

Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill

Saucy Meatballs and the Ways of Adventuring



Author: Ren Eguchi
Illustration: Masa

13

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Fel, Gon,
Dora-chan,
and Sui were
napping away
on the lawn,
enjoying the
midday sun.



The Story Up Till Now



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

Mukohda's party reached the bottom floor of the Brixt Dungeon, a hellhole famed for its lethal difficulty. There they found not just an Ancient Dragon, but an Ancient Dragon who had some unresolved bad blood with Fel! The two legendary beasts almost came to blows, but Mukohda's cooking saved the day once more, and the party departed Brixt on the back of their newest member, Old Man Gon, making their way home again...



Mukohda

Human

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

Unique Skill "Online Supermarket"

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

Character Introduction

Mukohda's Party

**Old Man Gon**

Familiar (for 300 years)

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

**Dora-chan**

Familiar

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

**Sui**

Familiar

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

**Fel**

Familiar

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

The Divine Realm

**Rusalka**

God

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

**Kisharle**

God

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

**Agni**

God

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

**Ninrir**

God

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

◀ Proceed



Table of Contents



You'd Be Shocked What People Will Pay
for a Mangy Clump of Fur
I Didn't Invite You Over, So Why Are You in My House?

Chapter 1



Chapter 2



A Long-Awaited Visitor

Chapter 3



A Wild Behemoth

Chapter 4



Mukohda Gets an Earful from the Guildmaster

Chapter 5



Charitable Contributions in the Town of Karelina

Chapter 6



Gon's Big Secret & An Unreasonable Oracle

Chapter 7



Nothing Beats a Nice Bath

Chapter 8



How to Use Your Magic Sword

Chapter 9



What Became of Elrand

Gossip



This Is How I Like My Breakfasts!

Extra



◀ Proceed



9 ×	Chapters
1 ×	Gossip
1 ×	Extra

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Chapter 1: You'd Be Shocked What People Will Pay for a Mangy Clump of Fur](#)

[Chapter 2: I Didn't Invite You Over, So Why Are You in My House?](#)

[Chapter 3: A Long-Awaited Visitor](#)

[Chapter 4: A Wild Behemoth](#)

[Chapter 5: Mukohda Gets an Earful From the Guildmaster](#)

[Chapter 6: Charitable Contributions in the Town of Karelina](#)

[Chapter 7: Gon's Big Secret & An Unreasonable Oracle](#)

[Chapter 8: Nothing Beats a Nice Bath](#)

[Chapter 9: How to Use Your Magic Sword](#)

[Gossip: What Became of Elrand](#)

[Extra: This is How I Like My Breakfasts!](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Chapter 1: You'd Be Shocked What People Will Pay for a Mangy Clump of Fur

Our adventure in Brix had come to a close. We'd cleared the hardest dungeon around, and gained a new traveling companion in the process: Old Man Gon, the ancient dragon. Thanks to Gon's ability to carry the rest of us on his back while flying at tremendous speeds, our journey home went way faster than I'd anticipated and we touched down on a plain near Karelina *way* ahead of schedule.

The moment I had the chance, I slid off Gon's back, flopped directly onto the ground and sprawled out on the grass. "Ugggh... That was *awful*," I moaned.

«Is that truly all it takes to exhaust you, my liege?» asked Gon. «You're quite delicate, aren't you?»

“What do you *mean*, ‘Is that all it takes’?! You’re the one who decided to fly the whole way at top speed! You could’ve slowed down a *little*, at least!” I groused up at the massive dragon.

«Nonsense,» said Gon. «We never would’ve reached our destination in a timely manner if I hadn’t flown at a decent pace.»

“I know, but *still*,” I groaned.

«**You could have ridden on my back, as we have always traveled in the past,**» commented Fel.

“Let’s not go comparing apples to oranges, okay?” I said. Fel was fast, to be sure, but when all was said and done, Gon was much, much faster. If I was going to suffer, I preferred the option that would get it over with quicker.

«Hey, what’s the holdup? Let’s hurry home already!» urged Dora-chan.

