look at Dora-chan and Sui! *They're* behaving themselves a *billion* times better than you two!" *Seriously, you're supposed to be the elders here! Why are you the ones embarrassing the rest of us?*

《You two're acting like a couple kids, you know that?》 commented Dora-chan, who was riding on my shoulder to give his wings a rest, holding onto my head to keep his balance.

《Sui's been quiet this whole time, Master! Sui's a good slime!》 said Sui, who had been sitting still in my bag, except for when it used a tentacle to

open the flap and peek outside.

“But seriously, you’ve gotta keep quiet, you two,” I said. “Keep this up, and it’ll be no dinner for either of you tonight!”

“*What?!*”

“**But—the karaage!**”

Fel and Gon both looked appalled, but this time, I was putting my foot down. “I’m serious, for the record! Keep quiet, or else!” I said with a pointed glare. Fel and Gon didn’t reply out loud this time, and just nodded in vigorous agreement.



I'd known that bringing Gon into the guild would freak everyone out, and I'd resigned myself to the fact that it was unavoidable, but the conversation those two had had was just beyond the pale. For the adventurers *and* for me—I felt so mortified I really wanted to run away on the spot. The adventurers here were all doing their best, and even if their weapons *weren't* powerful enough to harm a legendary monster, they were still prepared to stand strong and fight if push came to shove! And there my familiars were, crapping all over their efforts, out loud! I just couldn't take it! *Come on, Tristan, hurry up and get over here already!*

Finally, after an uncomfortably long wait, my prayers were answered and Tristan arrived. "Oh, Mister Mukohda! You're *finally* back!" he exclaimed, all smiles. "Now then, come along this...way..."

Then Tristan took one look behind me and passed out on the spot.

"Tristan?!" I yelled, just barely catching him in time to keep him from concussing himself on the floor. "Stay with us, Tristan! Can you hear me?! Tristaaan!"

Come on, what am I supposed to do about this??!



While I flailed about in a panic, trying to figure out how to deal with Tristan the guildmaster's sudden fainting spell, a man walked up to me. He was remarkably muscular, but not excessively so, and had just enough stubble growing in to give himself an air of handsome maturity.

"So you're Mukohda?" said the man. "I'm the sub-guildmaster of this branch, Bartolomeo. Good to meet you. Tristan's told me all about you, but, seriously...of all the things to bring into the guild! Our guildmaster's not used to this sort of thing, y'know? No wonder he passed out."

Bartolomeo turned to a few nearby staff members and started barking out orders. "Hey, you two! Take Tristan up to the second floor and put him to bed, will ya?"

The guild members quickly rushed up, took Tristan off my hands, and carried him away.

"All right, now for you people," said Bartolomeo, turning in my direction. "Follow me." He took the lead, and the rest of us went along after him.

We quickly arrived at a familiar destination: the guild storehouse. We'd

spent plenty of time in the storehouses of the various guild branches we'd visited up to this point, thanks to the attention Fel drew if we lingered in the main hall—though in this case, we had Gon to blame as well. I didn't mind, really, since having a little more space made this sort of conversation a lot easier on me. *Man, though, every one of these storehouses looks exactly the same, don't they?* They were all enormous, and all jam-packed with items that the guilds had purchased.

Bartolomeo must've cleared the storehouse of other staff members in advance, because when we arrived, I found that we were the only ones present. As soon as we were inside, he got right down to business. "So? Why did you bring *that* thing here?" he asked. "It's an ancient dragon, isn't it? I thought they were supposed to be a lot bigger than that, but there's still no mistaking it."

And just like that, Bartolomeo blew Gon's cover wide open. I wasn't exactly surprised—between his build and his status as a sub-guildmaster, it wasn't hard to guess that he had been a high-ranking adventurer back in his day.

Wait, is he seriously asking me why I brought Gon here? I've been shouting about it this whole time! "Umm, it's pretty much exactly like I said earlier," I explained. "He became my familiar recently, so, y'know... Oh, and yes, he *is* an ancient dragon and he *is* usually a lot bigger than this. You wouldn't believe how huge he was when I met him in the dungeon! It would've been really hard for him to follow me around if he was that big, though, so he shrunk himself down before we left the dungeon. I guess that's a thing they can do."

"Right. Okay," said Bartolomeo with a nod. Then he sighed. "Look, Mukohda, I'm gonna need you to stop messing with me now. Ancient dragons are literally the stuff of legends, and there's no way one of them would *ever* become someone's familiar. I don't know *why* it's acting so docile, but I *do* know that can't possibly be the reason."

"I don't know what to tell you," I said with an awkward shrug. I mean, I was telling the truth! What more could I possibly do?

"You!" barked Gon. "Enough questioning my liege. He's telling the truth—I really *am* his familiar now. Also, if you're going to judge based off your silly old legends, then shouldn't you be saying the same thing about Fel the Fenrir over there?"

For just a moment, Bartolomeo's eyes widened at the sound of Gon's voice, but then he just nodded and muttered, "So ancient dragons really *can* speak human languages after all." Then he turned to Fel. "I figure that means the Fenrir probably can too, huh?"

"**But of course,**" said Fel. "**To speak the language of man is but child's play for me. Moreover, I am indeed his familiar—of that there can be no mistake. I have been formally registered as such by your own guild.**"

"Oh, don't even get me *started* about that," grumbled Bartolomeo. "Trust me, you wouldn't believe the fit the guild higher-ups in Erman threw when they got word that one of our branches had registered a godsdamned Fenrir as a familiar. Even worse, word has it we've been expressly banned from trying to get the country to do something about it."

This wouldn't be the first time a country had adopted a policy of non-intervention as far as I was concerned, though it *was* the most solid proof yet that the Kingdom of Erman had chosen to do so. Bartolomeo explained that a letter had supposedly arrived from the King of Leonhardt himself, the contents of which could be roughly summed up as "go ahead and try to force the Fenrir to do your bidding—assuming you're fine with your country getting obliterated overnight, that is." He'd also explained that Leonhardt's official policy regarding Fel was that since fighting him was hopeless, they'd let him run free and hope that he stuck around in the country and solved some of its problems while he was at it. Last but not least, he'd noted that if Erman *did* somehow provoke the Fenrir's wrath, then they shouldn't expect Leonhardt to intervene in any capacity.

"Thankfully, that letter got the royals *and* our top dogs to finally calm down a bit," said Bartolomeo. "Not even *they* were dumb enough to think that they could make an enemy out of a Fenrir and live to tell the tale, or irresponsible enough to take the risk anyway knowing full well they could sink the nation right along with them."

And so, the Kingdom of Erman had decided to follow the Kingdom of Leonhardt's example and adopt a policy of letting me roam free, it seemed.

"And then, after things *finally* started calming down, you just *had* to go and pull a stunt like this!"

"But, err, I mean...sorry," I apologized sheepishly, though internally I had to protest that I hadn't asked Gon to be my familiar, *or* Fel, for that matter.

"And, look, I have to set the record straight here—are you planning on

conquering the continent, or what?" asked Bartolomeo with such a serious look on his face it made me wince.

"Huh? Am I trying to *what*?! Of course not! Don't even *say* stuff like that!" I shouted. I had a perfectly nice home in Karelina already, and I was totally satisfied with relaxing there, going out on occasional excursions around the world, and—above all else—eating delicious food. Even just the *thought* of me conquering *anything* was laughable, and I took great care to explain that to Bartolomeo at length.

"Okay, okay!" he said eventually. "If you *were* looking to get into conquest, though, there's not much that anyone could do to stop you at this point. There's not a country out there that could take on a Fenrir *and* an ancient dragon at once! Aha ha ha ha ha!"

"Please, Bartolomeo," I sighed. *Why does he have to keep saying that sort of thing? Didn't I just tell him over and over that I wasn't interested in all that stuff?*

"Enough with your teasing," said Fel. **"So long as your nation does not meddle in our affairs, I will not meddle in yours. I have no complaints regarding our current arrangement. However...if you do cause harm to one of ours in any manner, I will be forced to take an altogether different stance."**

"And the same from me," said Gon. "I won't be doing anything to you unless my liege orders it. Of course, if you hurt him, I might decide to take things into my own hands."

"Ugh," grunted Bartolomeo. The sheer pressure of Fel and Gon's glares was clearly too much for him to handle.

"Fel, Gon," I said in a slightly stern tone. I couldn't stand to watch Bartolomeo squirm like that any longer.

"Phew... Looks like you've got them on a pretty short leash, huh?" said Bartolomeo as my familiars backed off. "All right, then, I'll trust you for now. Please, though—and I mean *please*—just don't cause any trouble," he pleaded. I could only smile awkwardly in reply.

《Hmmmph! Sui's here too, you know?》 huffed Sui.

《Right? Like, I'm not gonna say we're *as* scary as those two, but we're plenty strong in our own sorta way!》 Dora-chan agreed. Neither of them seemed very happy about Fel and Gon getting put up on a pedestal.

《Trust me, guys, I know that better than anyone,》 I replied telepathically,

giving them each a pat on the back.

I handed my guild card over to Bartolomeo, and thankfully, he was able to register Gon as my familiar without too much hassle. Then he moved the conversation along to the obvious next topic. “So, with familiars like *them* backing you up I’m sure you managed to clear our dungeon, right? Lemme guess—the ancient dragon was the last floor’s boss?”

He wasn’t *exactly* wrong, per se, but in terms of the dungeon’s mechanics, he wasn’t right either. I told Bartolomeo all about how we’d cleared the dungeon, found a black dragon as the final floor’s boss, and happened to run into Gon—or rather, we happened to interrupt his nap.

“How the hell’d something like *him* sneak into the dungeon without us noticing?” Bartolomeo marveled.

“Umm, technically he did it around two hundred years ago,” I explained.

Bartolomeo asked me to tell him all about what the dungeon was like past the forty-first floor, so I explained about how we’d encountered wastelands and deserts that more or less only had their sheer size to make them challenging, and how an intensely cold snowscape had followed. He mentioned that he’d *wanted* to be there when I had talked about everything up to the fortieth floor with Tristan, but he’d happened to be in the dungeon on a rescue mission at the time and had been forced to miss it.

From the way he described it, it seemed that Bartolomeo and Tristan had carefully and specifically divided up their guild’s administrative duties between the two of them. Tristan handled all the upper-level management and the purchasing of drop items while Bartolomeo was responsible for distributing quests, training adventurers, and that sort of stuff. As he put it, “All that paper-pushing’s just a pain in the ass, as far as I’m concerned. If I don’t have to do it myself, then so much the better.” It seemed that by dividing their duties based on their respective strong points, the two of them had the Brixt guild running like a well-oiled machine.

In any case, when I finished describing everything we’d encountered from the forty-first to the forty-seventh floors, Bartolomeo hung his head and sighed. “Well, that settles it. Clearing floors like *that* would be totally impossible for an ordinary adventurer.”

“Hey, uhhh, I’d really prefer it if you didn’t imply that I’m not normal,” I interjected.

“Like *hell* you’re normal! Not even close! You’ve got a godsdamned

Fenrir and an *ancient dragon* as familiars! If I tried to claim *that* was normal, every adventurer in the entire guild would band together to kick my ass!"

Right. My bad. Sorry.

Bartolomeo let out another heavy sigh. "If the monsters were too strong to handle, our people would be able to just sneak past them, but there's nothing you can do about the floors being so damn big. That makes it a problem of practical logistics—how much water will you need to get through the floors? And how much food? *Maybe* you're in a typical five-man party and have someone with an Item Box, but that won't be enough to keep you stocked for the sort of distances we're talking here. You'd need a magic bag to make it through even *one* of those floors, and getting through *all* of them? Out of the question. You'd have to spend a small fortune just to get all your supplies in order."

I had to admit, he made some pretty good points. "Agh, what a damn headache this has turned into," grumbled Bartolomeo, crossing his arms and scowling.

The Brixt dungeon was notorious for its difficulty, and it tended to attract a relatively high-ranking adventurer clientele as a result. A fair number of them were totally serious about clearing the dungeon someday, and if the information I'd brought back were to fall into the hands of that sort of person, it was totally possible that they'd decide that clearing the dungeon was impossible, give up, and move on to some other town. Bartolomeo was seriously concerned about losing their patronage.

"The sorta folks who seriously think they'll be able to clear the dungeon are exactly the kind of spirited, motivated adventurers that you want hanging around your guild, see. If *all* of them decided to move on at once, I'd be in it deep. Can't exactly go hiding the info now that we have it, though, so I'll be reporting to my superiors about this, and they'll decide when we should put it out in the open. If anyone asks you about this before then, I'm counting on you to dodge the question."

"I think I can handle that," I replied.

I got my guild card back, with Gon's status as a familiar registered to it, and with that, I was finally free to go. I'd have to come right back the day after tomorrow, of course—I'd spoken with Bartolomeo about getting my drop items handled, and he said that was Tristan's wheelhouse, so I'd have to return once he was up and about again. He suggested that I come back

tomorrow, but I decided that I wanted to do an inventory of my items beforehand, so I said I'd be back the day after instead. I had *fewer* items than I'd brought back my first time through the dungeon, sure, but it still seemed worth the effort of putting together a list. That would give Bartolomeo time to explain everything to Tristan as well.

"All right," I said to my familiars. "Next up is the Merchant's guild!"

And so we set off to secure our lodgings for the night.



Once again, I had to spend the entire trip to the Merchant's guild parading around at the head of my party and shouting "They're my familiars! It's fine! No danger here!" at the top of my lungs. I caused a pretty huge commotion when I arrived, of course, but showing the person at the door my Adventurer's guild card gave my explanation the backing it needed to convince them to let me through. I *did* hear one of the nearby merchants whisper "I wonder if I could convince him to bargain away just a single scale?" at one point, but honestly, I was too impressed that they'd had the guts to say that in front of Gon to be annoyed.

In the end, though, I managed to communicate to one of their staff members that I wanted to rent a place big enough for my whole party to stay in, and they found an estate for me that was even bigger than the one I'd rented last time. This one had a whopping eighteen rooms, and I assumed that *had* to be large enough, so I went ahead and jumped on it. The staff member had explained that each of those eighteen rooms was huge in its own right, so it seemed perfectly suited to our needs.

A week's stay cost a hundred and fifty gold coins, and it seemed that on account of that frankly outrageous price, it had been quite a long time since anyone had actually rented it out. I was just grateful to have found a place that could fit us at all, to be honest, though I could've done without the extremely long-winded and redundant requests to please, please, *please* take care that I not damage the interior.

I paid my rent in advance, accepted the key, and headed out to see our new lodgings right away. I figured it'd be just plain cruel to ask one of their staff members to lead us there, considering how terrifyingly intimidating my lineup of familiars had become lately, so I just asked for directions instead.

The moment I arrived, though, I began to regret that decision.

“This...is the right place, right? I’m not confusing it with somewhere else?” I wondered out loud. After all, the building was enormous and opulent enough that for a second, I wondered if I’d mixed up the address with somebody’s castle, or something. I had to spend a moment just standing there in dumbfounded shock.

《Not bad. Not bad at all,》 said Fel.

《Dang, yeah, this looks even bigger and fancier than the last place!》 Dora-chan happily added.

《The garden’s bigger this time too!》 Sui noted, then leapt out from my bag to hop around on the enormous grassy lawn.

《Oh? I’m surprised—I never knew humans had half-decent taste! This is just the sort of house I like,》 said Gon, who sounded just as satisfied as Fel.

The building didn’t get any less extravagant once we were inside—quite the opposite, in fact. The entryway was enormous, featuring a truly incredible chandelier and an intricately crafted spiral staircase leading up to the next floor.

“This place is so fancy it’s starting to make me uncomfortable,” I muttered, but it seemed I was alone in that particular sentiment. My familiars were all just as pleased with the interior as they’d been with the exterior, and had already moved into the equally enormous living room and made themselves at home. I could only shake my head and smile. “Okay, guys, I’m gonna head to the kitchen and start getting dinner ready!” I called.

“Oooh, then it’s finally time for the karaage I’ve heard so much about! I have only the highest of expectations!” Gon shouted back as I made my way to the kitchen.

“Dang, this room is huge too,” I said to myself as I stepped inside. It even had a magic stove with six burners, if you can believe it. “If Gon’s expecting that much from me, I’m gonna have to do my best to live up to his hopes! Time to make some karaage!”

I’d be sticking with my usual flavors this time around: one batch seasoned with soy sauce, and another with just plain salt. That might’ve been an unsurprising decision, sure, but those two flavors were delicious enough that you could never get tired of them no matter how much you ate. I psyched myself up, pulled out a humongous pile of cockatrice meat, and got to work.



“Ahhh, this *is* delicious! ‘Karaage’ is exactly good as you all claimed—I understand now!” said Gon, staring hungrily at the veritable mountain of fried chicken before him. It was, incidentally, his third plateful of the stuff so far. I’d started by serving him soy-sauce flavored karaage and went with salt next, so we were back to soy sauce for this round. Gon took an enormous bite, stuffing his mouth as full as he could get it and chewing away happily.

“**Heh heh! I did tell you, yes,**” said Fel with an obnoxiously smug grin. I wasn’t sure what *he* was so proud of, considering that *I* was the one who had made it all.

《Master’s karaage is sooo tasty!》 said Sui, who had always been a big fan of the dish and was in an excellent mood.

《Yeah, this stuff’s as good as ever. But is it just me, or does the salt one taste kinda weird? Like, it’s not *worse* or anything—just a little different, that’s all,’ said Dora-chan, who was still working on a plate of the salt-flavored stuff.

“Oh, good job noticing that, Dora-chan!” I said. “I actually flavored that batch with salted preserved lemons. Lemons are a type of really sour fruit, and preserving them in salt gets you a really nice condiment! I just thought it’d be fun to experiment with different flavors a little,” I explained.

Salted preserved lemons had been this big fad at one point, and I’d gotten pretty hooked on them. I had even tried making them myself, though lately I’d exclusively been using the store-bought stuff. Anyway, whenever I decided to make karaage and happened to have some preserved lemon in my fridge, I’d always throw a little into the marinade, and remembering that had made me decide to give it a try again. *Nothing wrong with mixing things up every once in a while, right?*

“The lemon flavor gives fried foods like this a really refreshing feel, right?” I asked, then snagged a piece of the salted lemon karaage to try for myself. It was nice and crispy on the outside, and absolutely brimming with juices once I bit in. The slight lemon flavor gave the whole thing a nicely aromatic touch as well. *Yeah, this turned out really well!*

“**Oh? You changed the flavor? Then I shall have to try it once more, and pay closer attention to its subtleties. Needless to say, I will have the salted lemon flavor next,**” said Fel.

“More for me as well, my liege!” added Gon.

《Sui wants another serving too!》

Everyone else had overheard my conversation with Dora-chan and immediately chimed in to ask for more so they could see what we were talking about for themselves.

“Okay, okay,” I said with a chuckle as I opened up my Item Box and pulled out the rest of the salted lemon karaage that I’d fried earlier and served it to my other three familiars. Needless to say, I’d made a mountain of the stuff, and they were all too happy to devour it all at record pace.

《Sheesh, you people,》 grumbled Dora-chan. 《It’s *super* obvious, you don’t even care *how* it tastes as long as it’s good! I’m the only one here with a decently developed palate, I swear,》 he said, speaking like a true gourmet.

I wasn’t so sure that he was the *only* one, though—Sui had demonstrated its palate to be remarkably discerning on a number of occasions as well. On the other hand, Dora-chan wasn’t entirely wrong in the sense that Fel and Sui really *would* be happy to eat pretty much anything as long as it was tasty. I hadn’t known Gon for very long, but I was already starting to conclude that he was the same way. To be fair, I guess my own priorities weren’t that far off from theirs either.

“This is *incredible*, my liege!” bellowed Gon. “And on that note, I’d like another!” he added, holding up his now empty plate.

“You really scarf your food down, don’t you, Gon?” I commented.

“It’s not my fault! Your ‘karaage’ is just too delicious to resist!”