“Yeah, good idea,” I said. “Of course, we’ll have to visit the Adventurer’s guild first.”

I’d handled Gon’s familiar registration with the guild back in Brix, and in theory they should’ve already contacted the Karelina branch to update them on the situation, but it would’ve just felt wrong to not stop in personally, for formality’s sake. Karelina was more or less my home base for the time being, after all.

“Okay, let’s get going,” I said.

«Very good. I shall carry us forward from here. Get on,» said Fel.

“Okay, okay.”

I scrambled up onto Fel’s back. Meanwhile, Gon started glowing as he shrunk down to a less titanic size.

«There! All ready!» said Gon.

«Think I’m gonna ride on the old man’s back, myself,» said Dora-chan as he fluttered up and took a seat at the base of Gon’s neck.

«Oh, if you must,» said Gon.

Wonder where Sui’s gonna ride? I peeked into my bag to find the slime still fast asleep. It had been so excited to fly around on Gon’s back that it had frolicked itself into exhaustion and had been out like a light since somewhere around halfway through the trip. It looked like it was sleeping so soundly that I couldn’t bring myself to wake it up, and just left it where it was.

“All right! Next stop: good ol’ Karelina!” I said, and with that, we set off toward town.

It was pretty obvious that the guards posted at the gates had been warned we were coming, seeing as they mostly managed to keep their cool in spite of Gon’s presence. Emphasis on the “mostly,” to be clear—having the real thing in front of them must’ve been more nerve-racking than simply hearing about him, and they were definitely a little more nervous than usual as we passed through. That awkwardness aside, we made it into town without incident...and that’s when the *real* struggle began.

I was pretty sure that the town’s elites and public officials had all been informed about Gon, but that information had clearly *not* made its way into the rumor mill of the general populace, and just like that, I was responsible for yet another local uproar. It was like Brixt all over again, and needless to say, I spent the entire trip from the gates to the guild shouting “It’s okay! They’re my familiars! Everything’s fine, no need to worry!”

“Ugh, I’m *exhausted*,” I grumbled as we finally stepped into the familiar entryway of the Karelina Adventurer’s guild. All that shouting as I paraded around with my familiars had really done a number on me. It wasn’t over yet, though—the second we stepped into the guild hall, the place fell into a deathly silence. I heaved a sigh as a distinct sense of *déjà vu* came over me, then opened my mouth to shout once more. “They’re my familiars! It’s fine! Nothing to see here!”

“Ah, you’re finally back!” said Willem, who quickly arrived to greet us.

“Hello, Guildmaster,” I wearily replied.

“I swear,” Willem continued, “do you have to bring an outrageous guest with you *every single time* you stop by?”

I honestly don't know what to tell you, man. It's not like I asked for him to become my familiar! It just happened before I knew it!

“Well, we can talk about all that later. Follow me,” Willem said, beckoning me along toward the usual storehouse. With Fel and Gon in the picture, there was just no way we could have our talk in the guildmaster’s office this time.

“Oh, hey there! You’re back! Hear you’ve been up to your old tricks again, eh?” said Johan, an old man who served as the guild’s butcher and who’d handled quite a few of the monsters I’d brought in previously.

I don't know what “old tricks” you're talking about, but no, I haven't! He had quite the smirk on his face for a guy who was keeping a very careful distance from me and my familiars. Is he scared of Gon, or something?

“So, I take it this is your new familiar? The ancient dragon, yes?” asked Willem.

“That’s right,” I said. “Everyone, meet my newest familiar: Old Man Gon, the ancient dragon.”

“I am my liege’s faithful servant, and so long as he makes this town his home, I will be relying on your services. Greetings to the both of you,” Gon said out loud. I’d instructed him to do so in advance—I knew that we’d be working with the Adventurer’s guild in this city quite a lot from now on, so it felt like it’d be for the best for him to properly introduce himself. Gon was terrifying at a glance, so anything we could do to make him seem less scary to the workers here felt like it would be worth doing.

“Y-Yes, well! We’ll be relying on you too, I’m sure,” Willem stammered before muttering, “S-So now there’s two of them that can talk,” under his breath.

“I know he *looks* like a big, scary dragon, but I promise that he won’t go on a rampage, or anything like that,” I said. “Right, Gon?”

“Indeed. *Assuming* nobody causes my liege any sort of harm, that is,” said Gon.

Willem gave me a long, hard, unblinking stare.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing! Just...you really *did* get yourself an ancient dragon as a familiar, didn’t you?”

“Yes? We just discussed this, didn’t we?”

“We *have*, but that doesn’t make it any easier to swallow!” Willem snapped. “You know what I thought when I first learned about that ancient dragon of

yours? I thought I'd gone senile and started hearing things!"

"I don't know what to tell you," I awkwardly mumbled.

"Not that the Fenrir was any easier to accept, I guess," Willem continued. "Anyway, there isn't the slightest doubt anymore that you're the most powerful adventurer in the whole damn history of the guild, so I hope you're ready for a big ol' laundry list of quests to come your way. We'll be working you hard from now on."

"Wait, wait, wait," I said. "What do you *mean*, 'the most powerful adventurer in history'?!"

"Seems pretty straightforward, if you ask me," said Willem. "If having a Fenrir and an ancient dragon fighting for you doesn't make you the most powerful adventurer, then I'd hate to meet whoever *does* deserve the title."

I glanced over at Fel and Gon, who were sitting to either side of me. *I mean...okay, yeah, he's kinda got a point.*

"And that's not even the end of it, is it?" Willem continued. "I've heard tell that your pixie dragon and your slime can put up a hell of a fight too. What else am I supposed to call a guy who has *four* familiars that're all that dangerous?"

"Okay, but even if I agreed with all that—and I'm *not* saying that I do—couldn't you at least, I dunno, say it in a way that sounds less over-the-top?" I asked.

"Huh? Why?" said Willem. "Everyone's already calling you that."

"Bwuh?!" *Everybody's calling me the strongest adventurer in history?! Oh, god, that's going to make people think I'm such a cringey weirdo!*

"Sorry, but it's a done deal at this point. It's also true. Just a matter of everyone acknowledging it," said Willem.

"Please, spare me," I moaned inconsolably.

"So, you two've just about wrapped this topic up, right?" asked Johan as I shriveled in on myself with despair. "Mind if I cut in and have a lil' chat myself? Just the two of us, if that suits you," he said, beckoning me over to him.

"What is it?" I asked as I walked up to Johan.

"I just have to check, see. About the ancient dragon—do you have any of its scales handy, or anything along those lines? You know, bits that it sheds?" asked Johan, stealing glimpses at Gon as he did so.

"Gon only became my familiar recently," I explained. "No way I would've gotten my hands on anything like that yet."

"Fair enough," said Johan. "Do any of its scales look, y'know, wobbly? Like it might shed them soon?"

“Not sure. I’d have to ask him.”

“Could you?”

“If you insist, I guess,” I sighed, then turned to Gon. “Hey, Gon? Do you have any old scales that feel like they might fall off soon, or anything like that?”

“Hmm? No, none in particular. My scales do not shed so easily,” said Gon. “Why, though? Do you desire my scales, my liege? They can be removed by force, if there’s a need.”

By force? Oof, that sounds painful! I really didn’t like the sound of making Gon tear off parts of his own body. “No, that’s fine, no need! I don’t want it that much, you don’t have to force it!”

“Now wait just a minute!” Johan shouted excitedly, his eyes sparkling with interest. “I want it that much! Ancient dragon scales are a treasure among treasures! I can’t let a chance like this pass me by!”

“Whoa there, slow down, Johan!” Willem cut in as Johan’s desire hit a fever pitch. “Ancient dragons are legendary and getting your hands on one of their scales is exciting, I get it! I understand why you’d want to make it happen, whatever it takes, but how’re you planning on *paying* for the thing? You could scrounge up every scrap of coin in this whole guild and still not have enough gold to pay for a piece like that!”