“Well, I guess I should be glad you’re such a fan. I’ll have more ready for you in just a sec,” I said, then piled up another plate for him, which he joyfully dug right into.

“More for me as well!”

《And for Sui!》

《Same over here, thanks!》

“Coming right up!”

Dinner that night didn’t end until we were all stuffed so full of karaage, we couldn’t possibly eat another bite. We settled down for an after-dinner drink—soda for the familiars and a cup of black tea for me—and then cleaned the table off.

“All right! Guess all that’s left for today is to take a bath and hit the sack,” I said. “You turned the water off for me, right, Dora-chan?” I’d started filling

up the bathtub before dinner, and had sent Dora-chan over to shut it off when I figured it would probably be just about full. Then, while we were settling down with our drinks, I'd sent him again to add in some of the bath additives I'd bought from my skill's drugstore.

『Sure did,』 said Dora-chan.『It's all full, and I dumped all the stuff you gave me in there, so it should be ready for us any time.』

“Great, thanks! In that case, I think it’s bath time.”

『Yaaay, bath time!』 shouted Sui.

“I, meanwhile, shall retire early,” said Fel, already on his way out the door.

I’d seen that coming, though, and jumped in front of him to block his path. “Stop right there, Fel!”

“Wh-What?”

“Oh, you know what! You didn’t really think you could get out of this, did you?” Fel scowled with profound distaste, but I wasn’t about to let that stop me. “We just got back from a dungeon, and that means you *definitely* have to take a bath. You remember how I said you should take one during our mid-dungeon break, and you said that we were just going to go right back in and get dirty again, so there wasn’t any point? Well, that excuse isn’t going to save you this time! We’re done with the dungeon for now, after all! And while I’m at it...”

Next, I turned to face Gon. I reached out and gave his scales a rub with one of my fingers, then inspected the grime I’d picked up. “Yup, thought so —you’re pretty dirty too! You’re taking a bath, Old Man Gon, and that’s final!”

“A bath?” said Gon, cocking his head. “What is a bath?”

“You’ll figure that out for yourself before too long! And don’t even think about running away, Fel! You’re not getting fed again until you bathe, one way or another,” I said, knowing perfectly well that with his meals on the line, Fel would have no choice but to do as I said.



“Man, this really *is* huge,” I marveled as I stepped into the bathroom wearing only a towel wrapped around my waist. I’d taken a look in there before when I got the water running, but its sheer size and splendor was

enough to take my breath away all over again.

I'd heard that the building was originally built by a lord, but that really wasn't enough to explain the bathroom on its own. Whoever that lord was, he must've been either a major bath aficionado, or else a truly remarkable showoff. Fel, Gon, and I could all get in together with plenty of room to spare—it felt closer to a bathhouse than a bathroom, really.

"Ah," said Gon as he stepped into the room. "So to take a bath simply means to cleanse yourself with water?"

"Uh-uh-uh," I said, shaking a finger at him. "Don't you go thinking that bathing's all about cleaning yourself, Gon! Bathing's all about *soaking* in water, not just running it over you! It's the best feeling in the world, I swear!" I was hoping that a little encouragement would turn Gon into another bath lover. We certainly had the space for him to get the most out of his first bathing experience, after all!

《Bath tiiime!》yipped Sui.

《Woohoo! Man, I haven't had a bath in *ages!*》shouted Dora-chan, who was just behind it. Both of them were major bathing converts, and they were ready to dive right on in.

"Wait up a second, you two!" I shouted. "You have to wash off before you get in the water, remember?"

《Okaaay!》

《Peh! Right, yeah. That.》

I pulled a bucket out from my Item Box, scooped up some water in it, and used it to wash Sui and Dora-chan off. "Okay, *now* you can get in." They didn't need me to say it twice, diving in without a second's delay.

《Ahhh,》sighed Dora-chan,《now *this* is more like it!》

《It feels so nice,》commented Sui.

"Hey, Sui?" I called out. "Sorry to ask for this when you're relaxing, but would you mind hosing down Fel for me?"

《Okaaay!》Sui said, then poked a tentacle out from the tub and started pumping hot water onto Fel.

"I'll wash you after Fel, Gon, so just hold on for now."

"All right, then," said Gon.

"Okay, let's get to it!" I said, turning back to Fel. Once he was nice and wet I pulled a brand new bottle of dog shampoo out from my Item Box. "Heh heh heh—your shampoo this time is fresh out of the drugstore, Fel! They

have a ton of different brands in stock, and the one I got this time's a special organic dog shampoo! It's a hundred percent plant-based, and it's made to not sting if it gets in your eyes *and* to make your fur *extra* fluffy!"

"I care not. If you are so intent on washing me, then hurry up and be done with it," said Fel with a deeply dissatisfied grimace. My best guess was that he just hated the sensation of being wet.

"Oh *ho*?" said Gon, smirking with glee at Fel's displeasure. "Don't tell me the great and mighty Fenrir's scared of a little water?"

"I fear nothing! I merely *detest* water," Fel huffed indignantly.

"Yeah, yeah, we know," I sighed. "Okay, I'm gonna start washing you now." I poured a big glob of shampoo into my hand, then started lathering up Fel's coat.

"So long as you are washing me, be sure to cleanse my neck and chest as well," commented Fel.

"You got it!"

Scrub scrub, scrub scrub!

"There too. Take time to wash it carefully."

Scrub scrub, scrub scrub!

"There as well."

Scrub scrub, scrub scrub scrub!

"Phew! I think that should just about do it!"

"Indeed."

"Okay, you're up, Sui! Give Fel a rinse!"

《Okaaay!》Sui extended its shower-tentacle once more and washed the suds off Fel.

"All right, that should just about...wait! No, don't—" I began to shout, but it was already too late. Fel gave himself a mighty shake, spraying water and fur in all directions.

"Peh! Blech! Come *on*, Fel, I tried to stop you and everything!"

"That is none of my concern. I am leaving now," said Fel, who left the bathroom without another word.

"Why that little..."

"Gah ha ha ha ha!" bellowed Gon. "You've met with a terrible fate, my liege!"

"Huh? Didn't he get you too, Gon?" I asked.

"Of course not! I protected myself with magic."

“Oh, barrier magic? I had a feeling you could do that sorta stuff with it, since Fel can and all.”

“That’s precisely correct,” confirmed Gon.

“Well, then you could’ve used it to guard *me* too, right?” I asked pointedly.

“And if you’d asked me to, I would’ve done just that,” said Gon.

Argh, these little punks! I poured a bucket of water over my head to wash off all the stray Fel fur, then set about washing Gon. “Okay, it’s your turn now! Sui, can you shower Gon next?”

“Okaaay!” said Sui, firing up its hose once again.

“Hmm—not totally sure what I should wash you with... I guess I’ll start by trying out the same body soap that the rest of us use.” I spread soap all over Gon, then pulled out a certain item I’d bought in advance from my Item Box. “Tah-dah! A deck brush! I had a feeling that this would be the perfect tool to scrub you with!”

“What *is* that thing?” asked Gon.”

“Here, I’ll demonstrate,” I replied, then started using the brush to scrub his scales.

“Oooh, that *does* feel quite nice,” said Gon, his eyes slowly drifting closed as he enjoyed the sensation.

“Ugh, gross, the suds are all black! You’re *filthy*, Gon, you know that?”

“Feel free to put a little more power into your scrubbing, my liege.”

“Right, right, I’ll see what I can do!” I said, then scrubbed even harder, giving his sides, back, and tail a thorough once-over.

Brush brush, brush brush!

“Ah!” As I brushed him, the towel around my waist came untied and fell to the ground. “Meh, whatever, I guess.”

Brush brush, brush brush, brush brush, brush brush!

“Phew! Man, only halfway done?” I muttered to myself. “Sheesh, I’m actually scrubbing down a dragon with a deck brush in the nude. This is just downright surreal... I’d better wrap this up quickly.”

Brush brush, brush brush!

Brush brush, brush brush!

Finally, I finished the job and had Sui hose Gon down.

“So, should I get in the water next?” Gon asked.

“Wait just a minute! All the water’ll splash out if you just jump right in.

I'll go first, and then you can take your time getting in afterward.”

“Very well, then.”

I climbed into the tub, then prompted Gon to very slowly sink his way into the water as well.

《Whoa, there!》

《Waaah!》

Dora-chan and Sui almost got swept right out of the tub as Gon's added bulk made the water overflow, but I managed to grab onto them at the last second.

“Hmm, so *this* is a bath,” said Gon. “Yes, this *does* feel quite nice!”

“I know, right?” I replied. “Though in your case, it’s gonna be hard to take any baths unless the tubs are at least as big as this one.” *Come to think of it, how big’s the bathtub at my place in Karelina?* I thought back to the bathroom at home, then resolved to commission someone to remodel the place as soon as I returned.

“The karaage you fed me today really *did* exceed my expectations, my liege,” Gon said, changing the subject. “I can’t wait to see what delicacies you’ll be feeding me from now on!”

《Master’s cooking is *always* tasty!》 bragged Sui.

《And he feeds us meat all the time, even in the mornings! It’s the best,》 noted Dora-chan.

“Oh? So the feast begins first thing in the morning? Becoming your familiar might just be the best choice I’ve ever made!”

“He’s exaggerating, really! I only feed them meat in the mornings because they throw a fit if I don’t!” I quickly clarified. *I preferred my breakfasts on the light and simple side and always made something totally different for myself, for the record. And speaking of cooking...* “Anyway, it’s weird—it felt like making the karaage today went way quicker and easier than it usually does. Like, I could’ve sworn I’m not usually *that* efficient when I cook! Am I just imagining things?” I asked.

“I assume you just leveled up,” suggested Gon offhandedly.

“I know this might make me sound like a bum, but I didn’t do *anything* that would’ve made my level go up during our second trip into the dungeon,” I admitted. “You were there, Dora-chan—there’s no reason why I’d have gotten any experience from all that, right?”

《I guess not, when you put it that way. You basically just picked up the

drops.»

“Right? And you don’t level up if you don’t fight, so...”

“Then maybe you’ve earned yourself some sort of title,” suggested Gon. “I can’t explain why, but every once in a while I have so-called ‘heroes’ seek me out. One of those heroes had quite the story, see...”

Gon recounted how the hero in question had declared that Gon was a “foul wyrm” who was in need of “slaying.” Gon had gone out of his way to explain that he was an ancient dragon, but the hero just wouldn’t listen. Eventually, Gon got frustrated with his nonsense and brought their exchange to a less-than-amicable end. In his own words, “That a puny little human would dare to stand against me *was* worthy of praise, at least. I could have ended him with a single claw, of course, but the futility of his courage struck me as so tragic that I simply beat him to within an inch of his life instead.”

From the hero’s perspective, his loss was apparently quite the unexpected development. Supposedly he started ranting and raving—“But I’m the *hero!* I have the title and everything! It boosted *all* of my stats! I’m the most powerful being alive, so why can’t I beat you?!”

Gon, of course, had no reason to put up with any of that nonsense and flew away without another word, but the obnoxious little hero had stuck in his memories, and made him wonder if I’d received a similar sort of “title.”

“Hmm, interesting!” I said when he was finished.

“Ah, yes, I knew it—you really do have a title!” Gon noted.

“Oh, right, I forgot you have appraisal for a second,” I said. “Wait...I *do*?! But I didn’t see anything when I checked my stats just a little while back!”

I quickly checked my status again.

【Name】Mukohda (Tsuyoshi Mukouda)

【Age】27

【Race】Kind of Human

【Title】The Solitary Chef

【Job】Cook, Adventurer (Alleged), Victim from Another World

【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, Ancient Dragon (300-Year Limited Contract)

【Unique Skill】 Online Supermarket

《Tenants》 Fumiya, Liquor Shop Tanaka, Matsumura Kiyomi

【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 *Solitary Chef*?” Excuse me? What is that supposed to mean? I poked the title on the semi-translucent screen my status was displayed on, and another window opened up explaining it in more detail.

【The Solitary Chef: A title awarded to those who cook an astonishing quantity of gourmet food single-handedly. Boosts the speed and efficiency of the bearer’s cooking substantially, as long as they cook alone.】

Woohoo! It boosts my cooking speed, and substantially at that? I’ll be cooking so much faster from now on! This is great...not! And wait, when did “Chef” get moved to the top of my jobs list?! What’s with the “Alleged” after Adventurer?! I’m registered with the Adventurer’s guild and everything, dangit!

“Why the hell would anyone want a title like *that*!?” I wailed, my voice resounding fruitlessly throughout the bathroom.

Chapter 6: With Treasure to Spare

The next morning, my quartet of gluttonous familiars stuffed their faces over breakfast, then retired to the living room to laze about like a bunch of overfed sloths. They'd demanded meat first thing in the morning, of course, so I'd made a bunch of gigant minotaur beef bowls, once again taking note of how the process of making them went *way* quicker and smoother than it ever had before. I knew that my newfound efficiency was probably thanks to the Solitary Chef title I'd picked up, but that in turn meant that whenever I noticed how fast I was working, it made me think about the whole title thing, so suffice to say, I had some complicated feelings about it.

I'd used a bottled sauce mix to make the beef bowls, so it wasn't like it was a super complicated or time-consuming recipe to begin with, but while I was slicing up the meat and onions, I definitely noticed that my knife skills had improved dramatically. I was honestly kind of amazed with myself, painful as it was to admit it. *The Solitary Chef. Man. That sure is a title, huh...* The perks were great, though, so I decided to just suck it up and focus on the bright side.

"Well, that put me in a crappy mood." I sighed to myself. "Think I'll sort through all our drops for a change of pace."

I opened up my Item Box and started pulling out the items we'd obtained over the course of the dungeon. "Okay, a zlatorog pelt, a hoof, and a magic stone... Right, I almost forgot that we got our hands on *another* one of these pelts." I had three of them in total now, and each one was so fabulously valuable on its own that selling it off would be a trial...which was unfortunate, since I didn't have any other use for them. According to Tristan, they were just too expensive for the Adventurer's guild to touch them.

Guess I might as well send them off as a gift to a king, or something? Actually, if I'm going to that much trouble, I could send one to the king of Erman and another to the king of Leonhardt. These two countries are basically our main area of operations at this point, so it can't hurt to be on their good sides, and they have given us all sorts of accommodations so far.

Though on the other hand, would sending them both the exact same gift come across as kinda boorish? I'll have to ask Tristan for advice.

"Whoops—can't let myself get bogged down thinking about that kind of stuff, or I'll never finish! Let's see here...we'll eat all these violetberries ourselves, so no point putting them on the list. Next up's the poison vultures' magic stones... Oh, jeez, we've got a ton of them! One, two, three, four, five..."

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"All right, finally done!"

I'd made a point of only picking up items that seemed significant this time, so sorting through them all was a much quicker process than it had been after our first expedition. I *had* really taken my time, though, sipping a cup of coffee and not stressing too much about my pace. I'd also made lunch for everyone halfway through, so in the end I spent pretty much the whole day on the task anyway. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui had all retired to the living room for a nap after they ate, by the way.

As for the items themselves, the list of all our finds from the fortieth floor to the forty-seventh read as follows:

Zlatorog pelt x 1, zlatorog hoof x 2, zlatorog's magic stone (huge) x 1, poison vulture's magic stone (tiny) x 117, giant sand scorpion stinger x 32, giant sand scorpion's magic stone (medium) x 14, sandworm tooth x 39, sandworm's magic stone (large) x 18, death sidewinder skin x 48, death sidewinder venom sac x 28, death sidewinder's magic stone (large) x 22, sand golem's magic stone (medium) x 11, apеп skin x 1, apеп venom sac x 3, apеп's magic stone (huge) x 1, ammut pelt x 1, ammut's treasure chest x 1 (contains one huge azure diamond), ammut's magic stone (colossal) x 1, giant snowy horn rabbit pelt x 88, giant snowy horn rabbit horn x 52, giant snowy horn rabbit's magic stone (tiny) x 12, snow cuckoo beak x 66, snow cuckoo feather x 24, snow caribou antler x 6, snow caribou pelt x 10, snow caribou's magic stone (small) x 13, snow panther pelt x 8, snow panther's magic stone (medium) x 8, giant snow tiger pelt x 5, giant snow tiger fang x 4, giant snow tiger's magic stone (large) x 6, yeti's magic stone (huge) x 1, boss yeti's treasure chest x 1, Cloak of the Yeti x 1, ice dragon skin x 1, ice

dragon eyeball x 1, ice dragon liver x 1, ice dragon fang x 1, ice dragon's magic stone (colossal) x 1, black dragon skin x 1, black dragon claw x 1, black dragon cursebone x 1, black dragon's magic stone (colossal) x 1

And then there were all the items in Gon's hoard:

Gold ingot x 132, ruby (large) x 18, sapphire (large) x 15, diamond (large) x 16, emerald (large) x 13, opal (large) x 20, amethyst (large) x 21, aquamarine (large) x 19, diamond ring x 4, diamond brooch x 5, diamond necklace x 3, diamond tiara x 2, sapphire ring x 3, sapphire necklace x 2, sapphire bracelet x 3, sapphire earring x 3, sapphire tiara x 1, ruby ring x 1, ruby necklace x 3, ruby brooch x 1, ruby earring x 2, emerald ring x 3, emerald necklace x 1, emerald tiara x 1, emerald earring x 2, emerald brooch x 2, opal brooch x 6, peridot bracelet x 2, peridot earring x 3, aquamarine tiara x 3, alexandrite brooch x 1, tanzanite necklace x 1, Ring of Antidotes x 2, Necklace of Antidotes x 1, Ring of Protection x 2, Necklace of Protection x 1, Ring of Magic Recovery x 2, Ring of Gales x 3, Ring of Infernos x 2, magic bag (medium) x 2, magic bag (large) x 1, Hrunting, Gram, Eckesachs, etc.

Gon, it seemed, had amassed a large—some might even say *too* large—pile of loot over the course of his several century on-and-off slumber. All of the gems in his loot pile were on the heftier side of things, and some of the pieces of jewelry had even *more* big gems embedded in them, while others had incredibly intricate designs! And those were only the ones that had caught my eye—there were a ton of other slightly less finely-crafted pieces that I hadn't even bothered listing. I had to wonder just how many black dragons Gon had obliterated over the course of those two hundred years. I actually started feeling a little sorry for them as I compiled my list, even.

In any case, though, my inventory was complete! I'd be stopping by the Adventurer's guild tomorrow, as promised, but I had to wonder just how many of the drops they'd be willing or able to buy this time. Oh, and as far as I was concerned, the magic swords were still on ice indefinitely, so I omitted them from the list I'd be handing over to Tristan. They were *not* the sort of thing you could casually admit you were hauling around to just anyone.



“An absolute *pleasure* doing business with you, really! I can’t thank you enough!” said Tristan as we wrapped up our transaction. We’d gone to visit the Adventurer’s guild the next day, as planned, and had once again been led to the storehouse on account of my familiars’ size.

The sale of my drops had gone quite smoothly this time around. It seemed that Tristan had requisitioned quite a solid chunk of funding after witnessing the sheer size of our last dungeon haul. He paid in cash with an eager grin, and seemed very satisfied with his purchases, even as he was openly terrified of Gon.

“You really are one hell of a guy, I gotta say. I’ve *never* seen anyone bring home a haul like this before,” Bartolomeo commented as we wrapped up our talk. It seemed that Tristan had asked him to sit in, possibly because he was too scared of Gon to be in the same room as him without backup.

“Yeah, I’ve, uhh, just got an excess of firepower on my side, that’s all,” I awkwardly explained. “That, and most of the jewelry you bought wasn’t really from my drops. It all came from Gon’s hoard. Oh, that’s the ancient dragon, by the way.”

“Those stupid black dragons kept kicking up a ruckus while I was trying to sleep,” said Gon. Bartolomeo and Tristan were the only ones in the room, so I’d given him the go-ahead to speak out loud. “I couldn’t even begin to guess how many I crushed! Brainless lizards, the lot of them. I wasn’t lacking for food thanks to them, though, so I suppose it wasn’t all bad.”