“Please, Guildmaster! It’s an ancient dragon scale, for crying out loud!”
Johan wailed.

“I don’t care *what* it is! I can’t conjure up the gold for it out of thin air! Or, what, are *you* planning on covering the difference yourself? It’s not gonna be cheap, let me tell you!”

“Ugh...”

“Oh, so *you* were the one who desired my scale, human? Not my liege?” Gon said. “I’d have considered such a sacrifice for him, but to you, I owe no obligation. If just one of my scales would bring you that much wealth, I can see why you’d desire it so, but you’d do well to set your sights on a less greedy goal. Fel’s fur, for instance—that, I’m sure you could afford.”

“Y’know, he’s got a point,” Johan muttered, turning a hopeful eye over to Fel next.

“Do not drag me into this,” Fel bluntly snapped, shutting down the conversation before it could even start.

“Actually, wait. Hold on. You mean Fel’s hair is worth something?” I asked. I always gave Fel a thorough brushing before he took his baths, and ended up with huge clumps of hair stuck to the brush by the time I was done. And when I

say huge, I mean ginormous clumps of dirt-stained, downright filthy hair.

“Certainly,” said Gon. “Not *as* valuable as my scales, to be sure, but a Fenrir’s hair is still abundant in magical energy. It would make for a remarkable material.”

“O-Oh, huh. It’s always looked so filthy and dusty to me, I’ve just been throwing it away,” I muttered.

Before I knew it, Johan had slapped both of his hands down onto my shoulders. “You did *what*?! Do you *realize* what a waste that was?!”

“It just looked like a bunch of gross old hair! What do you want from me?” I protested as I flinched away from him.

“It wasn’t just a bunch of old hair! It was a *Fenrir*’s old hair!” Johan bellowed. “The next time you get some, you bring it directly to me! Understood?!”

“I refuse!” barked Fel. **“Know this: should you ever do such a thing, I shall never deign to bathe again!”**

“Huh? Why?” I asked.

“Listen well, for I will only say this once” said Fel. **“Under normal circumstances, I almost never shed my coat. Only when I am washed before bathing with you does any noteworthy amount of it fall out.”**

When he puts it that way, it looks like there’s a lot of fur stuck to the brush whenever I groom him, but compared to the amount of fur on his whole body, you’d think there’d be even more of the stuff. Like, a lot more.

“I do not object to losing my hair in such a manner, as long as it is disposed of like we have done so far. However, selling it is an entirely different matter. The thought of putting my own fur up for sale sickens me.”

Again, I gotta admit, he has a point. Just thinking about selling my own fingernail clippings or hair was enough to gross me out.

At that point, Johan barged back into the conversation. “*Please,*” he pleaded, literally clinging to me in desperation. “Have a heart!”

“Gah! Personal space!” I shouted.

“Just once! Let me buy his hair just once! That’s all I ask!”

“I’ll second that request, actually,” said Willem. “There’d be no end to the hopeful buyers who’d come thronging in to buy a Fenrir’s fur.”

Even the guildmaster wants it that badly? Between the pressure exuded by Willem’s request and Johan’s repeated, tearful wails of “Just once! Just once!” I finally folded.

“Okay, okay! Just once, though! I’m holding you to that!” I shouted. I just couldn’t take a big, brawny man bawling on my shoulder any longer. It was really, *really* obnoxious. *That guy, I swear.* Fel, of course, protested the arrangement bitterly, but between the promise that it really would be just this once and me bribing him with a lavish meal of his choosing, we finally managed to convince him to play along. That was all well and good...in theory, anyway.

“Remember your words, and know that I shall demand a truly exceptional meal in exchange,” Fel declared, making me feel a lot more apprehensive about my success than I would’ve liked. *Eh, I’ll work it out somehow, probably.*

We’d come to the Adventurer’s guild to report that we’d returned to Karelina, and somehow we left having promised to sell Fel’s old fur to them. Oh, and of course, I spent the entire trip from the guild to my house shouting, “They’re my familiars! It’s okay! No danger here!” at the top of my lungs.

Chapter 2: I Didn't Invite You Over, So Why Are You in My House?