Gon had explained that he’d eaten the meat that the black dragons dropped while chucking the skins and fangs, and everything that had either been in a treasure chest or that had just looked shiny he just stashed away in his cave. He hadn’t done so *every* time, though—just when he felt like it, apparently. Considering how much stuff he’d managed to amass despite not even storing all of the drops he could’ve grabbed, I could only imagine how many black dragons he’d slaughtered over the years.

Tristan and Bartolomeo’s expressions both stiffened up as they heard Gon speak. “In any case,” said Tristan, “everything you’ve brought to us is of the highest quality, and we couldn’t be more grateful!”

I was just as grateful to him, frankly. Tristan had bought up a huge percentage of the items I brought to him this time, most prominently from my

selection of gems and jewelry. I had no interest in that sort of stuff, so it would've been a total waste for me to keep holding onto them. He'd also bought up all the large-sized and smaller magic stones, plus all the pelts from the giant snowy horn rabbits, the snow caribou, and the giant snow tigers. He'd happily explained that it was virtually unheard of to obtain the pelts of animals that only lived in frigid climates.

After a lot of thought and some hesitation, he had also bought the ice dragon eyeball. He *wanted* to buy the liver as well, and had done a lot of muttering about how it would be *such* a waste to let it go, but a pointed comment from Bartolomeo about their budget was all it took for him to abandon the idea. He'd gotten *very* excited about them when he first saw the list and had insisted that he just had to have them—apparently, dragon materials were so rare it was quite possible he'd never get the chance again.

He'd gone through the jewels and jewelry after that, choosing to buy all of the gold bars and large gemstones. He'd also snapped up all the magic bags, and an assortment of the smaller, less valuable jewelry. He'd *desperately* wanted the finer gem-studded and intricately crafted stuff as well, not to mention all the magical trinkets, but his wallet wasn't quite bottomless enough to allow him to go that crazy, it seemed.

Out of everything that I'd brought back with me, though, Tristan was especially regretful to let one item in particular pass him by. "It's *beautiful*," he sighed. "I've never seen anything that glimmers quite like it!"

The item that had him so spellbound was the azure diamond that the ammut on the forty-fourth floor had dropped. I had a feeling it was the sort of gem that could be more trouble than it was worth, and I'd been hoping he'd take it off my hands right away, but between how rare diamonds of its like were and how huge this particular specimen was, he'd reluctantly explained that he'd never have any hope of being able to justify its purchase. It was another zlatorog pelt, basically. He *technically* had the money to buy it, but that would mean being unable to afford the vast majority of the other stuff he wanted to purchase.

"For the love of the gods, man, just let it go already! Can't you see Mukohda's sick of this?" snapped Bartolomeo.

Tristan jumped with surprise, then handed the azure diamond back to me. "Oh, I'm so sorry! It was just so spectacular, I couldn't help but stare," he explained.

I returned the diamond to its case, then popped it back into my Item Box. Tristan kept a *very* close eye on my hands as I did so, and the longing in his eyes made me conclude that the bit in its description about somebody razing a country to get one might not've been an exaggeration after all. I really, *really* wanted to be rid of that thing as soon as possible.

In any case, the two of them got the funds to pay me for my sale ready in short order. "Now then, your total today comes to fifty-five thousand gold coins. We've prepared your payment in platinum again this time, of course!" said Tristan as he plopped three bags onto the table with a massive thud. "I have to say, I'm *very* satisfied with our purchase! You've brought us so many goods, and all of them are at the absolute pinnacle of quality! I couldn't be happier! Feel free to confirm your payment," he added with an elated grin.

They'd told me how much I'd be paid after Tristan picked out all of the items he wanted, so I'd been *sort of* prepared, but seeing that much money in front of me was still sort of terrifying somehow. I gulped, then started carefully counting up the platinum coins. *Three, three, four, ten! Three, three, four, twenty, three, three, four, thirty...*

Finally, I was finished. "That's five hundred and fifty platinum coins, all right," I confirmed.

"An absolute *pleasure* doing business with you, Mister Mukohda, truly!" said Tristan. "Once again, I'm quite confident that every item you've provided to us will be gone within a day of us putting it up for sale! Bwaa ha ha ha ha—and of course, just getting the chance to lay eyes upon the truly priceless items you've obtained was *most* exciting—err, enlightening, rather!"

Bartolomeo rolled his eyes. "Quit cackling like a madman, *please*. Though I'll admit, seeing treasures like these *is* a rare treat. I used to be an A-ranker, and I've never seen the likes of most of the drops you brought back with you. This was a learning experience, for sure."

G-Great, I guess? Good for you, seriously. Actually, wait—this might be the perfect time to check about those gifts! Getting Bartolomeo's opinion along with Tristan's felt like it could prove useful, so I asked what they thought about my idea to send the kings of Erman and Leonhardt presents.

"It's not like it would be a huge hassle for me, and I figured that showing them a little consideration like that could convince them to make my life easier in the future," I explained.

“Yes, I suppose that *is* plausible,” said Tristan with a nod.

“True ‘nuff,” concurred Bartolomeo.

I explained that I was just operating off my past experiences, really, and that after I’d sent the king of Leonhardt gifts before, he’d made a lot of allowances to let me enjoy my time in his country without any outside interference. “So, what I was hoping to ask about is what sort of item they’d be happy to receive. I have three zlatorog pelts, and I thought about sending one to each of them, but then I realized that giving two of the same gift might look tacky.”

“Yes, I advise against offering them both the same gift,” Tristan immediately confirmed. He explained that kings were, in essence, the absolute top of the upper crust, and that like any other member of high society they greatly valued the uniqueness of their most expensive acquisitions.

“Okay,” I said, “then what do you think of this? I’ll send the king of Erman a zlatorog horn, and three rings—one diamond, one ruby, and one sapphire. Then I’ll send the king of Leonhardt a zlatorog pelt, plus a diamond necklace and a ruby necklace. Think that would go over well?”

I figured that a spread like that would keep them from taking offense at the other getting more or better gifts. I’d technically be sending more jewelry to the king of Erman, but since each necklace had more gems in them than the rings did, it all balanced out in terms of value.

“The zlatorog horn and pelt are a good idea,” said Tristan, “but I would recommend against that particular selection of jewelry. The *queen*, after all, is the one who would likely end up wearing it, so I believe it would be more appropriate to offer a variety—say, a single ring, necklace, and earrings. I also believe that giving each of them items made using the same sort of gemstone would be most appropriate—a ring, necklace and diamond all inlaid with diamonds, for instance.”

Oh, that makes sense. He had a point—even if I sent three rings, most people would only wear one of them at a time, but if I sent a set of three different pieces of jewelry, the queen would be able to put them all on at once and dazzle whatever social event she wore them to.

“Of course,” Tristan continued, “all of the items you’re considering giving them are incredible pieces. I’ve no doubt that they would draw a great deal of attention in the nobles’ social circles, so I’m quite certain the queens of both

nations will be *very* pleased with anything you send them.”

Yeah, that makes sense too. I knew that the wife was the *real* head of the household for plenty of families, so I’d thought that sucking up to the queens a little as well wouldn’t be a bad idea, and it seemed I wasn’t wrong.

“I’ve got a thought for you too,” said Bartolomeo. “I figure you might wanna send the king of Leonhardt a diamond necklace, not a ruby one. You said you sent him a ruby pendant already, right? Well, I bet he’d be happier to get something new than to get what’s basically a repeat.”

Oh, yeah, great point! I was impressed that he’d thought it through that carefully. I hadn’t really considered that a pendant and a necklace would feel like the same general sort of gift, but when he put it that way, he was absolutely right.

“Hmm, in that case,” I said, then kept proposing different assortments of gifts until, with Tristan and Bartolomeo’s help, I finally settled on my final arrangement. I’d send the king of Erman a zlatorog horn and a sapphire ring, necklace, and earring, while I’d send the king of Leonhardt a zlatorog pelt plus an emerald ring, necklace, and brooch. Tristan agreed to take custody of the items meant for the king of Erman, and to deliver them for me as soon as he could.

Having that matter resolved was a real relief, and I thanked the two of them profusely. Then, with my business concluded, I departed from the Adventurer’s guild.



With selling my drops out of the way, I decided to spend the next day taking it easy. It was a lovely day out, so Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, Sui, and I decided to spend some time hanging out in the garden. By “hanging out,” of course, I mean “napping on the lawn” for three out of the four of them—Sui was the only one who spent any time frolicking instead of just passing out, and even it ended up fast asleep before too long, using Fel’s fuzz in lieu of a bed. I had spent a fair amount of time playing along with Sui, so I was a little tuckered out as well.

All told, I found my attention occupied less by my familiars and more by the near-constant stream of rubbernecks who passed by the house I was renting. *Somebody* must have noticed us out in the garden and started a

rumor, and it had clearly spread at record pace, because it wasn't long before the onlookers started piling up. It would've been laughable if it wasn't so awkward, honestly, though that went both ways—judging by the looks on their faces, the curious spectators found it kinda awkwardly amusing to see great and mighty creatures like my familiars napping away in the middle of town without a care in the world.

I couldn't spend the whole day lazing about, though. I had to pay the Adventurer's guild one more visit, and I brought my familiars along for the trip. My objective: to gather information! My charity efforts back in Hirschfeld had worked out pretty well, as far as I was concerned, so I was planning on repeating the process here in Brixt, and that meant I had to do some digging on any local churches and orphanages.

Tristan was free to meet with me, thankfully, and provided plenty of useful information when he wasn't too busy being terrified of Gon to bring himself to speak. "Charity, you say? That's admirable of you, mister Mukohda, truly admirable! Brixt is one of the largest cities in the nation, second only to the capital, so we do, of course, have a wide variety of temples available, some of which have orphanages associated with them. Their size and funding varies quite a bit depending on the number of followers their faith boasts, but all of them are, broadly speaking, impoverished to some degree or another. All of them except for *one*, anyway," Tristan added with a scowl.

That one exception, it seemed, was the Church of Rubanov's local branch. I'd heard plenty about them in the past—their faith was notorious for its human-supremacist ideals. It seemed that Tristan had never been a fan of how they did things, and he was perfectly willing to relay all the most unsavory rumors about them to me without sparing a single distressing detail.

For starters, it seemed that the Church of Rubanov was directly and amply funded by the nation of its origin. Its clergy lived lifestyles that one would never even dream of describing as humble—their lodgings were downright luxurious, from the way Tristan told it. There were also never-ending rumors of less than savory sorts getting involved with the church out of a desire to claim a piece of that excessive state funding.

The worst of those rumors involved the slums in the eastern sector of Brixt. Supposedly, individuals associated with the Church of Rubanov had been abducting the vagrants who lived there, forcing them into servitude, and

selling them off as slaves to buyers in foreign countries. Their operation had proven difficult to track down, but Tristan at least claimed to be ninety percent certain that the rumors were all true.

“The Church of Rubanov preaches an ideal of human supremacy, so it goes without saying that they consider the beastfolk, elves, and dwarves that live in our fair nation to be inferior,” he explained. “As you might expect, though, a philosophy as openly intolerant as theirs stands out in a bad way in a nation like this one that champions equality for all. There are hardly any followers of Rubanov in the whole city as a result.”

Indeed, it seemed the local branch of their church wasn’t staffed by locals at all, but rather by followers of the faith who had been sent out from other countries. Even then, their local population was remarkably low.

“And yet in spite of their failures, in spite of our citizens knowing better than to listen to them, *still* they insist on proselytizing their human supremacist tripe. I’d drive them away in a second, if I only had the means!” Tristan ranted. I was sort of shocked to see him get that openly upset—it felt a little out of character.

“Umm, Tristan...?” I said, trying to catch his attention and calm him down.

“Ah! My apologies,” Tristan said, dropping back into his usual tone. “I’m afraid I let myself get carried away, didn’t I? My great-grandfather, you see, was a dwarf. He passed away before I came of age, but I remember him well. He was a fearsome man, stone-faced and ready and willing to mercilessly berate anyone who *dared* breeze through their work half-heartedly. To *me*, though, he was just a kindly old man and a caring, compassionate part of my family,” he explained.

As Tristan told me about his great-grandfather, his expression slackened into a happy, nostalgic smile, but suddenly, it stiffened up into a scowl once more. “The Church of Rubanov would have you believe that my great-grandfather was *inferior* to them. That is a stain upon his memory that I find simply intolerable.”

Yeah, that explains a lot. The fact that he had a dwarven relative made it easy for me to understand why Tristan would feel so strongly about the church’s discriminatory practices. I mean, *I* didn’t have any non-human relatives and I was still extremely leery of them on the whole. Needless to say, we agreed that donating to *them* was off the table, though frankly, I

wouldn't have even considered doing so whether we'd had this conversation or not. I'd sooner literally dump my money into a storm drain.

"This has been really helpful! Thanks," I said once Tristan finished giving me the lowdown on the local churches.

"I'm happy to be of service!" said Tristan with a smile. "And as far as the Church of Rubanov is concerned, I trust we have an understanding?"

"Ha ha, yeah, of course. I don't know what they'd use my money for, and I really don't want to find out."

"That's a relief! I'm glad we're on the same page."

"Oh, right! Before I go, I actually have one last question I'd like to ask..."



My familiars and I found ourselves walking along Brixt's main street. Plenty of people still stopped to gawk at Gon as he strolled past, but it seemed that the rumors about him had spread far enough that he wasn't causing a major commotion anymore, thankfully. The crowd *did* part in front of us as people rushed to give us a wide berth, though, and I felt a little conflicted on whether it was nice since I didn't have to deal with traffic, or awkward for, well, all sorts of reasons.

『Look, my liege, look! I want to try the meat they're selling over there!』 Gon suddenly piped up.

『**No, not that one. The meat from *that* stall has a much more succulent aroma,**』 said Fel.

『Has nobody else noticed the stew stall? Am I the only one who thinks it smells the best of all?』 asked Dora-chan.

『Sui wants to try *all* of them!』 our slime helpfully added.

『Great idea!』 my other three familiars agreed in unison.

In case it wasn't already obvious, my quartet of gluttons had set their sights on a portion of the street that had a number of food stalls set up, and were excitedly deciding what they wanted to try. I, on the other hand, just sighed. "You guys know we didn't come here to eat, right?" I asked.

『We know,』 all four of them replied at once.

"Of course, I sorta had a feeling you were going for something like this when you all decided to tag along," I admitted with a shrug. They'd been completely disinterested when I told them I was going to the guild for

information, but the second I mentioned hitting up the shopping district afterward, they were chomping at the bit to come with me.

My goal in the shopping district was to pick up some souvenirs for everyone back at home in Karelina. Lambert and I were business partners, so it just felt right to get him something, and I felt a little bad for leaving my home completely in the hands of my workers, so I wanted to pick something up for all of them as well. It *did* give me a chance to check out the stores too, which was a nice change of pace—it felt like I'd barely seen any of Brixt aside from the dungeon, much to my displeasure.

Of course, if I wanted to find the best stores, I knew I'd have to ask a local for advice. That was why I'd stayed behind to ask Tristan one final question—I'd asked him to point me toward any shops worth checking out, and he'd singled out one in particular for me to visit.

“This must be the place,” I muttered as I finally located the store he'd mentioned to me. According to him, if I was looking to get someone a souvenir that was unique to Brixt, then I more or less *had* to go with jewelry. The town was famous for miles around for the jewels and precious metals that adventurers brought back out of the dungeon, and a thriving jewelry trade had been built around that source of materials.

The shop Tristan had recommended was a place where I'd apparently be able to find reasonably priced Brixt jewelry that wouldn't be so excessively fancy it'd completely blow the mind of whoever I gave it to. It looked like a pretty small place, so I had my familiars wait outside and stepped in on my own.

“Welcome,” said the shopkeeper, who looked like a pleasant sort around forty-five years old, give or take. “Can I help you find anything, good sir?”

“Actually, yeah. I’m looking for some souvenirs,” I explained.

“Hmm, I see, I see! For your missus, I’m guessing?”

“No,” I sighed. *I definitely don’t have one of those. Tragically.* “They’ll be for my slaves, actually. Err, I mean, they’re *technically* slaves, but they’re more like one big family, honestly! They’re basically just my employees!” I quickly clarified.

“Oh?” the shopkeep said, raising an eyebrow. “You buy your slaves souvenirs? Aren’t *they* the lucky ones!”

“I’m glad you feel that way.” I sighed.

“So, what sort of budget are you looking at today?” asked the shopkeep.

“Umm, I guess somewhere between one gold and one gold, five silver each, or so?”

“Oh, *ho*? Is that *so*?” asked the shopkeep, eyes wide with shock. It seemed that was a pretty remarkable amount of money to spend on one’s slaves, but considering the windfall I’d just obtained, I wasn’t in the mood to pinch coppers.

I spent a while discussing my options with the shopkeeper, and finally decided on a set of souvenirs for everyone. I picked items out for the little girls—Selja and Lotte—first: hair clips decorated with rose quartz—a pink gemstone—and prehnite—a semi-translucent green gem. The colors of the gems looked cute in a way that seemed like it would really suit the two of them, so I had a feeling they’d be pleased with the choice.

Aija, Theresa, and Tabatha were all a little older, so I bought them brooches made with amethysts, peridots, and garnets, which were vibrantly colored purple, green, and red gems, respectively. I wasn’t really sure if a brooch would be Tabatha’s style, but supposedly she’d developed feelings for a certain gentleman lately, so I thought she might be interested in dressing up for a date in the near future. *Best of luck, Peter.*

That left the men and boys: Kosti, Oliver, Erik, Tony, Alban, Luke, Irvine, Peter, and Barthel. I decided to get all of them belt buckles decorated with gemstones. It took me quite a while to settle on those gifts, and the shopkeep was a big help in picking something out that a man would appreciate.

The buckles were designed to make the gems tastefully unobtrusive, which apparently made them quite popular with men across the board—I just hoped they’d be appreciated. I also went with dark, deeply colored gems like lapis lazuli, jade, and onyx, which would probably suit their tastes as well. I actually took quite a liking to the design myself, and ended up buying my own buckle with a slightly large piece of jade incorporated into its design. *I have the money, after all. Might as well treat myself sometimes.*

All told, my purchase came out to twenty gold coins in total, thanks in no small part to the shopkeep casually guiding me toward the slightly more expensive end of the spectrum on all the items I’d chosen. I handed over the money, had the gifts wrapped, and then went on my way to find Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all lying in wait outside.

《You’ve finally finished, my liege!》

《Now it is our turn to steer the course of this venture.》

《This city's huge, so it's gonna take a while to hit up *all* the food stalls!》

《Sui's gonna eat sooo much!》

“Huh? Wait a second—I told you guys that we weren’t here for the food, didn’t I?”

《Oh, never you mind the details!》

“I absolutely *will* mind the details, Old Man Gon! And hey, quit pushing me!”

《We shall visit the stall from earlier first. Let us away!》

“The stall from earlier? *Which* stall from earlier?!”

《Time to put this town to the test! We’ll see if it can satisfy customers of our caliber!》

“Why’re you acting like some sort of food stall snob, Dora-chan?!”

《Master, Sui wants meat! Let’s hurry!》

“Seriously, Sui, I never said anything about meat! That’s not the goal today!”

《Let’s go!》 all four of my familiars shouted in unison.

“Don’t I get a say in this?! Hey, guys! Come *on*!”

And so I was dragged into an extended tour of Brixt’s street food that lasted all the way until sunset.

Chapter 7: Giving Back to the City of Brixt

Our time in Brixt was quickly drawing to a close. The rental period for the house I was staying in was scheduled to end the day after tomorrow, after which I intended to head back to Karelina. Today, though, I'd be making use of the info Tristan had given me to visit the various churches and orphanages throughout the town. Tomorrow would be dedicated to reporting to the gods on my charitable activities, as well as taking care of their offerings.