At long last, my beloved home came into view. Barthel and Peter were out by the gates. It seemed they were on guard duty today.

“Hey, Barthel, Peter! I’m home!” I called out as I walked up to the gate.

“Welcome back,” said the two guards, though both of them were obviously much more preoccupied with Gon than they were with greeting me.

“I gotta say,” muttered Barthel with a very strained smile, “we heard everything from the guild already, and I thought we’d gotten over the surprise of it all, but, well...you sure brought a biggun back with you this time, didn’t you?”

Peter nodded vigorously in agreement.

“It sort of just happened, honestly,” I replied. “He’s my familiar now, in any case, so you’re all going to have to learn to live with him.”

“Can’t argue with that,” said Barthel. “Suppose he’s more or less our coworker now, when I really think about it.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” I agreed with a nod. “So, was everything all right while I was out and about?”

“Ayup. No issues here. Nothin’ but peace and quiet. Oh, right—hey, Peter! Run on over to the house and tell everyone he’s back, will ya?”

Peter gave Barthel a nod, then jogged off toward my house, his heavy, thudding footsteps fading into the distance.

“I bet everyone’s going to have a lot to tell me about, so maybe we should all have dinner together tonight,” I muttered to myself as I walked along behind him.

“A dinner featuring an ample selection of meat, I would hope,” Fel commented from beside me, leaning in so close his nose was almost poking me in the cheek.

“I know, I know! And personal space, please!” I said, shoving him back to a comfortable distance away from me. *It’s not like you don’t demand tons of meat every single meal, anyway! Did you think I forgot, or something?* “I was thinking about doing something with Alban’s veggies too, though. Is his field still doing well, Barthel?”

“Gra ha ha ha! ‘Well’ ain’t even the half of it! Alban’s been puttin’ some real effort into that garden of his, and it’s been working out so well we can’t keep up with his crops, no matter how much we eat ‘em!”

Wait, seriously? Just how many vegetables does he have growing these days? I was maybe just a little worried, and resolved to ask for the details later on.

«I’m down for lots of meat too, but the veggies that guy grows here are pretty decent, so I’ll take some of them as well!» Dora-chan added from up on Gon’s back, much to my delight.

«Sui wants to have those sweet ‘melon’ veggies again! Oh, and Sui wants to eat looots of meat too!» squealed the slime as it bounced out from my bag and up onto Fel’s back. It must’ve woken up the moment the topic of conversation had shifted to food.

I know Alban grows melons in his garden, but they’re not exactly vegetables and you can’t make a meal out of them! They’re more of a dessert thing, okay?

«I favor meat over all else, but nothing my liege has fed me so far has failed to please my palate!» commented Gon. «I’d be interested in sampling the vegetables that grow in this place.»

That’s the spirit, Gon! Good attitude! “Hear that, Fel? Don’t you think it might be nice to give some veggies a try every once in a while too?”

Fel let out a low, threatening growl. **«Enough! I said I shall eat only meat, and my mind will not be changed!»**

Sheesh, talk about stubborn.

Before I knew it, we’d arrived at my estate’s main building, where I found a crowd of familiar faces assembled to greet me.

“Welcome back, big brother Mukohda!” shouted Lotte, who skipped out ahead of everyone else to meet me.

“Thanks, Lotte,” I said. “It’s good to see you, and everyone else too!”

“Welcome home!” the rest of the group said in unison. They were all smiles, and I found myself grinning back at them.

There really is no place like home.



“All right, thanks for your help, everyone!” I said as the women of my estate got to work. I’d finished introducing everyone to Gon (which *did* surprise them, of course, but frankly I was proud of them for not passing out on the spot the moment they saw him), and we were now hard at work preparing for the feast I

had planned. I had the women handle a bunch of the prep work—chopping, boiling, and other simple tasks along those lines.

Seeing the vegetables that Alban had poured his heart and soul into growing made me want to come up with a dish that would let everyone really enjoy them to their fullest potential, and I eventually settled on making cheese fondue. Fondue felt like a dish that everyone could have fun eating, and more importantly, it would also be delicious! The fact that it would be really easy to prepare was also a point in its favor.

I'd carefully picked out an assortment of vegetables that seemed like they'd be good in fondue to pass over to the ladies. I went with potatoes, pumpkin, broccoli, carrots, cherry tomatoes, and orange and red bell peppers.

I don't even remember giving him the seeds for some of these, actually... Oh, but I guess there might've been a time when he asked me to give him as many seeds as I could, and I just bought a bunch of random stuff off my Online Supermarket for him, I think? Well, whether or not I remember doing it, if it means we get to eat a bunch of tasty veggies then I guess it all worked out in the end!

The ladies got to work, cutting and boiling their veggies with great efficiency. I knew that unless there was some meat on the menu as well, I'd end up facing the incessant complaints of you-know-who, so I had them prepare a carnivore-friendly set of options as well. I had them slice some sausages that I'd bought from my Online Supermarket in half on a diagonal, then give them a light stir-frying, and I pulled some cockatrice meat out of my reserves for them too, which they cut into bite-size pieces, lightly seasoned with salt and pepper, and sautéed. Theresa had baked some of her homemade bread that morning, which was always a treat, and I asked her to cut it up into bite-size chunks to have with our fondue as well.

As for me, I wasn't just sitting around while the ladies were hard at work processing that massive pile of ingredients. I was busy watching over a pork roast I'd prepared some time earlier, which was now roasting in an oven.

"Looks like this'll need a little longer before it's ready," I muttered to myself. I knew that Fel and the others would throw a fit if there wasn't a big, hefty chunk of meat on the table, and this felt like the best option available. Specifically, I'd decided to go fancy and use a chunk of the high-end dungeon pork we'd obtained from one of the unique monsters back in the meat dungeon. The meat was so fresh it was practically glistening, and you could tell even at a glance that it was a really high-quality cut.

I'd rubbed the roast down with grated garlic, salt, coarsely-ground pepper, and olive oil, then shoved it in the oven a little while back. Given that I was making this for my familiars, of course, I wasn't *just* making one roast. I had roasts cooking away in the oven that came with my kitchen *and* the magic oven I kept stored in my Item Box, keeping them both in constant operation to roast several cuts of pork at once.

Once the roasts were in the oven, there wasn't much left for me to do other than keep an eye on them and wait until they were cooked to the perfect level of juicy doneness. In the meantime, I got to work preparing the cheese part of the cheese fondue.

To start, I took out some easily meltable presliced cheese that was mostly meant for making pizza and sprinkled potato starch all over it. Then, to impart a bit of flavor, I rubbed a clove of garlic all over the inside of the pot I'd be using, poured in some white wine, and brought it to a boil to cook out the alcohol. Using milk instead of wine would've worked too, but wine gives the fondue a real depth that I'd always been a fan of, so I preferred it. Once the alcohol was all boiled out, I added the starch-covered cheese in three stages, taking the time to make sure each addition was fully melted before adding the next batch. The result: a pot full of thick, rich cheese sauce, ready for dipping!

I peeked into the ovens, and found that the dungeon pork roasts were just about ready. I checked in with the ladies as well, and their ingredients were apparently all good to go too. All we had to do now was plate everything up and carry it out to the dining table.

"All right!" I said. "Let's call everyone together and get eating!"

By the time we were finished bringing all the dishes out, the enormous table I had set up in the dining room was just about packed to capacity with fondue-ready food and roast pork. I also put out four portable gas burners, on which I set up the pots full of thick, simmering cheese sauce.

For a second I panicked as I realized that I didn't have any of those special forks you use to eat fondue, but thankfully, they sold them in my Online Supermarket and I was able to procure a full stock of them. My Online Supermarket actually had a surprisingly complete stock of kitchenware of all shapes and sizes. I'd never really considered how convenient that was before, and was once again grateful for how often my skill came in handy.

Once everyone had gathered up at the table, I set about explaining our meal.