Speaking of the gods, I'd actually gotten in touch with them the day before, and I could already tell that one of them was going to make her oh-so-divine self into a major timesink when the moment for offerings came around. I could hardly believe it was possible, but she'd become even more frighteningly passionate about cosmetics than ever since I got a drugstore as one of my Tenants. She also tended to put an incredible amount of effort into her research, and I knew she'd take literally hours to choose her items. I could see it coming from a mile away.

But anyway, the point was that I'd contacted the gods yesterday and arranged for them to place their orders with me this evening. I considered telling them about the donations I'd be making then, but given how long taking everyone's requests usually took, I decided I might as well wait until tomorrow when I was actually sending them their stuff to have that conversation. I was planning on getting all their stuff together in the afternoon, then sending it over in the evening. That *would* mean that a full day would pass between their requests and the delivery of their goods, and I just hoped they wouldn't get too impatient in the meantime.

When I'd contacted the gods last night, I had made sure to go out of my way to ask that they get in touch with me a little earlier than usual tomorrow, on account of a certain *someone* who would probably want to take her time sorting through her options. Most of them had immediately caught on to what I was getting at, but one of them had been violently opposed to the proposal.

Needless to say, the deity in question was a certain sweets-loving failure of a goddess. *She'd* wanted to get her order in and her delivery sent out as soon as possible, and I had to assume that she'd already eaten through her *last* order entirely. Thankfully, the rest of the gods had intervened, initially telling her to stop being such a brat and threatening to tell on her to the God of All Creation when that failed.

Between all those activities, I more or less had the rest of my time in Brixt scheduled down to the hour. Normally, I'd need at least a few days to prepare premade meals for the trip home, but this time Gon had confidently declared that with him around that wouldn't be necessary. According to him, he could easily get us all the way to Karelina within a single day. I assumed that meant he'd have us ride on his back, and I'd asked him if he was *really* sure he wouldn't drop me part way there, but he insisted that there was nothing to worry about. *I'm counting on you, Old Man Gon!*



“All right, looks like this is our first stop!” I told my familiars. We’d set out to visit the various churches I was thinking of making donations to. Our first destination for the day: a church dedicated to Agni, the Goddess of Fire. Fel had argued that Ninrir’s church should take precedence, but we had so many churches to hit up over the course of the day that I’d insisted that we start with the one that was closest instead.

According to Tristan, Agni’s church had the third largest congregation in Brixt. A lot of adventurers chose to worship her on account of her being on the relatively militant side of the pantheon, even if she didn’t go quite as far in that direction as Vahagn (who *did* actually have a church in Brixt, albeit a small one). The church’s associated orphanage trained its charges well, from the sound of things, and produced both talented fire mages (which seemed a little on the nose for a Goddess of Fire’s church, frankly) as well as skillful spearmen.

The church was big enough for Fel and the others to follow me inside, and as we stepped in I found that it was clearly quite old, but also well-maintained. A statue of Agni stood at the center of the church, but I didn’t actually see any clergy around—or any people at all, for that matter.

“Excuse me! Is anyone here?” I called out, but nobody answered.

《No one is here. Shall we set the money down and move on to the next one?》

“Look, Fel, just because we put off Ninrir’s donation doesn’t mean we can be slipshod about the other churches!”

《There are people over yonder, my liege! I can hear their voices,》 noted Gon, gesturing toward the right side of the church. I piqued my ears, and sure enough, a moment later I just barely managed to make out what sounded like children at play. We headed in that direction, passing through a doorway and stepping out into a large garden. There we found a large group of children swinging spears around with wild abandon.

“Focus on your footwork!” shouted an imposing woman who stood before them. “Make sure your stance is firm *before* you strike! You won’t slay any goblins with your knees knocking against each other like that, let me tell you!”

“Yes, Sister Corinna!” shouted the children in unison.

Huh? Wait, did they say “sister”? I thought she was a soldier, not a nun! Aren’t nuns supposed to be, like, nice and kindly and stuff? Thinking back on it, the clergy at Agni’s church in Hirschfeld had all been pretty well-built as well. She was known as a militant goddess, so maybe this sort of thing was just normal by her standards?

While I was mulling over the demographics of Agni’s followers, Corinna noticed me loitering around and called out to me. “Excuse me! Do you have business with the church?” she asked. There was a distinct glint of interest in her eyes as she looked at Fel and Gon, but she didn’t seem surprised and addressed me quite politely in spite of my unusual company. I could tell that she was no ordinary person.

“Umm, yeah. You see,” I began, then summed up my intention to make a donation to her church.

Corinna was all smiles as soon as she realized what I’d stopped by for. “I’ll summon the minister at once. Please wait just a moment!” she said, then raced off to find him—though not before stopping to bark orders at her kids. “Keep running through your drills while I’m gone! And no slacking off, or I’ll keep you thrusting those spears until you can’t hold ‘em anymore!”

“Yes, Sister Corinna!” shouted the kids. They were obviously keenly interested in my familiars, but they also weren’t about to disobey their instructor’s orders. Most of them ended up thrusting away with their spears

while keeping their eyes glued to us—or at least they did until another shout from Corinna turned them back to their drills for real. I watched them do their thing while I waited, and it wasn’t long at all before Corinna returned with a tall man who had silver-streaked hair and looked like he was in his mid-fifties.

“A pleasure to meet you,” said the man. “My name is Gregor, and I am the minister of this church.” He had the same sort of crisp, military-man posture as Corinna, and he was wearing a set of white robes with a flame motif sewn into the cuffs of the sleeves. If I hadn’t known in advance, I never would’ve guessed that he was a religious figure.

“Likewise,” I replied. “I’m an adventurer, and my name’s—”

“Sir Mukohda, yes,” said Gregor before I could even finish. “You’re the talk of the town, at least among certain circles.”

Oh, he knows about me already? I guess there are supposed to be a lot of adventurers who worship here. “Yes, that’s me,” I replied. “I explained this to Sister Corinna just a moment ago, but you see...” I told them about how I wasn’t *really* especially devoted to their goddess, but that I wanted to be of service to the community and especially wanted to help out the orphans however I could. The two of them expressed their enthusiastic approval of my charitable spirit, and I decided to move on to the main point. “So, uhh, sorry to do this in platinum, but here,” I said, passing three platinum coins over to the minister.

All of the orphanages in Brixt were affiliated with churches, so I’d decided to lump their donations together and give three hundred gold coins (or the equivalent in platinum) to each of them. I’d barely found any opportunities to spend my platinum so far, so I was glad to finally be able to get rid of some of them, even if only a very small number. *I think the only other place I’ve used them so far is charging up my Online Supermarket’s account. Ha ha ha...* I’d put two platinum into it quite a while back, and still had yet to run through that balance.

Corinna and Gregor gaped at the platinum coins, but they did a remarkable job of keeping their composure. They said their thanks in a very professional tone, then asked if I would like to take a tour of the church or the orphanage, which I politely turned down—after all, I had other places to be.

As we left the church, all of the priests and nuns present gathered up to see us off. “May the Goddess of Fire grant you her blessings,” they said as

we departed. *Thanks, but I already have one—well, a small one, anyway.* They stayed out there for quite a long time, as well—at least as long as it took for us to walk out of eyeshot—which put me in a pretty good mood. It felt like I’d actually contributed something to society, and I made my way to the next church in line with a spring in my step.

The next church on our docket was also the one that boasted the largest congregation in town (and in the nation, for that matter): the church of Kisharle, Goddess of Earth.

“Yup. Sure is huge, huh?” I commented. The building was just as big as I’d expected from the largest church in a major city, but its design was quite restrained and modest, considering. I could hear fervent prayers drifting out from within, so I decided to have my familiars wait outside this time to make sure I didn’t interrupt anything.

I walked inside to find a portly, jovial-looking old man with white hair in a plain brown robe watching over the worshippers. I assumed that he was a priest, and walked over to speak with him.

“Umm, hi! So,” I began, then explained everything about my intended donation and my desire that it be used to fund their orphanage. The old man—who really *was* a priest, by the way—grabbed both of my hands and thanked me over and over again. He was obviously moved by the gesture, while *I* was a little embarrassed by all the attention he was attracting toward us.

The old man brought me over to a corner of the church where I presented him with the three platinum coins. At that point he abandoned all pretense of formality and full-on hugged me, but I somehow managed to slip away from him and make my escape without too much trouble.

Our next stop was the church of Rusalka, Goddess of Water. Ruka’s church was the second largest in town, and was a stone structure that looked very old, but remarkably sturdy. It was built with an open design that made it look more like a classical temple than the churches I’d grown used to.

As I stepped inside, I noticed a passageway off to my left that led to a garden where a group of children seemed to be engaged in an open-air lesson. A nun was teaching them what I assumed to be an arithmetic lesson.

“A customer purchases one bag of wheat for five copper coins, and one

bag of potatoes for three copper coins. If they pay with one silver coin, how many coins do they receive as change?" the nun asked, then paused as her students started frantically counting on their fingers.

It was a really charming scene to witness, and I paused to watch for a moment. It wasn't long, however, before one of the kids noticed us, pointed, and shouted "Look! A wolf and a dragon!"

The nun looked over at us, and the blood drained from her face an instant later. She started to panic, while her kids went in the exact opposite direction and looked at Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui with open excitement in their eyes.

I let out a tired chuckle, then turned to the nun. "It's all right! They're my familiars," I called, then stepped out into the garden to speak with her. I noticed the kids' eyes following me as I walked over to her, so I paused to turn to them. "Hey, I need to talk with your teacher for a minute. Would you kids mind playing with my familiars until I'm done?" I asked. They didn't need any more encouragement than that. The children let out a shout of glee, then sprinted over toward the rest of my party.

《H-Hey! Surely you do not intend to force us to watch over these whelps?!》 Fel transmitted telepathically, his face twitching with indignation.

《R-Right, what he said! This wasn't part of the plan!》 added Dora-chan, who looked just as horrified as Fel.

《What? Surely you two can handle a human runt without lifting a finger. Why so flustered?》 asked Gon, who seemed to just be confused with what was happening.

《Wait a second, Gon!》 I shouted telepathically. **《What do you mean, 'handle' them?! You aren't allowed to attack the kids! Do you hear me?!》**

《It was a figure of speech! Don't you worry, I won't lay so much as a claw upon them.》

I sighed with relief. **《Okay, great. Anyway, I'm gonna go talk with the nun over there, so keep the kids company while we're gone.》** *Have fun on babysitting duty, guys!*

《There is *nothing* 'great' about this! I am *not* a provider of childcare! Agh, hands off me, you filthy little creatures!》

《Gah, stop it! No yanking my arms, kid!》

《They're...riding me? Do these children not fear dragons? Wait—ow! Do not yank on my wings, little ones!》

『Yaaay! Playing with everyone's so much fun!』

Sui, at least, seemed to be having a good time. *Always good to see kids being so happy and lively.*



Some time later, I returned to the garden. “Phew! Okay, guys, all done!” I announced.

A quick run-through of my usual spiel had resulted in the nun calling over the presiding minister, who I’d given my three-coin donation. I’d taken the time to emphasize that I wanted it used for the children’s sake, of course, and the minister had been deeply moved by the gesture. It seemed that the orphanage really was suffering from a severe lack of funding, at least up until now.

The two of them explained to me that with the children’s appetites being as hearty as they were, just feeding the kids was a constant struggle. They couldn’t let them go hungry, of course, which meant that the orphanage staff was forced to prioritize quantity over palatability. They’d been agonizing over the issue for quite a long time, and they were ecstatic to think that they’d be able to feed the children good food much more often thanks to my donation. That really made me feel like this had been worth the effort. I’d always been of the opinion that food was important—the more tasty food you ate, the better you felt and the harder you could work on the things you cared about.

With that, I’d wrapped up the donation and returned to my familiars, who I found *still* getting manhandled by the kids. Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan all looked absolutely spent, while Sui, in contrast, was in as good of a mood as I’d ever seen it in.

《L-Let it be over...》

《My liege...help us, please...》

《I can’t take any more of this...》

“You guys.” I sighed. The nun, meanwhile, took one look at their weary expressions and quickly set about gathering up the kids. Once my familiars were finally free of their pint-sized wards, they hustled me out of Ruka’s church on the double.

《I am exhausted,》 said Gon as we left. 《To think human runts would be that hard to handle...》

《Glad to see you’re finally up to speed,》 grumbled Dora-chan. 《I swear, human kids are straight-up demons.》

《Indeed, Dora has the right of it,》 said Fel. 《I would sooner face a *real* demon than subject myself to the whims of those children once more.》

“Oh, c’mon, it can’t have been *that* bad! You can put up with a few kids

every once in a while, right?"

«*Wrong!*» rang three very loud and very irate voices in my mind.

«*Sui had tons of fun! Sui wants to play with them again!*» rang out a fourth, significantly more upbeat voice. Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan all somehow looked even more tired than ever as they watched the slime happily bounce along ahead of them.

After the church of the Goddess of Water, it was finally time for Fel's long-awaited trip to the church dedicated to Ninrir, Goddess of Wind. Though the goddesses were said to have a comparatively greater number of followers than the gods on this particular continent, Ninrir happened to have the least among her particular subset. That was probably why her church was, to put it nicely, a little on the compact side of things. It wasn't *as* dilapidated as the one back in Hirschfeld had been, but it *was* small enough that I decided to leave my familiars outside while I went in.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" I called out as I walked inside.

Before long, a nun wearing a simple white habit emerged. "Yes? Is there something I may help you with?"

"Yeah, actually. You see," I began, then gave her the same donation spiel I'd given all the other churches so far.

A moment of shock later, the nun ran off to call over the church's minister. The minister himself arrived soon after, huffing and puffing his way onto the scene. He was a slightly overweight middle-aged man with remarkably small eyes and a kindly expression. He spent a moment panting, then finally addressed me between gasping breaths.

"I am...the minister...of this church," he said. "My name...is Eleuterio."

"And I'm an adventurer. My name's Mukohda," I said. "Nice to meet you."

"My associate has...explained the situation to me, but if possible..." Eleuterio huffed. He didn't have to say any more than that—I quickly summarized my offer to him, and noted that I wanted the money to be used for the sake of the children in their orphanage, if at all possible. This church was smaller in scale than the others, but it *did* have an orphanage associated with it nonetheless.

Eleuterio was all too happy to accept my offer. He explained that the church had been at a loss as to how to deal with the insufficiency of their resources to keep the orphanage running, and that they'd been particularly

desperate for food to feed the children in recent years. Here, too, they'd been forced to lean on quantity over quality as far as their meals were concerned, and nobody was happy with the unbalanced diets the children had been subjected to.

I was in firm agreement in that respect. Children had healthy appetites for a reason, after all. I handed over the three platinum coins, and Eleuterio told me that they'd be able to feed the children meat for the first time in ages thanks to my contribution. He was so moved he was practically in tears, and he all but begged me to accompany him to the orphanage and meet the children myself, but I politely declined the offer. As I made my way out of the church, Eleuterio and a number of the nuns followed along after me, thanking me over and over as I departed.

My next destination was the church dedicated to Vahagn, the God of War, though I wasn't entirely sure if "church" would end up being the right word for it. From the way Tristan described the place, it sounded more like a sort of commune, populated by Vahagn's followers. They supposedly valued strength above all else, and spent their days honing their bodies and skills together.

"I guess this must be the place?" I muttered to myself. The "church" had a set of big, heavy-looking doors, and I could hear grunting and shouting coming from the other side, along with the unmistakable clash of metal on metal—swords, or something like that, I assumed. "Excuse me—wait, whoa, these doors are as heavy as they look," I said as I slowly shoved my way inside...to find a fairly large group of stern-faced warrior types pointing their swords and spears directly at me.

I reflexively flinched back and raised my hands. "Whoa! I'm not an intruder or anything, I promise! I-I, uhh, heard that this was the Church of Vahagn? Am I in the right place?"

"We're no church," said one of them, "but if you're looking for the followers of Vahagn, you've come to the right place, yeah. Before we talk about that, what the hell're you trying to bring in here with you?" he asked, the look in his eyes betraying the fact that he was quite nervous.

"Oh! Uhhh, these are my familiars!" I said, gesturing behind me. "They won't do anything unless you try to hurt me, so don't worry about them!" Then I glanced over my shoulder and said, «You guys heard that, right? No

attacking them!» telepathically to my party members.

“Oh?” said another of Vahagn’s followers with a smirk. “So if we *do* try to hurt you, we get to fight with the Fenrir and the dragon back there?”

Wait, what? Is it just me, or are they thinking about picking a fight?! I was starting to consider submitting a complaint directly to Vahagn himself.

“Hmph! The God of War’s followers clearly have no sense of their own strength. Is this a church, or a circus full of fools?” commented Fel, out loud. I just knew he was doing it on purpose.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” said Gon, also out loud. “They have some guts to challenge the likes of us, I’ll admit! Guts, and nothing else.”

“What was that?!” shouted one of Vahagn’s followers. They were, it seemed, very easy to provoke.

“Fel, Gon, *please* stop making this more complicated than it already is!” I begged. I had already been racking my brain for a way to cool down the situation, and they just *had* to go and stoke the flames instead!

“*Silence!*” a shout suddenly rang out. I turned to look, and a moment later a tall, incredibly muscular man walked out of a building near the back of the compound. He looked like he was somewhere in his thirties, and the scars that peppered his face told quite the story.

“The Warmaster,” gasped one of Vahagn’s followers. The crowd parted as he walked toward us.

“The Fenrir and the ancient dragon are right. You wouldn’t stand a chance against them. Not even I would,” said the man they called the Warmaster. A stir ran through the rest of the crowd, and their shock shocked *me*. Had they *seriously* believed they could take on Fel and Gon? “Listen up, all of you,” said the Warmaster. “Judging your foe’s strength is one of the most important skills a warrior can possess, and every one of you needs to work on it! Now get back to your training!”

“Yes, Warmaster!” roared Vahagn’s followers in unison before they returned to their combat drills. *Wait, drills?! That’s supposed to be training?! They look like they’re actually trying to kill each other! What sort of crazy gladiatorial ring is this?!*

“So you’re Mukohda, the S-ranked adventurer,” said the Warmaster as he turned to face me. “I’d invite you inside, but we don’t have a room big enough for your familiars to fit in, so we’ll have to make do outdoors.”

He led me through a covered walkway to a garden just a short distance away from the training ground. A table was set up there, and we each took a seat on opposite sides of it.

“You’ll have to excuse how spartan our facilities are,” said the Warmaster.

“Oh, it’s not a problem at all, honestly!” I replied. “We’re sorry for distracting you while you were busy.”

“So, what brings you here?” he asked.

“Uh, right! You see...” One more run through the usual donation spiel later, and I had him up to speed. “I saw some kids out in the training yard—you’re taking care of them here, right?”

“Right,” confirmed the Warmaster. “We take the orphaned children of dead believers and kids who want to learn the ways of war into our custody, and the community raises them as our own.” It didn’t *quite* feel like they were running an orphanage, per se, but at the very least there *were* definitely little kids being raised here. I’d seen a few of them here and there in the training grounds earlier. “We’d be happy to accept your offer,” he continued. “Thanks.”

The Warmaster explained to me that the followers of the God of War were split up into a large number of small rival sects. This particular sect was mostly populated by former mercenaries and their children, and the Warmaster used to work as a mercenary himself.

“I grew up in a war-torn land. It wasn’t the sort of place you could raise a kid of your own in,” the Warmaster told me. It seemed that the facilities run by the God of War’s followers in the kingdoms of Erman and Leonhardt were created in part for the purpose of raising children whose mercenary parents couldn’t raise them personally. I was surprised to learn that no small number of mercenaries specifically sought them out for just that purpose, and I had to wonder why the mercenaries themselves didn’t stick around to live with their kids, but it seemed it wasn’t quite that simple.