"We'll be having cheese fondue and roast pork tonight! Fondue is something kinda different. You eat it like this," I said as I plucked up a piece of Alban's

broccoli with my fondue fork, then dipped it in the cheese and popped it into my mouth. It was hot, but oh boy, was it ever tasty! The broccoli's stalk wasn't too tough or too soft. It had just the right amount of bite to be perfectly satisfying, and it suited the slightly sweet, deeply rich cheese exceptionally well. It was so good I almost went for another bite then and there, but I resisted the urge and carried on with my explanation instead.

"See? You use these special fondue forks to pick up whatever you want, then dip it into the cheese and eat it, just like that! Give it a try, everyone! Oh, but be careful. The cheese is really hot, so don't burn yourself."

Everyone reached right for the fondue forks, picked out their preferred ingredients, and got to dipping. They took a moment to blow on their food and cool it off, then gave it a try.

"This is *delicious!*"

"It's so tasty!"

"Hot damn, that's good!"

"This is exceptional, really!"

"It's exquisite!"

One by one, everyone spoke up to voice their approval of the dish.

«**Hey! It is high time you feed us as well!**» Fel interjected.

«Yeah, what he said!» Dora-chan agreed.

"Huh?" I grunted. "What do you mean? You have the roast pork, right?" I'd set those dishes out first thing, so it wasn't like I hadn't given them plenty to eat already.

«**We have long since finished all of it,**» said Fel.

«Yeah, it was great, but it barely lasted us a minute,» added Dora-chan.

«It was really yummy!» said Sui.

«Your cooking truly is a cut above, my liege,» said Gon.

Holy crap, that was fast! I roasted a mountain of the stuff! Where do you guys put it?! Seriously! "Getting the fondue ready for you guys is gonna take a little while, so have this in the meantime," I said, bringing out another dish I had in reserve. "It's roast pork again, but I seasoned this one with garlic soy sauce."

«**Hmm? Would that be the sauce you put on steaks?**» Fel asked.

"Yup. Your favorite," I replied. "That stuff works well on pretty much any sort of meat, so I figured it'd be good on a pork roast."

I laid the new dish out in front of my carnivorous party mates, who dug in without hesitation.

«**Indeed, it does suit this meat remarkably well!**»

«*Dang, this hits the spot!*»
«*It's really, really yummy!*»
«*Oh? The last dish was certainly no slouch, but *this* is delectable in an entirely different way!*»

While my familiars were occupied with their roast pork, I got to work spearing and cheese-coating pieces of food from the fondue piles, snagging one for myself every once in a while as I worked. “All right, that should do it! Okay, everyone, here’s your fondue,” I said once I’d finished piling their plates with enough food to last them a little while. I served the fondue, and once again, they dug right in without wasting a moment.

«I would have preferred to be served meat alone. The meat, however, is scrumptious.»

«*This cheese is rich as all get-out! This stuff’s awesome!*»
«*It’s all white and gloopy! Sui thinks it’s delicious!*»
«*Yes, this is wonderful as well! Your cooking impresses yet again, my liege!*»

All four of my familiars took an immediate liking to the fondue, Fel’s griping aside, and now that I was done serving them, it was time for me to eat my fill as well! I started by spearing a piece of Theresa’s homemade bread, dunking it in cheese, and eating the whole thing in one bite. The bread turned out to be the perfect dipping food. It picked up plenty of cheese, and was so good that words failed to describe it. *You really can’t go wrong with bread when it comes to cheese fondue!*

Next up, I tried a piece of potato. That was another fondue standby—since potatoes are relatively light in flavor, they let you really focus on the cheese. There’s no way it *wouldn’t* be a perfect pairing, honestly.

By that point, I’d had enough fondue that I was ready to move on to another dish, so I tried a piece of the roast pork. I know that saying this about my own cooking is going to sound super stuck-up, but I *nailed* that dish. It was cooked to perfection, and absolutely delicious.

“Oh, man, this is good! This meat is *so good!*” someone excitedly exclaimed to my right. It was Irvine, one of the twins.

“It *is!* It’s *incredible!*” said the other twin, Luke, who was sitting on Irvine’s other side.