“A mercenary born is a mercenary to the day they die. It’s in our blood—in our very marrow. A good fight’s the only thing that makes us feel like we’re really living,” said the Warmaster, a hint of melancholy creeping into his tone. I was starting to suspect that he still longed for that mercenary lifestyle himself, on some level. Not that I could relate. Like, at *all*. “Well, I say all that, but really, I and everyone I teach are all *former* mercenaries.

We're no slouches when it comes to combat, but there's just no market for mercenaries around these parts. Some of us scrape by as adventurers, but they're the exception to the rule."

He didn't say it out loud, but I could guess that fighting people and fighting monsters were on two very different levels. The Warmaster told me that a few of the War God's followers had gone on to become high-ranking adventurers, but by that point they were more or less living on their own, away from the commune. In the end, the only ones left here were either young adults or children, and that meant the commune had very few sources of income. They were running on a perpetual shoestring budget.

Okay, I think I get the picture. Their training regiment was impressive, no question, but the techniques needed for human-on-human combat were nothing at all like those needed for a human to fight a monster. I'd also come to realize that they weren't just a bunch of combat-obsessed fighters who were only here to sharpen their skills—they each had their own roles and responsibilities. *Hopefully someday all the different sects will be able to work out their differences*, I thought as I passed the Warmaster his three platinum coins.

The Warmaster's eyes widened. "That much? You sure about this?" he asked. I explained that it was money I'd just earned in the dungeon, so I felt like I had to give some of it back to the town, and he clasped my hands and thanked me over and over again. Having my hands held by a grizzled old warrior wasn't exactly my jam, but I forced a smile and accepted his thanks anyway.

"Going into that dungeon really can turn one hell of a profit, huh?" said the Warmaster after he finally let me go. "We owe our livelihoods to it as well. If only they'd stop with all the raiding and infighting back in my homeland, maybe they could make a living by delving into their dungeon as well," he muttered.

Fel, surprisingly, was the one to respond. **"Wait. There is a dungeon in your homeland?"** he asked.

The Warmaster seemed a little shocked by Fel suddenly speaking, but he was calm enough to nod and say "Yeah," and then tell us a little about the dungeon in question. "I come from a place called the Kingdom of Vondel. Well, it *was* called Vondel—the country collapsed ages ago. Point is, there was a dungeon there. Not many people knew about it, though, and with all

the fighting going on, barely anyone even went near the place.” He told us that even though the country collapsed, the region was still war-torn and he imagined the dungeon was probably still largely untouched.

I could tell just by looking that Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were already chomping at the bit to embark on a new dungeon adventure. “**Oh? An entirely untouched dungeon?**” said Fel. “**An amusing prospect indeed! Let us hear the details.**”

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Fel wagged his tail happily as he walked along ahead of me. Dora-chan was sweeping his about in the air as well, and Sui was hopping along with a happy little spring in its bounce, humming a tune that went something along the lines of 《Dungeon, dungeon, another dungeon!》

《**And a dungeon in a minor nation, unknown to all! This was quite the find indeed,**》 said Fel.

《Right?!》 agreed Dora-chan. 《I’m getting hyped for this!》

《Sui’s so excited!》 added the party slime.

What? Oh, no you don’t—don’t bother getting excited, ‘cause we’re not going! He said that region’s supposed to be in a state of constant infighting and small-scale warfare! I’m not going to a place like that no matter how much you guys beg me to! I resolved myself to ignore my familiars’ rekindled thirst for spelunking.

《You all venture into dungeons for fun?》 asked Gon, sounding a little surprised.

《**Indeed,**》 said Fel. 《**They are one of the few places one can find monsters that put up a fight, and those monsters often drop good meant when you slay them.**》

《When you put it that way, they *are* quite nice for killing time, and I’ve never lacked for a meal in a dungeon,》 Gon muttered thoughtfully.

Oooh, no. I do not like where this conversation’s going! You two know that you’re the only ones who’d ever view a dungeon as your own personal pantry, right?

《Yeah, dungeons *are* fun as hell,》 said Dora-chan.

《Yeah! They’re super fun!》 agreed Sui.

I guess loving dungeons is unanimous—but nope! Still ignoring them! I was not about to let myself get goaded into joining the conversation. I'd learned since the last time I was put in this sort of position—if I acknowledged what they were saying at all, I'd be dooming myself to exploring that dungeon someday, without fail. I was going to focus on my donations, and there was nothing they could do to convince me otherwise!

“Okay, guys, let’s head to the next church!” I said.

《Tch!》

Click your tongue all you like, Fel, I’m still not getting involved this time!

The next church we arrived at was, to my understanding, the Church of the God of Medicine. I'd never actually asked the gods I was acquainted with about their other divine brethren, so I wasn't totally sure if there even *was* an actual God of Medicine out there somewhere, but it seemed plausible enough that there would be.

Somewhat similar to Vahagn's followers' complex, this “church” was more like a commune that the God of Medicine's congregation gathered up at. Most of them were doctors, it seemed. According to Tristan, the majority of them were supposedly so fanatically devoted to their research they'd spend days on end working without so much as a break, and they had a reputation for eccentricity as a result. That being said, they'd also developed quite a few lifesaving potions, and were respected for their accomplishments.

Generally speaking, how effective a potion was could vary wildly depending on the skill of the potion maker who brewed it. The potions from the God of Medicine's church, however, were known for their remarkably consistent effects, and the Adventurer's guild reportedly placed orders with them quite regularly. They were an indispensable asset to the adventurers of Brixt, it seemed. They also sold potions to the general public, and had a small store set up to handle those sales. I had a feeling that the store would be the easiest place to handle my current business, so I told my familiars to wait for a minute and headed inside.

“Hello?” I called out as I stepped into the store.

“Yes, welcome!” shouted a young boy who was manning the counter on his own.

“Umm, hi! So, this is the Church of the God of Medicine, right?” I asked.

“We prefer to call it the administrative institution of the God of

Medicine's followers, but basically, yeah!" said the boy.

"Great! So, the thing is," I began, then gave my patented spiel to the young shopkeep.

"Seriously?! Thank you *so much!*" he exclaimed when I was finished. The boy was obviously delighted by the news, and told me that their research and potion development was always in need of extra funding, and that their organization solicited donations all year round. Medical science wasn't exactly very advanced in this world, and as a result potions were invaluable to all of its people.

The boy's eyes widened and his jaw dropped when I passed him the three platinum. He looked at me, then at the coins, then back at me. Finally, he took a deep breath, shouted "*Professooooor!!!*" at the top of his lungs, and took off at a sprint.

I, however, had already passed off my donation and didn't feel like sticking around for another extended conversation, so I decided to call it a wrap and move on to my next destination.

Our final destination for the day was another church-that-wasn't-a-church: the congregation of Hephaestus, God of Blacksmithing.

"So, am I the only one who thinks this is totally just a smithy?" I said as I looked at the building before us. I could hear the heavy clanging of hammer on metal, and I could feel the heat of who even knew how many forges from all the way outside. I timidly opened the door, and stepped inside to find myself surrounded by more dwarves than I'd ever seen in one place before. Skillful dwarven blacksmiths were hammering away at chunks of metal, and younger apprentice dwarves were trotting around here and there, doing the smithy's busywork.

Either nobody had noticed that I'd stepped into the smithy, or they had noticed, but none of them cared.

"Excuse me," I said, but my voice was drowned out by the ambient din and nobody seemed to hear me.

I took a deep breath. "*Hey! Excuse me!*" I shouted, which finally caught the attention of one of the nearby blacksmiths.

"What?! Can't'cha see I'm busy?!" snapped the dwarf with a pointed glare.

I decided not to hold his irritation against him and tried to move things

along. “Yes, I can see that, but I have something really important to tell you about!” I shouted.

“Oh, fer the—fine! Just sit’cher ass down and wait till I get to a stopping point!” said the dwarf.

I didn’t have much choice in the matter, so I settled down for a wait. It wasn’t long before Fel and the others started badgering me with telepathic messages about how hungry they were, but since this was our last stop of the day, I was able to talk them down until the dwarf finally finished up his work about an hour later.

“So, whaddya want?” asked the dwarf when he was done.

“Well, long story short,” I said, then gave him the spiel and offered him my donation.

“Keep it,” snapped the dwarf. Which, honestly, I really wasn’t expecting! “We’re blacksmiths! We *work* to earn our keep! We’re a business—nobody gives a business their money for free, and the God of Blacksmithing would be ashamed of us if we took your damn charity! But anyway,” the dwarf continued, his tone suddenly dropping into a more businesslike register, “you’re that adventurer with all the familiars, right? How ‘bout’cha buy one of our weapons? *That’d* be welcome, if you’re up for it!”

“You’ll sell stuff to me?” I asked.

“This is a store, ain’t it? Of course we’ll sell ’em to you! Adventurers are our best clients, y’know?”

The dwarf took me on a tour through the smithy, and I found myself ooh-ing and aah-ing in admiration of their work. They had it all—daggers, kukhris, short swords, claymores, shamshirs, bastard swords, rapiers, and that was just the stuff that I recognized in the sword section alone! There were all sorts of swords I couldn’t put a name to as well, plus spears, axes, and all sorts of other weaponry of all shapes and sizes. It was incredible, honestly. Incredible, yes...but the one problem was that I was already perfectly satisfied with the mithril sword and spear that Sui had made for me.

“Well? Really something, eh?” asked the dwarf.

“They are, yeah,” I said. “But, well, I’ve actually already got a mithril sword and spear, so...”

“*Mithril?*” said the dwarf, raising an eyebrow. “Lemme see!”

“Uh, sure, I guess.” I removed Sui’s custom-made mithril weapons from my Item Box and held them out for the dwarf to inspect. He took a very long

and very thorough look at both of them.

“*Masterpieces*,” he eventually said with an approving nod. “Dunno where you got your hands on these, but whatever smith made ‘em was a cut above us, that’s for damn sure. Goes to show you can never rest on your laurels. We’ve still got a lotta work to do before we can say we’re the best out there.”

“Ha ha, that’s, uhh...that’s great,” I awkwardly replied. I sure as hell wasn’t about to tell the poor dwarf that “the smith that made them” was a slime who was currently asleep in my shoulder bag. I was glancing around the store again in an effort to hide my discomfort when my eyes fell upon a certain item. “Is that what I think it is?” I asked.

“*This* is a magic iron warhammer, and it’s one that *I* made with my own two hands! Not a bad piece, eh?” said the dwarf proudly.

I knew it—it’s magic iron! I’d seen a warhammer just like it once before. Sigvard, a member of a party of adventurers called Ark, had been carrying one when I met them in the Aveling dungeon. I didn’t *want* to run into golems or gargoyles ever again, and even if I did I definitely didn’t want to *fight* them, but it occurred to me that if worse ever came to worst, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have at least one bludgeoning weapon in stock, just in case.

“I’ll take that, then,” I said, pointing at the warhammer.

“A fine choice,” said the dwarf. “It’ll cost you eighty-six gold.”

Needless to say, I handed him three platinum. “Keep the change. And if you can, use it to feed your youngest apprentices something nice.”

“Hmph!” the dwarf snorted. “Thanks for your business.”

I stored my new magic iron warhammer in my Item Box, then departed from the God of Blacksmithing’s shop.

“Okay, guys, wanna head home?” I said as I strolled up to my familiars.

《I hunger. We shall eat the moment we return.》

《I’m feeling some hunger pangs, myself.》

《Make that three of us!》

《Sui’s tummy is grumbling too!》

They weren’t kidding—I could hear their stomachs start rumbling up a storm the moment they realized we’d be eating soon. Even Sui woke up to chime in. Maybe it was too hungry to stay asleep?

“Ha ha, okay, okay! I think I still have some hamburger steaks I premade a while back in stock, so I’ll bring those out as soon as we get home.”

《Yay, hamburger steaks! Ooh, ooh, Master? Are there any with the white

stuff Sui loves inside?»

“You mean the cheese-stuffed ones, right? Yeah, I definitely made some of those.”

《Hurray!》

《What’s this? Cheese-stuffed whatsits?》 piped up Gon.

《Master makes these balls of meat with yummy, gooey white stuff inside, Old Man Gon! They’re really, really tasty!》

《Oh, *are* they, now? Then this will be a meal to look forward to!》

《The ones without cheese in ’em are pretty good too, though,》 noted Dora-chan.

『Yes, indeed. I am partial to the ones that are made solely of meat. Though of course, the cheese variation has its own appeal as well,』 added Fel.

“Don’t worry—I made them half with cheese, half without,” I said.

Fel’s eyes lit up. 《Hmph—I can wait no longer! Get on!》

And, to make a long story short, I was coerced into riding on Fel’s back.

“Felll, *no!* You can’t race through the city like this! *Stoooooop!*”

《This is hardly fast by my standards!》

“Your standards are *nuts!* Guys, please, say something!”

《This really isn’t that fast at all, though, my liege. I’m having no difficulty keeping up.》

《Yeah, and we’re hungry! Gotta get there fast!》

《It’s okay, Master! We’ll be home soon, and then we can eat!》

“Come *on*, guys!”

『Enough complaining! Silence yourself and hold on tight, or you will bite your tongue.』

“Feeeeeeeeel!”

I didn’t even want to imagine how many people witnessed the four of us rocketing through the streets of Brixton at superhuman speeds that evening.

Chapter 8: Extortion Is a Crime

A little while after breakfast the next day, while all of us were taking a moment to lounge about in the living room, I heard a knock at the door.

“Hmm? Who could that be?” I wondered out loud. I couldn’t remember making plans to meet with anyone that day, and got up to walk over to the door when I heard another knock. And another. A flurry of knocks—someone was really letting that door have it. “Yes, I’m coming!” I yelled. “Be with you in just a second!”

Is it someone from the Adventurer’s guild? It would’ve been totally understandable if someone had complained to them about Fel’s rampage through town last night, and I felt a little apprehensive about the potential consequences. “Sorry to keep you waiting!” I said as I opened the door.

“You *should* be!” snapped one of my visitors. There was a whole group of them, and the moment I opened the door, they flooded into the entryway uninvited. Whoever they were, they were wearing flashy outfits sewn with gold thread that just screamed “I’m rich and it’s very important to me that everyone knows it.” An equally large group of boorish-looking ruffian types filed in after them—bodyguards, I assumed.

I was too taken aback to do anything about their intrusion at first, but I quickly shook off the astonishment, and a wave of indignation followed soon after. “Hey! What do you people think you’re doing?! You can’t just barge into a guy’s house like this!” I shouted.

“Excuse me?” said one of the gaudily dressed men. “We’ve done you the honor of paying you a visit, and you’d receive us *outside*?! The nerve!”

I’d already been pretty sure these people were bad news, and that settled it for me. *Time to call for backup.* 《Hey, guys?》 I telepathically called out to my familiars. 《Come over here, stat! We’ve got weirdos in the entryway!》

It didn’t take them long to show up. 《Who are these people?》 asked Fel as he stepped into the entryway.

《And why’re they dressed like lunatics?》 added Dora-chan.

《No clue,》 I said. 《They just walked right in the second I opened the

door, though.»

«Oh, did they?» said Gon. «Without so much as asking? Our ‘guests’ have quite the attitudes!»

Fel, Dora-chan, and Gon all glared at the strangers, who seemed more than a little unsettled by their presence. “Wh-What are you thinking?!?” said one of them. “Do you mean to...to *threaten* us by bringing those filthy beasts out?!”

My familiars bristled. It seemed that getting called “filthy beasts” wasn’t something they were very fond of.

“They’re my familiars, and every one of them is an important member of my party,” I asserted. “And don’t even think about insulting them in front of me again! And besides, *you’re* the ones who barged into my house without an invitation, so you’re in no place to complain about anyone threatening you!”

The intruders’ faces turned a shade of red that complimented their sparkling-gold outfits quite nicely, actually. They also started screaming and squealing with rage, though, which was less nice. *What are these people doing here first thing in the morning? Who are they, and what is their problem?*

“The *insolence* of it all, the *insolence*! Have you any idea who we are, knave?!” squawked one of them.

“Actually, no, I don’t!” I snapped back. “And if anyone’s being insolent here, it’s definitely not me!” What could be more insolent than intruding into someone else’s house, after all? That was as rude as it could get!

“Grr!” another of them growled. “We are representatives of the Church of Rubanov, and *this* is the venerable Bishop of Brixt!”

Geh! Of all the groups that could’ve sought me out, it just *had* to be the Church of Rubanov. I had no clue why they’d be visiting *me*, though, and I really didn’t want anything to do with human supremacists like them if at all possible, so I decided to play it cool and speed the conversation along. “Oh, okay,” I said. “So, what do you want from me?”

“How *dare* you speak so flippantly to the Bishop!” snapped one of the Bishop’s flunkies.

“Now, now, no need to be hasty,” the Bishop himself said before turning to me. “You’ve made a number of sizable donations to the local churches of late, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, I did. What’s it to you?” I replied.

“Well, it seems that over the course of your charitable endeavors, it slipped your mind to pay our own church a visit! As such, we thought to save you some time and come to you ourselves,” the Bishop explained with an off-putting sneer.

So they’re just soliciting me for money, in the end? That’s all? And anyway, I didn’t forget to donate to them, I chose not to! Take a hint, please! I thought, then decided that if they weren’t going to read between the lines I’d just have to write it out in block letters. My irritation was starting to get the better of me, honestly. “I didn’t forget, actually,” I explained. “I didn’t pay you a visit because I had no intention of donating to your church.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh... Whaaat?!”

The Bishop shot me a sharp glare as his followers gasped and flushed red with rage.

“The Church of Rubanov’s doctrine disgusts me, and I have no intention of donating even a copper to you, now or *ever*,” I continued, driving the point home. The over-the-top theatrics of the Bishop’s followers’ anger escalated yet again in the background, but the Bishop himself had enough presence of mind to maintain *some* awareness of the dignity he was supposed to project. His face was flushed bright red too, of course, and his glare was as harsh as could be, but at least he wasn’t losing his mind or anything.

“Oh?” said the Bishop, his tone laced with pure, unmistakable rage. “So you would mock our church and belittle our faith? I hope you realize that we will not take such slander lightly,” he said, then shot the rough-looking bodyguards he’d brought with him a look. Their hands dropped to the hilts of their swords. It was a blatant threat—he was telling me that he could order them to cut me down whenever he wanted.

Wow. I’m almost impressed he has the guts to walk right into a guy’s house and talk like that. And hold up—this is just outright menacing by now, isn’t it? 《Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, Sui—if those people try to attack me, take them out,》 I transmitted to my familiars. 《Ah! But not, like, in the ‘kill them’ sense! I’ll have to report this to the Adventurer’s guild, so no murder!》

《There was hardly a need to specify. Should they attempt to lay so much as a hand upon you, they will live to regret it,》 replied Fel.

《They certainly will,》 said Gon. 《They really *must* be stupid, though, surely. It is *inconceivable* that they would be acting this way if they understood how powerful we are.》

『Yeah, if they're willing to take on a Fenrir *and* an ancient dragon, they're dumbasses for sure,』 said Dora-chan.

『Sui's not gonna let them get away with bullying Master!』

Listening to my familiars go off was almost enough to make me crack up in spite of myself. 『I know you guys could wipe the floor with them, but try to hold back at least a little, okay?』 I cautioned them. *All right—I should be okay now, even if those bodyguards do try something.*

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?” asked the Bishop. “If you donate the same sum to us as you did to the other churches—no, *twice* that sum—then I would be willing to turn a blind eye to your rudeness,” he added with a triumphant grin. It seemed that he’d misinterpreted my silence as I spoke with my familiars telepathically and assumed I was just too scared to speak.

“I think you have the wrong idea,” I replied. “I was just too fed up with you to *bother* replying.”

“What?! ”

“I tell you I won’t donate to you, and so you bring out armed thugs and ask again? I can take this as a threat, right? It really looks to me like you’re trying to extort me—you know that’s a crime, don’t you?” I asked.

At that point, the Bishop’s rage finally got the better of him. His expression twisted into an indignant grimace. “Your arrogance will cost you dearly, adventurer! Teach this miserable wretch a lesson!” he shouted to his guards, who drew their swords.

“Oh? You would dare bare your blades before us?”

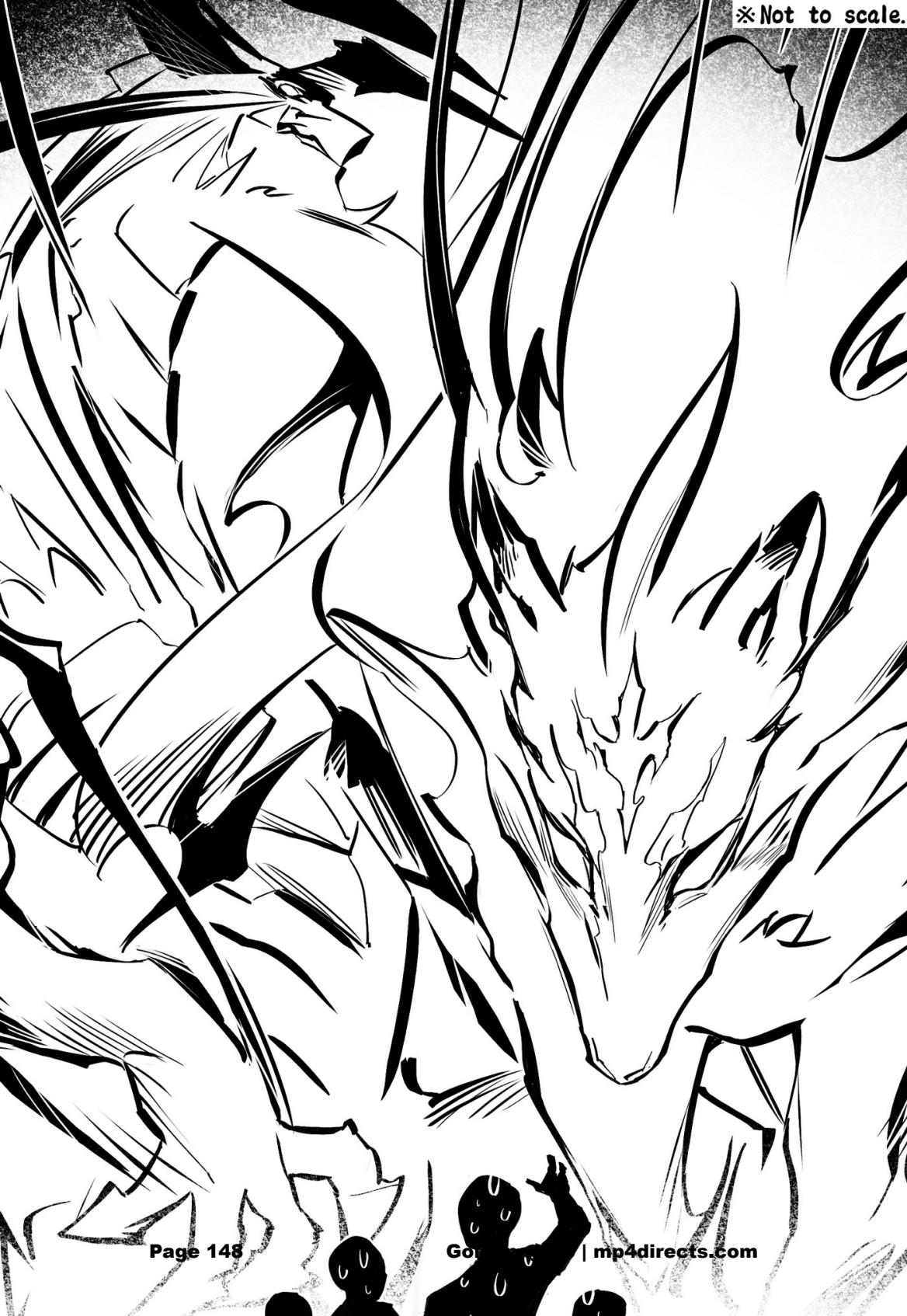
“Are you sure you’ve thought this through?”

Fel and Gon stepped forward, speaking out loud, and together with Dora-chan and Sui, they loomed over the Bishop and his minions and bodyguards. Said bodyguards instantly dropped their weapons and fell over on their backsides, while the minions dropped to the ground and started crawling for safety, shrieking with terror.

“Just so you know,” I said, my voice cold and uncaring, “my familiars don’t take kindly to anyone who threatens me. If you value your lives, I’d recommend you leave. Now.”

The Bishop and his crew staggered out the front door as quickly as their shaking legs could carry them. Before he left, though, the Bishop himself took one last moment to spin around and shout, “You will pay dearly for this

mistreatment, adventurer! Mark my words—you will *pay!*”



Wow, guy, way to make yourself into a small-time villain at the last second!

“What did those fools even come here for?” asked Fel.

“To extort money out of me,” I sighed. “Y’know how I made all those donations yesterday? They wanted me to donate to them too.”

『Wait, that’s not how it works, right? It’s not a donation if they *ask* you for it!』 said Dora-chan.

“Right?” I agreed. “But I guess those people—oh, they’re called the Church of Rubanov, by the way—thought that it was only natural for them to get a donation too. Too bad for them, though, since I don’t think there’s even a single thing I agree with them about, and I wouldn’t be caught dead donating to them. I’d sooner throw my money into a gutter drain than give it to those people, seriously!”

“Gra ha ha ha ha!” cackled Gon. “You hate them *that* much, do you?”

“I’m not even exaggerating, honestly. Anyway, I figure I should go tell the Adventurer’s guild about this. But, hmm...”

It seemed totally possible that the Rubanov gang would come back, and I knew it’d be a major headache if they vandalized the house in an act of petty revenge while I was out, or something along those lines. This was a rental, after all! I explained my worries to my familiars, and we decided that Gon and Dora-chan would stay behind to guard the place.

“Okay, we’re off! Thanks for watching over the house, Gon, Dora-chan.”

“But of course.”

『Bring us back some meat skewers!』

“We’re going to the guild, not going street-food shopping!”

“Meat skewers? A sound idea. One of the stalls we ate at last time was especially delicious.”

『Meeeat!』

Don’t jump on the bandwagon too, you guys! Come on! “Anyway, we’ll be back soon!” I said, then led Fel and Sui off to the guild.

I asked for Tristan when we got there, and when he arrived I explained everything that had just happened in as much detail as I could manage.

“Hmm,” he said when I was finished. “So the Church of Rubanov really went that far this time? This is a matter of the *utmost* importance...hee hee hee,” he giggled, a malicious grin spreading across his face. “Bwa ha ha ha ha! Oh, we’re going to give them *hell* over this one! As it just so happens,

Mister Mukohda, I was just about to set out for the capital to present your gifts to the king. Really, you couldn't have timed this any better!"

Wait, what's this about the king and the capital? What do the gifts I asked him to deliver for me have to do with this problem?

"Ah! No need for you to worry about anything, of course," Tristan continued. "I'll deliver a formal complaint to the Church of Rubanov on behalf of the Adventurer's guild as well. They'll be made fully aware that antagonizing you means making an enemy of the entire guild!"

"Great, thanks," I said, "but I'm actually scheduled to leave for Karelina tomorrow, regardless."

"Oh, yes! Of course," said Tristan.

"I'm planning on stopping in before I go, but just in case you're out then, thank you for all the help you've given me during my stay in Brixt."

"Think nothing of it! It's been a pleasure doing business with you, and if either of us owes the other thanks, you can be certain that it's me!"

"You're exaggerating," I chuckled. "But anyway, since we'll be heading out tomorrow, I don't think we have to worry about those people bothering us ever again."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," cautioned Tristan. "The Church of Rubanov does not deign to play by the rules of civilized society. You have to nip them in the bud swiftly, or there's no telling what they'll do! I doubt they'd dare to make an enemy of our whole guild, though...especially when they've just made an enemy of an entire *nation!* Bwa ha ha ha ha ha!"

That last comment was pretty unsettling, so I decided to pretend I hadn't heard anything and move along. *You know what they say about sleeping dogs.*



Man, nothing starts a day off wrong like getting visited by a bunch of obnoxious solicitors! What kind of religion makes up excuses to shake down strangers for money? That's what gangsters do, not bishops!

Just thinking about it was pissing me off all over again. That irritation had lasted all the way through my visit to the Adventurer's guild, and had yet to clear up as I prepared to deal with the gods' requests. I knew that I wouldn't be able to make it through a day like this without eating something nice, and I

decided that it was finally time for a recipe that I'd been going out of my way *not* to make up until now. It was a personal favorite of mine, but it was just so time-consuming that it usually didn't seem worth it: mille-feuille cutlets!

The only real difference between mille-feuille cutlets and ordinary ones is that you make them out of stacked layers of thinly sliced meat. The theory is simple enough, but that one extra aspect adds a lot more prep time than you'd expect, compared to regular cutlets, in return for making them taste way better. You could slip cheese or shiso leaves in between the layers to make them even more delicious, as well!

For better or for worse, I'd been granted the Solitary Chef title. The boost that it gave to my cooking speed and efficiency when I cooked alone seemed like just the thing for this recipe in particular. *Ha ha...great. Just great. Whatever, though! Let's make some mille-feuille cutlets!*

I decided to make just two versions this time: plain mille-feuille cutlets made exclusively of pork, and cheese ones. If I were just making them for myself, I would've gone with cheese and shiso, but Fel always complained when I didn't offer a meat-only option, so I was forced to shelve the shiso for the moment. Sui loved cheese, though, and the cheese ones were my personal favorite too, so it all worked out.

The first step was to buy all the ingredients except for the meat from my Online Supermarket. Though, really, all that I needed was processed cheese, eggs for the battering process, and panko. Once I had all of those on hand, I could get right to cooking!

I started out by slicing orc meat into thin sheets, lightly seasoning each one with salt and pepper. I stacked up ten slices for the standard version of the dish—I was of the opinion that this sort of cutlet was always better when they were a little on the thicker side. For the cheese version, I stacked up seven layers of orc meat with a slice of cheese in between each one. I always used the sort of processed cheese that comes packed in individual slices, myself—those made putting it all together way easier.

Next up was the batter! It was a simple mixture of flour, eggs, and water, though I had to take great care to make sure there weren't any lumps of flour left over after it was all mixed up. Cutlets are usually made using the three-step breading process, but I'd always felt that a thick coating of batter kept mille-feuille cutlets in particular from falling apart as I fried them, so I'd made a habit of breading them that way instead.

I heated my oil up to 170 degrees Celsius, then got to frying! The trick with cutlets like these is to not touch them at all until the batter's had the chance to harden up. Once it gets to that stage you can start flipping the cutlets, and keep frying them until both sides are a nice golden-brown. That's all there was to it—I just had to repeat that process over and over, stacking, frying, stacking, and frying again, until I had an enormous pile of mille-feuille cutlets all ready to serve.

“Phew! All right—I think that should do it!”



“*Mmmh!* Yes, these are *incredible!*” Gon exclaimed after just a single bite of the standard cutlets, which he'd seasoned with a generous dash of tonkatsu sauce.

“**Indeed, they are acceptable,**” Fel haughtily agreed after just one bite as well. The way his tail was wagging up a storm made it pretty clear how he *really* felt, though.

『It's crunchy and juicy, and this sauce ties it all together!』 said Dora-chan. I had to agree, and I'd had a feeling he would realize that was the secret to the dish. There was just something magic about tonkatsu sauce—sometimes the classics are classic for a reason!

『It's got lots of the gooey white stuff in it! It's delicious!』 said Sui, who was wobbling from side to side with glee. *Ever the cheese lover, that slime*, I thought. I had to agree with it as well, though—meat and cheese were a combination that was hard to beat.

I could feel myself starting to drool, and only then realized that I had to grab some for myself while I had the time! I took a big bite of one of the cheese mille-feuille cutlets. “*Mmmh, delicious!* This sort of cheese really does hit the spot sometimes!” I took a bite of rice next, which made the whole experience even better. Cutlets like these paired incredibly well with rice, and the pile of shredded cabbage I had on the side as a palate cleanser completed the picture. I was the only one who'd gone for the cabbage, incidentally, but it really was good, especially with a little of the sauce on it!

Ahhh, this is the life! I thought, then realized I'd forgotten something important: the perfect drink to go along with fried foods! I pulled a can of ice-cold beer out from my Item Box, cracked it open, and took a long draft.

“Ahhh, yes! Now *that’s* the stuff!” *You really just have to have a beer with fried food! This is so good, seriously—it was worth the effort for sure!*

“Seconds, now! The kind with only meat, for me.”

“Seconds for me too! I’ll have both types, though.”

《Both types over here too!》

《Sui wants more of the ones with the gooey white stuff!》

Yup, yup—coming right up! I piled up a plate to match each of my familiars’ orders. “Here you go,” I said as I served them up, then watched as everyone happily dug in.

I was starting to come around on the Solitary Chef title, at least a little. If it let me make food that everyone enjoyed *this* much, then maybe I could live with the implicit slight. It still got on my nerves a little, and part of me wanted to throw it right back in the universe’s face, but if I were being completely honest, it was just about the perfect title for someone like me.

“Man, though, mille-feuille cutlets really *are* the best,” I muttered. “Today was all sorts of awful, but this is so good I can’t even bring myself to care anymore!” I couldn’t help but smile as I saw how everyone was completely focused on their meals. Every one of us was enjoying the food and the moment for all they were worth.

“Tonight’s dinner was a cut above, my liege! I couldn’t be more satisfied!”

“Ha ha ha—glad to hear it!”

Our meal had put Gon in an incredible mood. I chuckled as I wondered if it was *really* appropriate for a bit of food to make an ancient dragon that happy—though of course, that ship had sailed a long time ago.

“Indeed, tonight’s dinner was thoroughly adequate,” said Fel.

“Oh, ‘adequate’ my rear,” I said. “Admit it—you thought it was delicious, right?”

“If you insist on putting the words in my mouth, I will not object,” said Fel. He just *had* to word his praise in the least complimentary way he could manage, and part of me wished he’d simply come out and say it when he thought my cooking was great more often. Of course, the fact that his tail made his opinions plain to see meant I never had to get *that* upset about it.

《Hey, how ’bout we go for some dessert tonight?》 suggested Dora-chan. 《Check it out—I’ve got a full mouth of teeth again and everything! It’s been

way too long since I've had any pudding!»

The little dragon opened his mouth up wide, showing off his razor-sharp teeth. I'd had a major shock about two weeks ago when most of those teeth had actually fallen right out of his mouth without warning! I'd thought that too many sweets was probably to blame at the time—we'd agreed on only two treats per day, but I'd caved to my familiars' demands and given them more a little too often for anyone's good. Anyway, for the sake of everyone's health, I'd decided that we should all hold off on sweets for a while.

Sui had been absolutely heartbroken, but I knew it was for its own good and forced myself to go through with it. Dora-chan, meanwhile, had insisted that he just had a new set of teeth growing in, and it's not that I *didn't* believe him, but I just couldn't help but feel that him pigging out on otherworldly sweets could have all sorts of unexpected consequences. We'd been holding off on sweets ever since, and it wasn't surprising that the urge to break our sugar-fast was finally getting too strong for him to resist.

«Sweets! Sui wants to eat cake!» shouted Sui, who had the biggest sweet tooth of all of us. I could only imagine how much it had missed its beloved cakes. Fel hadn't complained too much, at least—carnivore that he was—but I knew that if I offered sweets to him he'd accept them without hesitation.

Hmm—well, it has been two weeks since we've had any real sweets. I'd have felt guilty about cutting them off from sweet foods *entirely* so I'd served them soda every once in a while, but that was it. Dora-chan's new teeth were clearly not riddled with cavities, so that concern had apparently been baseless after all, and everyone had really helped me out by driving away those Church of Rubanov jerks earlier in the day. Lifting the dessert ban seemed like the perfect reward.

“Okay, okay! Dessert’s back on the menu,” I said.

«Hell yeah!» shouted Dora-chan.

«Yay! Yippee!» squealed Sui.

“Everyone can pick out three things today, okay? After that, we'll take a day off from dessert, then have two things each the next day. We'll keep going one day off, one day on from then on out.” Dora-chan and Sui weren't too excited about that plan, but it was better than not getting any dessert at all, so it wasn't too tough to bring them around. “Okay, what'll everyone have?”

«Ooh, me first, me first! I want pudding, of course!»

《Sui wants cake! The super sweet chocolate one!》

“I shall partake of my usual.”

It seemed everyone was going for their classic choices—pudding for Dora-chan, chocolate cake for Sui, and strawberry shortcake for Fel.

“My liege,” Gon piped up, “What is this ‘dessert’ you speak of? I can tell it’s food, at least, given the ruckus the others are kicking up.”

Oh, right! I guess Gon’s never had any of this stuff, huh? “Dessert’s basically, like...something sweet you eat after dinner, more or less,” I explained.

“Something sweet?” repeated Gon, cocking his head. “So, something like the ‘soda’ you served me before dessert, then?”

“Not *exactly*? That was a drink, so it doesn’t really count. There’s this stuff called cake, and...y’know what? It’ll be way quicker just to show you. Can I pick something out for you this first time?”

“Yes, of course. You have yet to serve me anything displeasing so far, so I’ll trust your judgment.”

The responsibility for picking Gon’s dessert had fallen upon my shoulders. I opened up Fumiya’s page in my Online Supermarket for the first time in what felt like ages, and got to shopping! First off, I piled Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui’s desserts into my cart: three shortcakes made with domestically grown strawberries for Fel, strawberry and banana pudding sundaes plus a standard custard pudding for Dora-chan, and a chocolate creme cake, chocolate chiffon cake, and chocolate banana-cream cake for Sui.

Next up was picking Gon’s treats. I chose a strawberry shortcake to start, since that was sort of the purest essence of cake in my mind. I also got him a citrus tart, which was a seasonal specialty, and vividly green matcha cake, which I felt would be right up Gon’s alley for some reason I couldn’t quite explain. Then I checked out and served everyone their long-awaited desserts. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui dug right in.

“You should give them a try too, Gon! I promise they’re not gross,” I said.

“All right, then,” said Gon, trying his first tentative bite of the strawberry shortcake. “Oh? It’s sugary, yes, but there’s more to it than that! This is the vibrant sweetness of fruit! And this orange one... Mhh, *these* fruits are even more striking with both sweet and sour notes!” he added as he sampled the citrus tart. “And last is this green one... Hmm! Bitter, yet sweet in equal

measure! One would think the flavors would clash, but they meld together in perfect harmony instead! And this fragrance—so wonderfully invigorating! This is *incredible!*”

“Sounds like you’re a fan of the matcha cake, then?”

“So this is called ‘matcha’? Yes, I am a fan indeed!”

“In that case, I’ll get you a whole selection of matcha desserts next time!”

“Gra ha ha! I can hardly wait!”

While everyone enjoyed their desserts, I brewed myself a lightly sweetened café au lait to sip alongside them. It wasn’t long before all the unpleasantness from earlier on in the day had completely slipped my mind.



Our plan was to head home to Karelina tomorrow, so Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all turned in early for the night. I *wanted* to head to bed with them, but I had one last bit of work to wrap up before I could rest. It was time to give the divines a call.

“Okay, sorry to keep you waiting, everyone!” I said to the empty air.

<Finally! It’s finally time! I was starting to get impatient!>

<We’ve certainly been excited, yes!>

<Oh, hey, there he is!>

<...It’s time.>

<All right! We’ve been waiting for an age!>

<Aha ha ha ha, at long last our moment has arrived!>

A cacophony of divine voices blared into my head all at once the second I summoned them. Apparently, everyone had been waiting on standby for this.

<Oh, and it seems you went to the trouble of donating to our churches in the town you’re staying in, didn’t you? Thank you for that,> said Kisharle.

<Yeah, thanks,> Agni chimed in.

<Well done indeed!> added Ninrir.

<Thanks,> said Ruka, rounding out the full set of goddesses.

<And you even gave our followers a little something this time as well! Many thanks!> Hephaestos chimed in.

<Quite right! You have our gratitude!> agreed Vahagn.

“It’s fine, honestly!” I replied. “My money’s really been starting to pile up lately, so I thought I should try to give back to society a little, that’s all.”

<If you have that kind of money, you could use it to boost our budgets, you know?> a certain disappointment of a goddess—also known as Ninrir—muttered, just barely loud enough for me to overhear her.

Yup, I'm gonna ignore that entirely! I heard nothing! If I gave in and boosted their budget, I knew for a fact that I'd end up doing the same thing over and over until I was spending all of my money on them. I was standing on the brink of a *very* slippery slope! More to the point, while four gold coins—the equivalent of forty thousand yen—each month wasn't an extravagant sum, it also wasn't exactly chump change.

The upper limit on the price range of the beauty products and booze that Kisharle, Hephaestos, and Vahagn asked for was so high that they might as well have not had an upper limit at all, so I'd have sort of understood if *they* had asked for more, but Ninrir the divine disaster only ever used her budget on sweets. Forty thousand yen's worth of confectionery was a *lot* to go through in a single month! She'd ended up ordering a pretty ridiculous pile of assorted sweets and cakes this time, though of course, she *did* always seem to have somehow eaten through the previous month's batch every time I contacted her for a new request. The appetite of a goddess of gluttony was clearly not to be underestimated.

Though all that being said, there was one other recent development that had me curious enough to probe my godly contacts for information. “So while I've got you all here, I have a question. I ended up donating to a God of Medicine's followers while I was visiting all of your churches, and I was wondering if the God of Medicine's, y'know, real?”

<Oooh, that's right! I do recall a God of Medicine, yes!> said Kisharle.

<Now that you mention it, I do as well!> chimed in Ninrir.

<Haven't seen him around for what feels like ages, though,> noted Agni.

<He's been cooped up in his estate forever,> added Ruka. Somehow, none of the goddesses seemed particularly fond of him.

<Aha ha ha ha, yes, he's a strange one! He spends all of his time locked in his room, researching new medicines!> said Hephaestos.

<I haven't seen him at all in the past five centuries or so,> mentioned Vahagn.

I was starting to get a pretty clear image of this god as a shut-in scientist who was absolutely obsessed with his field of research. And, like, *really*

obsessed if Vahagn's five-hundred-year estimate was on the money.

<We goddesses have many followers, and we have many churches dedicated to us as a result,> Kisharle explained. *<That being said, as you've noticed, plenty of other gods have churches dedicated to them dotted around here and there as well. I hope you'll continue to spare them a little support whenever the whim takes you.>*

"Yeah, of course," I replied. "Oh, except the Church of Rubanov! Sorry, but I'm not helping *them* out no matter what you say."

<Oh, yes, of course, you can skip them. Their god isn't real, anyway.>

<Kisharle's right!> Ninrir chimed in. *<You humans just made that one up on your own!>*

<Technically, it was just one guy named Rubanov who started the whole thing. And on top of that, he only did it to make a quick buck!> said Agni.

<A cult,> said Ruka.

<Aha ha ha ha, well said, Ruka! A cult indeed!> Hephaestos bellowed. *<Many of my followers are dwarves, and that vile cult persecutes them to no end!>*

<Of course, from our perspective the minute they started preaching human supremacism they were close enough to being a cult for us to count them as one,> Vahagn noted. The gods seemed united in their distaste for the Church of Rubanov, and all I could think was *Hah! Serves those losers right!*

"Oh, right! There was one other thing I wanted to ask you, actually. Is there a church dedicated to the God of All Creation out there somewhere?" It had struck me as strange that out of all the towns I'd visited so far, not one of them seemed to have a temple devoted to Demiurge.

<Oh! Well, you see...> Kisharle began, then delivered an explanation with some occasional help from the other gods.

According to them, Demiurge had a fairly strict policy of staying hands-off with this world. He had only granted his blessing to a very small selection of individuals, none of whom had ever revealed their blessings to the public at large. As a natural result, barely anyone in the mortal world even knew about Demiurge to begin with. He went very light on the oracles as well, and it seemed the only place his name cropped up in modern times was in extremely old regional folktales.

As for the rest of the gods, it seemed there had been a period where they'd

started worrying about whether it was okay for their names to spread far and wide while the god who ruled over them languished in obscurity. Demiurge himself, however, told them that he didn't mind at all, and seemed to really mean it. *I guess it makes sense that the god who created this world would have a pretty tolerant perspective when it comes to that sort of stuff!*

I did have to question the bit about him "going light on the oracles," though. I mean, he'd been using them to chat with me on a pretty regular basis, right? *Y-Y'know what, I'm just gonna try not to think about the implications there. More importantly, I still need to send everyone their stuff!*

"All right, I'll send over all the stuff you asked for now! We'll go in the same order as always, so Ninrir's up first."

<Yes yes yes yes yes! Oh, how I've waited for this! Cake and dorayaki, yes!>

Please, Ninrir, just stop! You don't have to freak out that much! I'm even sending this month's offerings over early, like I promised! I had to wonder just how quickly she managed to burn through each month's shipment.

Anyway, I'd filled her box with exactly what she'd requested: whole cakes, seasonal specialty cakes, and a massive selection of dorayaki. When I'd asked for her requests she'd explained that "there's nothing quite like the sense of luxury you feel when you eat a whole cake all by yourself," or something along those lines, and I almost came down with a stomachache just listening to her.

Nevertheless, I *did* do as she'd asked and got her a whole strawberry shortcake and a whole chocolate cake. Fumiya was also putting on an event themed around domestically sourced fruit, and I got her a pineapple chiffon cake, a citrus tart, a melon roll cake, and a few other things from that selection. I spent the rest of her money on all the dorayaki I could get my hands on.

"Okay, here it is! All yours," I said as I pulled a cardboard box filled to the point of bursting with sweets from my Item Box and set it down on the living room table.

<Finally! Finally! My sweets! Thank youuu!> Ninrir exclaimed as the box was engulfed in a faint light and quickly faded away before my eyes.

<So many cakes and dorayaki! So very many!>

<Wait a moment, Ninrir. You don't intend to start eating here again, do you?> asked Kisharle.

<I can't wait another second! Just one, okay?! Nobody would mind if I just eat one!> A short pause ensued. *<Mmmmmh! Dorayaki is the most delicious food in the world!>*

I could just picture her tearing into her box on the spot and descending upon her sweets like a starving jackal. She really was giving all the other goddesses out there a bad name. *Let's just move this right along.*

“Next up is Kisharle,” I said. She had, predictably, requested nothing but cosmetics. It seemed she’d been thoroughly charmed by the ST-III line of products she discovered last time I let her browse my Supermarket’s menu, and asked me to get her even more of the stuff. Specifically, she wanted another 230 milliliter bottle of their lotion—the largest size they sold. Supposedly it had moisturized her skin incredibly well, leaving it with a healthy glow the likes of which she’d never experienced before...not that I cared.

Kisharle had also asked for a massive stock of cotton pads this time around. She’d done even more research, it seemed, and had learned that the lotion she wanted was supposedly most effective when applied with those instead of your hands. I had to wonder where she found the time to learn all this stuff—it was mystifying.

Her next request was another item in the ST-III line: their foundation. It was supposed to make your skin appear smooth, clear, and glossy, and also did wonders for your pores, so she was beyond excited to give it a try. They sold it in thirty, fifty, and seventy milliliter sizes, and after no small amount of agonizing she’d asked me for a fifty milliliter bottle. The smallest size would have vanished in the blink of an eye, so it was worth the splurge, by her estimate. It was quite the splurge too, and I found myself wincing at the price tag—even with Matsumura Kiyomi’s discount factored in, it cost one gold and seven silver, which seemed *outrageously* expensive for fifty milliliters of foundation.

Last but not least, Kisharle decided that she might as well throw one more ST-III product onto the pile, that being their foaming facial cleanser. It was less expensive, but at six silver it still struck me as being priced higher than it was worth. Her order ended up taking up much less space in her cardboard box than Ninrir’s had, but each and every item within it was incredibly valuable. I set the box on the table, and it vanished in an instant.

<Eee, yes! I finally have the full ST-III line! Thank you ever so much!

Hee hee, I'm going to give myself a very thorough cleansing tonight!> said Kisharle, who seemed to be in a really, *really* good mood. I could've sworn I heard her humming a happy little tune to herself in the background.

Okay, let's keep this ball rolling. "Next up is Agni, I think!" I said. She, of course, had asked for beer again: her usual cases of S-company's premium beer, Y-bisu's beer, and S-company's black beer. She also asked for one more case of something new, and I picked out a case of a beer made by A-company that came in silver cans and was known for being quite dry—one might even say *super* dry.

Agni wasn't done asking for beer yet, though. She also wanted me to pick her up a few taste-testing packs of beer from both domestic and international brewers. She still had a bit of her budget left over after that, and told me to use it to pick something out that I thought she'd like, so I bought a couple gift packs of slightly expensive premium beer that came in bottles. All that beer made for a pretty hefty box, and I set it down on the table with a loud thud.

"Okay, Agni, your order's ready!"

<Oooh, now that's a one hell of a haul! Think I'll crack some of these open in a little bit. Thanks again!> Agni said happily as her box faded out of sight. *<All right! Gonna have myself a party tonight!>*

J-Just don't drink too much, okay, Agni?

<I'm next. Cake and ice cream,> said Ruka, who was apparently feeling a little impatient.

No need to worry, I have all of your stuff right here. Ruka had asked for seasonal cakes, just like Ninrir, so I picked out the same pineapple chiffon cake, citrus cake, and melon roll cake from Fumiya's fruit special as I had for the disappointment. She also wanted ice cream, of course, so I bought up just about everything that Fumiya had to offer. The quantity *and* variety were kind of incredible.

"Okay, that should be all of it! Go ahead and grab yours whenever you're ready," I said.

<Thanks,> said Ruka a split second before her box vanished. A moment later I heard a rapid series of pitter-pattering footsteps that I attributed to Ruka grabbing her box and rushing back to her place without wasting a second.

Okay, next up...

<Woohoo! It's finally our turn!>

<Gwa ha ha! We've been beside ourselves with excitement for the whiskey we asked for!>

I didn't even have to tell the resident whiskey lovers Hephaestus and Vahagn that they were next. They had taken a leaf out of Kisharle's book recently and started doing some serious research into the types of booze available to them. I didn't know where exactly they'd done said research, but their sources seemed to have provided them with nothing but brands of whiskey purported to be the best that money could buy. They'd even gone so far as to *not* ask for their staple booze, a Japanese whisky that claimed to be the best in the world, in order to pool their funds for some experimentation.

What did they request? For starters, they asked for a traditional Japanese malt whisky brewed using a column still. I also threw in a blended Scotch whisky made from a specially chosen selection of the best whiskies around and known for its signature blue label. Next up was a whiskey that had won the gold medal in an international whiskey competition six times, which was known for the richness of its flavor, and a unique, high-class scotch whisky that came in a porcelain bottle. Finally, I picked up a twelve-year single malt whiskey that was aged first in a bourbon barrel, then again in a sherry one, as well as a dark brown whiskey called a "chocolate malt" that came in a distinctively classy bottle.

Those six bottles were all they could afford to specifically request under the constraints of their combined budget. They asked me to use what little was left to pick up a few bottles of comparatively cheap whiskeys, so I pulled a few highly rated but relatively inexpensive bottles off of Liquor Shop Tanaka's ranking list. Their box ended up packed to the brim with whiskey bottles, and since most of them were made of glass, I was especially careful about setting their cardboard box down.

"Okay, here's your long-awaited haul of whiskey! Whenever you're ready," I said.

<Oh, we've been ready for ages! Our thanks, as always!>

<Finally! Hah hah, I can hardly even wait! We'll be savoring these. Thank you again!>

You two are certainly in high spirits, huh?

<Let's hurry up and get tasting, War God!>

<As if you even needed to ask!>

I heard the clattering of bottles bumping against each other as the two of

them rushed away posthaste.

“Phew! Okay, that just leaves Demiurge. I hope he’s happy with this—it’s been a while since my last offering to him, so I really splurged on this one!”

I’d purchased him a five-bottle taste-testing set of sake that had been picked out by Liquor Shop Tanaka’s manager, another five-bottle set featuring sake from Niigata—a prefecture of Japan renowned for its sake production—and a final five-bottle set of sake from all over Japan focusing on very dry regional brews.

I also threw in five bottles of umeshu from the rankings, since Demiurge had taken quite a liking to the stuff recently. One was a very sweet, syrupy umeshu that had been a best-selling brand for over fifty years, and one was an umeshu known for having a remarkably peach-like aroma, despite being made from plums. I got one that was renowned for having placed first in an umeshu contest, and one that was made using particularly small plums from Nagano and brewed with brandy as a base, giving it a very smooth flavor. Last but not least, I picked up an especially luxurious umeshu made using unrefined sugar and honey that supposedly had an incredible depth of flavor.

Finally, I threw in the usual assortment of drinking snacks. With that, Demiurge’s offering was ready to go! I ended up packing it into three separate boxes—one for sake, one for umeshu, and one for the snacks—and heaved them up onto the table.

“Demiurge?” I called out. “Sorry to keep you waiting! I hope you’ll accept this offering.”

<Ho ho ho!> Demiurge’s laughter rang out in my mind. *<I really can’t thank you enough for going to the trouble, each and every time!>*

“Oh, it’s no problem at all,” I replied. “And by the way, there really was something pretty crazy on the bottom floor of the dungeon after all...”

<Ho ho ho ho! But it all worked out for you, as I predicted, didn’t it? Though of course, I never dreamed that you would bring him into your party, of all things! Ho ho ho!>

“Surely you didn’t think we’d *beat* him? He’s an ancient dragon, for crying out loud! We wouldn’t stand a chance!”

<Oh, but you would! If all of your familiars had worked together, you would have had a more than ample chance of victory.>

“Well, I guess...but even if we *could* have beaten him, I really don’t like the idea of killing creatures that can understand what we say and have a sense

of reason and stuff.”

<Oh, don't get me wrong—I'm not criticizing you for the choice you made! If anything, I'm sure your life will become even more entertaining now that you have an ancient dragon following you around!>

I paused. “Umm, Demiurge? What exactly do you mean by ‘entertaining’?”

<Whoops! I suppose I've let the cat out of the bag, haven't I? Well then, until next time!>

“Demiurge? Wait a second! Demiurge?!” *Get back here and explain yourself, dangit! Sheesh—of course he'd cut the line the second the conversation drifted in an awkward direction for him.*

I was more convinced than ever after that little slip that Demiurge had been using us as a form of entertainment. *That guy, I swear... But I guess complaining about the gods isn't going to get me anywhere, huh? Might as well just go to bed.*



A new day dawned, and with it, our return to Karelina was finally upon us. I headed to the Merchant's guild first thing in the morning to drop off the keys to the house I'd rented, then made my way to the Adventurer's guild afterward. Since I'd informed them in advance that I'd be stopping by, Tristan the guildmaster was already waiting for me with his sub-guildmaster Bartolomeo when I arrived.

“Thank you ever so much for your patronage over the course of your stay!” said Tristan.

“I'd tell you to watch yourselves on the journey back, but eh, I think you've got that pretty much covered,” noted Bartolomeo.

“Oh, yeah, we shouldn't have any problems,” I replied. “Gon says he can grow to full size and carry us there on his back, so we'll be in Karelina before the end of the day.”

For some reason, Tristan and Bartolomeo both fell into silence, their eyes as wide as dinner plates.

“O-O-Oh, goodness! C-Contact everyone! I need emergency messages sent to every guild between here and Karelina *on the double!*” Tristan shouted as he sprinted away into the guild.

“Uh? Wh-What was that about?” I asked, turning to Bartolomeo, who just sighed deeply.

“I swear, you really are one of a kind,” he muttered as he massaged his temples. “Just for the record, who is ‘Gon’?”

“Huh? Gon’s my ancient dragon familiar. Why?” I answered.

“And he’s actually big enough to carry the rest of you on his back? So, enormous?”

“Right.”

“And do you think there’s a snowball’s chance in hell that folks on the ground *won’t* notice something like him flying around?”

“Oh.”

“This is a bit bigger than just an ‘oh,’ pal! Did you even consider what would happen if an enormous dragon got sighted outta nowhere? And there’s plenty of people out there who could tell it’s an ancient dragon, to boot! For the love of the gods, man, you have to *think* about these things!”

No, but, I mean...yeah, okay, this one’s my bad.

Bartolomeo sighed once more. “Tristan’ll sort it all out for you this time, I’m sure, but from now on you’ll have to inform the proper authorities yourself *before* you go riding around on your ancient gods-be-damned dragon. You got that?”

“Y-Yeah, will do!” I have to admit, I hadn’t even considered that anything of the sort would be necessary. *Whoopsies!*

So, that wasn’t exactly the best note to end our stay on, but we did finally manage to bid Brixt goodbye and make our way out of the city without any further incident. Then, when we were a safe distance away...

“Good—this place should do! I’ll return to my usual size now!” declared Gon. His body let out a flash of light, and a second later he’d grown to the same enormous size he’d been when we first met him at the bottom of the dungeon. “Now then, my liege, climb aboard my back! The rest of you as well!”

“Hmph! You would dare to order us—”

“Yes, okay, let’s skip the banter this time, please,” I said, urging the others onto Gon’s back. I got the impression that Fel was feeling a little bit grouchy on account of no longer being our party’s most reliable means of transportation.

『Wooow, we’re so high up!』 shouted Sui. It had already bounced up onto

Gon's back.

『This is a nice view,』 agreed Dora-chan, who had beat us to the top as well.

“Come on, Fel, let’s get a move on!” I said.

“**Hmph!**” Fel snorted, then leapt on top of Gon in a single bound. I, unfortunately, wasn’t quite capable of that sort of athleticism, and had to take the long way up.

“Ugh... *Finally*, I made it,” I grumbled as I hauled my way up onto Gon’s back with the others. It hadn’t been the easiest climb, and I was a little winded.

“You’re all ready? Then let us away!” said Gon.

“Wait a second!” I yelped. “Gon, you’re really, *really* sure this is safe, right?”

“You worry about the pettiest things, my liege! I always make a point of erecting a barrier around myself to prevent the wind from hindering me in flight. Thus, there isn’t the slightest chance that you will be blown away, and you can rest easy.”

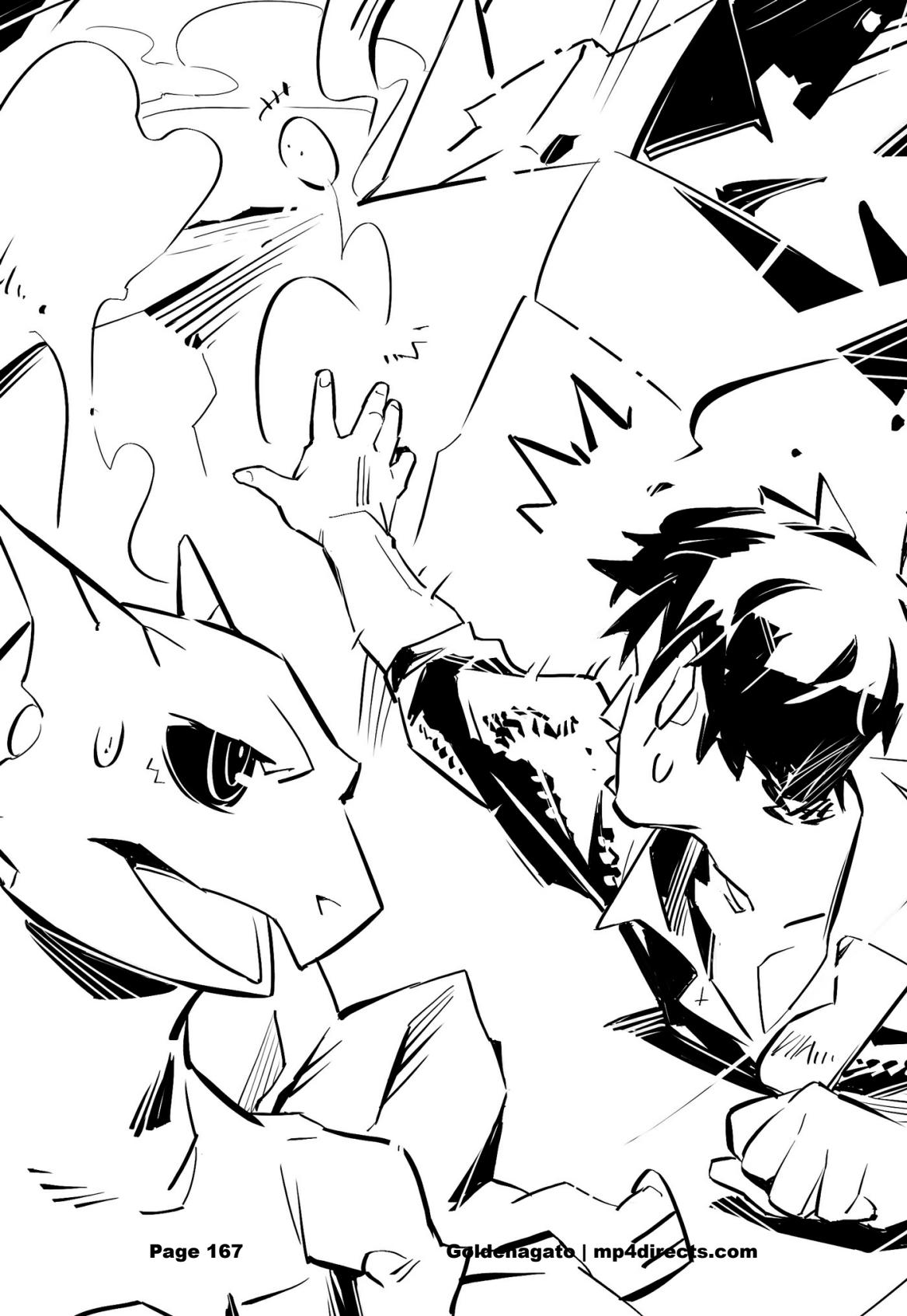
“That is reassuring, actually,” I said with no small amount of relief. At the same moment, I felt Gon’s enormous body begin to rise up into the air as he started flapping his massive wings.

“Of course,” he added, “that’s not to say you won’t feel the wind at *all*! Oh, and take care to sit such that you won’t be at risk of getting thrown off. My barrier will put a damper on the wind—to an extent—but it won’t save you if you fall.”

“Wait, *what*?! You could’ve told me that *before* we took off!”

『Oh wooow, Master, look! The town looks so tiny from up here!』 called Sui, who was, much to my horror, sitting on the nape of Gon’s neck and peeking down at the ground below.

“*Gah!* Sui, no! You’re gonna fall!”



『Oh, chill out, please. Sui's not *that* much of a screwup!』 Dora-chan said with an exasperated shake of his head.

『Which way should I fly, my liege?』 asked Gon.

Unfortunately, I'd never been very good with directions and had no clue where Karelina was relative to us. "Uhh...Fel?"

『Unbelievable,』 Fel sighed.『**You are already facing the right direction. Fly straight, and we will reach our destination before long.**』

『All right!』 said Gon.『In that case, I shall pick up the pace!』

『Noooooooo! Too fast! Way too fast, Gon! And I thought you said you'd do something about the wind?! I'm *definitely* feeling a lot of wind right now!』

『I said I would dampen the wind, not eliminate it entirely! You'll have to put up with a slight breeze.』

『Old Man Gon, you dirty stinking *liaaaaaar!*』

Gossip: The Rumored Adventurer

“So you mean to say that an *adventurer* has offered these to me as gifts?” I asked as I looked over the articles laid out before me. They’d been brought to me by the master of the Adventurer’s guild in Brixt, the only city in my fair kingdom that boasted a dungeon. Said dungeon was the source of the treasures I’d been offered, and it seemed a solitary adventurer had won them within its depths.

My wife, the queen, was spellbound the moment she laid eyes upon the offering, and I must admit I could hardly help myself from marveling right alongside her. Even I, the king of a nation, had never seen their like.

“That is correct, Your Majesty,” said the guildmaster. “He instructed me to deliver them to you, and to inform you that he appreciates your patronage and wishes you the best.”

“My patronage? But I’ve hardly done a thing for him,” I replied. “I’ve refrained from meddling in his business, perhaps, but I’d have to be a fool to trifle with the man who tamed a Fenrir.”

One could hardly estimate the value of a man served by a legendary beast like a Fenrir. At first I had considered attempting to lure him to my country, but a letter from the king of Leonhardt brought me back to my senses. If I were to anger that creature, I would be putting my nation and all of its people at risk. In the worst-case scenario, I could end up being the very *last* king of Erman.

“You said this adventurer’s name was Mukohda, did you not? I have heard that he has laid claim to yet another absurd familiar, as of late. Is this true?” I asked. Such rumors would not be brought to me if they did not bear at least a glimmer of truth, but nevertheless, I could not help but think they strained credulity.

“The rumors are true indeed, Your Majesty. Mister Mukohda has forged a contract with an ancient dragon and bound it as his familiar. I’ve seen the beast myself, and I’m afraid there’s no mistaking its identity,” said the guildmaster.

I couldn't help but let out a weary sigh. "This Mukohda was in Brix to explore the dungeon, was he not? Was the ancient dragon one of its monsters? I've heard no reports that creatures of that nature existed within its depths."

"Oh! No, not a dungeon monster. As it so happens, my sub-guildmaster received an explanation about the dragon's origins from Mister Mukohda himself..."

The guildmaster went on to explain that the ancient dragon had been lurking on the final floor of the dungeon since somewhere in the vicinity of two centuries ago. That number caught my attention, on account of the fact that the city of Brix *did* exist two hundred years ago, and the dungeon's entrance *had been* kept under careful lock and key at the time, according to our records. Moreover, I'd heard that the ancient dragon was a truly enormous creature. I just couldn't understand how something like that could have possibly gotten into the dungeon, much less snuck in.

I voiced my doubts to the guildmaster, and he explained that the dragon could apparently alter its size at will. When he had seen it, it was apparently no larger than the Fenrir it traveled with. Preposterous as the idea was, I had to admit that I wouldn't put it past an ancient dragon to be capable of such a feat.

"To claim an ancient dragon as a familiar, of all things...and after already doing the same to a Fenrir! To what end is this Mukohda amassing a host of creatures as fearsome as these?" I asked. I knew full well, after all, that even one of those creatures could bring my entire country—no, the entire *continent*—to heel with ease.

"Yes, well, it happens that my sub-guildmaster *also* asked about that," the guildmaster explained. The sub-guildmaster had specifically asked if Mukohda intended to conquer the continent itself—a notion that would have been preposterous under just about any other circumstances. Mukohda, however, had been shocked by the mere idea of attempting such a thing, and had offered immediate and vehement assurances that he wasn't interested in anything like that.

"I believe that Mister Mukohda is a man of remarkably mild-mannered disposition, and I trust that he was telling the truth," said the guildmaster. "I should also note that the Fenrir and the ancient dragon both obeyed his commands, and swore that they had no ambitions of conquest either. They,

err, specifically said that they would do nothing of the sort *so long as* the kingdom's officials made no effort to interfere with their business."

"Hmm. Is that so?" I murmured. The implicit threat in those words bore quite a bit of weight, considering the creatures who had delivered them. If they really wanted to destroy my nation, they could surely do so with the greatest of ease.

"I don't think you have anything to gain from fretting about these things, my dearest," said the queen, tearing her eyes off the treasures before us to try and console me. "And besides, there isn't a nation out there that could oppose a Fenrir and an ancient dragon, is there?"

"Yes, that is true indeed," I admitted.

"Quite so! And thinking about matters that are beyond our control accomplishes nothing other than wasting time. You'll have to find a way to deal with this Mukohda if he starts making unreasonable demands or asking the impossible of us, of course, but you'll have time to consider such measures when—or *if*—that time comes! Don't you think?" the queen added, turning now to the guildmaster.

"I believe that would be most prudent, yes," he said with a nod. "Mister Mukohda hasn't expressed the slightest speck of interest in gaining social standing or authority of his own. It seems he would rather live a life of freedom, just like his fellow adventurers."

"See?" said the queen. "Why bother being concerned?"

"Hmm..." I hesitated, then finally sighed. "Yes, I suppose there's no sense worrying about what cannot be helped."

"Quite so, darling!" said the queen with a smile. "And perhaps if we continue to allow him to fly free within our realm, he'll offer us another batch of wonderful gifts!"

"A prospect I cannot deny the appeal of," I admitted. "The nobles and major administrative bodies of our kingdom have already been informed of Mukohda and our policies regarding him. I do not believe anyone in power would be foolish enough to bother the man." I'd taken steps to inform everyone in a position of authority or influence not to lay so much as a finger on him the moment I had received word that the adventurer with the Fenrir would be traveling through my land. On that front, at least, I doubted I had anything to worry about.

As I further considered the matter, the guildmaster cleared his throat.

“Your Majesty, if I might speak with you regarding one other matter?”

“Yes? What is it?” I replied.

“Well, you see...”

As the guildmaster outlined the details of a certain incident that had transpired within the town of Brixt, I felt my expression shift into a frown, and then into an indignant scowl. *Those thrice-damned Rubanovs! I know perfectly well that they were sent the same notice as all the other organizations within my realm, and still they committed such an outlandish act of stupidity! This is precisely why I never wanted to allow them within these lands to begin with!*

When the Church of Rubanov had first petitioned me to allow them to build a church within my nation, I had dearly wished I could turn them down. It was at times like those that my kingdom’s long-standing custom of allowing its citizens freedom and liberty to do and worship as they pleased felt less like a boon and more like a curse. Refusing their request would have been a betrayal of my nation’s principles, and I’d had no choice but to allow them to establish a foothold within my nation.

However deeply I regretted that necessity, though, I had never imagined they would do something *this* beyond the pale. They’d stared a Fenrir and an ancient dragon in the face and *attempted to shake them down?* “Stupidity” hardly did the thought justice. And *nobody* in their entire church knew better? Did every last one of them share a single hopelessly deficient brain?!

I didn’t care one whit if the Church of Rubanov went and got itself eradicated, but if they had sent their missionaries into my nation solely to cause trouble, then I could no longer turn a blind eye to their doings. “Those damnable fools have gone too far this time,” I grumbled, unintentionally voicing my thoughts out loud. Every one of them was a money-grubbing madman, and I’d known it from the start—that was why I never wanted them here to begin with! I would *not* allow those lunatics to drag my fair nation into their self-destructive idiocy!

“Don’t you suppose this could be the perfect chance to chase the Church of Rubanov out of Erman altogether, dearest?” suggested the queen.

“Forgive my impertinence, Your Majesty, but I could hardly agree with Her Majesty the Queen more,” said the guildmaster. “The Church of Rubanov has disregarded a formal royal missive and acted against the nation’s best interests. If Mukohda were of a less gentle temperament, it

would have been entirely unsurprising for multiple deaths to have resulted from their foolishness. His familiars, as it so happens, made it very clear that they would show no mercy to any who seek to do him harm! If they had gone on a rampage, I have no doubts that the city would have been leveled.”

“That, I certainly believe,” I replied. “Even if my kingdom itself were not the subject of their ire, it would surely suffer no small amount of damage if beasts such as them ran rampant through it in an effort to destroy the Rubanovs. I have made up my mind! The Church of Rubanov has acted in open defiance of my orders, and endangered my nation and its people. Thus, they shall be expelled from Erman at once!”

“An excellent decision, my dearest. Our nation has no need for people such as them,” said the queen. “Why, I would expect this Mukohda to contribute more to our nation than all of them put together!” she added, turning her attention once more to the treasures he’d sent to us. In particular, her eyes had fallen upon the ring, necklace, and set of earrings studded with remarkably large sapphires, each stunning enough to catch even my attention. “I’ve decided! I shall wear all three of them to the next party we attend! I’m sure I’ll be the talk of the venue!” she declared with a gleeful giggle.

I could hardly fault her for her enthusiasm. I was already pondering which wall of my bedchamber the glimmering golden zlatorog horn would look best mounted on.

Extra: A Difficult Age

One day after finishing dinner, I sat back to relax, sip a cup of coffee, and browse through my Online Supermarket's menu. I'd realized that I was running low on body soap, and had decided to take a look at my drugstore tenant's inventory when something entirely different caught my attention: an item in the recommended section advertised with the tagline "To all the men out there: are you sure you're managing your BO?"

That tagline caught my attention, and as I read more and more about "the disgusting stench of sweat" and "that unmistakable old-person funk," I found myself getting more and more concerned. Fel and the others demanded meat for one meal after the next, and as a consequence I'd ended up eating a very meat-heavy diet as well. That, I assumed, was why my body odor—which I'd never paid any mind to before—felt like it had been becoming more and more noticeable lately. Bluntly, my sweat was starting to stink. And that wasn't even mentioning my pillow...

"It really doesn't smell great, huh?" I mumbled to myself, grimacing as I remembered how much it had reeked when I woke up that morning. I'd been half asleep at the time, and rolled over onto my stomach, burying my face in my pillow, only to recoil and gag a second later. Much as I hated to consider it, I was pushing thirty, and I knew that was around the age people started having to worry about smelling, well, old.

When I sniffed that pillow, I'd been dumbfounded by the realization that I might be producing that old-person stench myself. Taking that into consideration, the ad really couldn't have been more perfectly targeted at me, and I found myself leaning way in close to the menu and giving the ad a very thorough and serious read. It said, in short, that the easiest way for a guy to get his body odor under control was to use a soap and shampoo designed to suppress it. Naturally, the ad happened to have just the brand for the job ready to recommend.

I took a very close look at the items it was advertising, though really, I'd already made the decision to buy them. Its text explained that the soap and

shampoo contained ingredients that wiped out the microorganisms that were responsible for bad odors, cleansed the sweat and oils that those microorganisms fed on, and even covered up what scent remained using plant extracts. It even extolled the ease with which the soap frothed up, and how refreshed your skin would feel after you used it! They were available in a bunch of fragrances, as well—there was a citrus version, a generic fruity one, an herbal one, a peppermint one, and more.

“I guess there are a lot of deodorizing soaps and shampoos these days, huh?” I mumbled as I browsed the listing, impressed by the sheer variety on offer. Finally, I chose a set that seemed like a good fit for me. The body soap was supposed to totally wipe away the sweat and grime that accumulated on your skin and purge the microorganisms that could be causing you to stink—basically, it was laser-targeted to eliminate any and all stench-causing factors, and had an herbal citrus scent, which sounded nice and refreshing to me.

As for the shampoo, I picked one that was designed to deal with all the grime in the pores on your scalp while also preventing dandruff, itchiness, and excessive sweat-stench *on top of* keeping your hair and scalp nice and healthy, all at the same time. It was citrus-scented as well, and what had attracted me to it above all else was the fact that it was a two-in-one shampoo and conditioner, just like the one I’d been using up to that point.

I went ahead and placed my order, eager to test them out that very evening!



I dumped a bucketful of warm water over my head, then squeezed a dollop of my newly purchased shampoo into my hand. I started massaging it into my hair, and it frothed up before I knew it.

“Ooh, nice! This stuff really does work up a lather quickly, huh?” The way the ample foam clung to my hair and scalp made it really feel like I was getting nice and clean, somehow. It must’ve had menthol or something in it too, because I was already starting to feel a cool, refreshing sensation spread across my scalp. “Yeah, that’s nice! I think I like this stuff!”

I really took my time massaging the shampoo into my head, putting in the effort to ensure that all those oils and all that junk in my pores got washed away. Then I rinsed out all the suds and let out a sigh. “That really *is*

refreshing, yeah,” I mumbled.

It was around that point that I noticed Dora-chan staring at me. 《You’re really taking your time today, huh?》 he observed.

“I guess, yeah. I’ve been worried about smelling bad lately, so I decided to try a new shampoo,” I explained.

《Oh, yeah, makes sense. Your pillow *does* stink like hell.》

“Ugh!” *He noticed?*!

《Master’s pillow’s sooo stinky!》 Sui added gleefully.

“Gaaah...” *Sui too?! Don’t tell me...* “Did you notice too, Gon?” I asked, glancing over at him. Gon, however, just kept sitting in the tub, his eyes closed, totally unmoving. *Is...Is he asleep?*

“A-Anyway, being a human’s rough sometimes!” I said, then went back to washing myself in an effort to shut down the conversation. The body soap, incidentally, lathered up really nicely as well, and I spent a long time scrubbing every inch of my body with its suds before I rinsed them off. I definitely did feel somehow *cleaner* than usual after I was finished. The advertisement had led me true, clearly, and I was really enjoying the fresh and subtle citrus aroma that the soap left behind.

I just hope this takes care of my body odor problem once and for all, I thought as I took a nice, leisurely soak in the bathtub.



The next morning, the first thing I did after waking up was nervously sniff my pillow. *Phew! No issues here,* I thought. The awful stench from the other day had vanished entirely. My new soaps, it seemed, were as effective as they’d felt. Still, though...

“I guess I should probably cut back on the meat a little, huh?” I idly mumbled to myself...then happened to make eye contact with Fel, who was staring at me with his eyes wide and his mouth open.

“W-Wait,” said Fel. **“What do you mean, ‘cut back on the meat’??!”**

“Huh? Isn’t that kinda obvious? What else *could* I mean?” I countered.

“I-I will not allow such a thing! Never!” Fel barked.

“All right, time to make breakfast!” I said, ignoring him entirely as I strolled out of the room. I’d meant that I’d be cutting back on the meat for *myself*, of course—not for my familiars—but I decided not to clarify for

once. It had been a pretty long while since I'd gotten to see Fel looking that horrified, and I wanted to take a moment to giggle at him while I had the chance.



Afterword

Hello! Ren Eguchi speaking. Thank you very much for picking up *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill Volume 12: Karaage and the Mighty Dragon of Yore!*

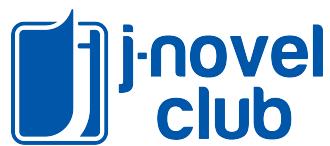
It's been seven years now since I first started serializing this story on Shosetsuka ni Naro. I was lucky enough to be picked up by Overlap for publication, and now we've finally reached the twelve-volume mark. It's all thanks to my readers that this series has been able to continue on for so long. Thank you all very much!

This twelfth volume continues the story of the Brixt dungeon that began in volume eleven. Mukohda and his party finally venture into the truly uncharted depths of the dungeon, and encounter something completely unexpected when they reach its final floor: a very important individual who Fel has history with, and who is lured into the party by Mukohda's cooking! Our hero's crew was already a force to be reckoned with, and now they've powered up yet again! (lol) I had a lot of fun writing that new character's introduction to the story, and I hope my readers enjoy it as much as I did.

By the way, the eighth volume of this story's comic adaptation and the sixth volume of the spin-off are both available at this very moment! Both series are incredibly entertaining, so to those of you who have yet to give them a try, I highly encourage you to check them out!

To Masa-sensei, who did the illustrations for this volume, Akagishi K-sensei, who's drawing the main comic adaptation, Momo Futaba-sensei, who's handling the spin-off comic, my editor "I," and all the other good people at Overlap: I can't thank you enough for all your help and support!

Finally, I would like to thank all my readers for enjoying Mukohda, Fel, Dora-chan, Sui, and their new friend Gon's laid-back and heartwarming otherworldly adventures in *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill* in all the formats it's available in. I hope to see you again in volume thirteen!



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Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill: Volume 12
by Ren Eguchi

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