“What sorta meat *is* this, anywho?” asked Barthel.

“I wanted to get a little fancy today, so I used high-grade pork from a unique monster in the meat dungeon,” I explained...then recoiled in horror as the five

former adventurers did a synchronized spit take. “Whoa! What the heck, guys? Gross!”

“How’re we supposed to keep our cool after *that*?!?” shouted Tabatha. “You served us *high-grade dungeon pork*?! And one of the *rarest* types, even in that grade?! Do you have any idea how much this meat’s *worth*?!?”

“Okay, okay, just calm down!” I said. “I mean, I knew it was a luxury item.”

“There’s luxuries, and then there’s luxuries so high-class that we commoners could never hope to try a bite of ‘em as long as we live,” mumbled Barthel as he stared at the meat on his plate. I really wish he’d kept that thought to himself. Tony and Alban’s families froze up as soon as they heard it.

I gulped. “Well, okay, Barthel is right about that, but who doesn’t splurge every once in a while, right? It’s so good, it’d be a waste not to eat it!” I said to the table. “And besides, Fel and the others went kinda all-out when we visited the meat dungeon a while back. I’ve got tons of dungeon beef and pork in stock, so it’s not like I’m gonna miss it!”

“Every once in a while’? It feels like you’re never *not* serving us something delicious,” Peter muttered under his breath. “Aren’t we supposed to be *slaves*?!”

“So what?” countered Irvine. “You heard the man! Our master said it’s fine, so who’re we to argue?”

“Yeah, what he said!” piped up Luke. “We just lucked out! Being Mukohda’s slave can’t be beat!”

“Sheesh. You two’re always ready to get the most out of a lucky break, huh?” I commented. “But, I mean, you *are* right this time, and eating something nice with all of you every once in a while is fun for me as well! Let’s all stop obsessing over prices and just enjoy, okay? Dig in, everyone!”

In spite of my reassurances, everyone seemed pretty reluctant to go for the dungeon pork after finding out what a luxury it was. Everyone, that is, except for Irvine, Luke, and a certain child.

“Mom, dad, aren’t you gonna eat? The meat tastes really, really good!” said Lotte, who was happily stuffing her face with roast pork.

“Oh? You like the pork, Lotte?” I asked.

“Yeah!” she replied. “It’s super tasty!”

“Glad to hear it! Have as much as you like.”

“Yeah! I’m gonna eat *so* much!” she said, then went right back to chowing down with remarkable enthusiasm. It was really cute to watch.

“See, everyone?” I said. “Try following Lotte’s example! Stop worrying and just eat!”

That finally convinced everyone to overcome their reservations and start eating again.

“Oh, whoops! Almost forgot,” I said to myself. Just like I had a pretty strong opinion about wine in cheese fondue, I was also of the opinion that beer went with just about everything, and I’d almost forgotten to crack myself open a can.

“Ooh, bringin’ out the booze, are you?” Barthel commented happily. I could always count on him to be up for a drink.

All of us ate and drank to our heart’s content. Sharing a meal with Gon seemed to help everyone get at least a little used to him, as well. More than a little, in the kids’ case—they were downright brimming with curiosity about their scaly new acquaintance. I figured the adults would warm up to him as time went on as well, with a little luck.

When the feast felt like it was starting to wind down, I distributed the souvenirs I’d bought for everyone back in Brixt. They seemed caught off guard by the gifts, but after that initial moment of awkwardness, everyone graciously accepted them. Lotte, the youngest, was so happy with hers that she spent quite a long time literally jumping with joy. With that, my return banquet came to a close.

From the next day on, my familiars and I were on holiday. We’d just come back from a dungeon, after all, and I wasn’t about to launch into some new adventure without taking a break first! That said, I still had some affairs to get in order in the meantime. I had to go tell Lambert I was back in town, for one thing, and deliver him his souvenir as well. He was so happy, he actually hugged me while weeping tears of joy, much to my bemusement. *I really wish all these old men would stop clinging to me sometime soon.*

Aside from the occasional errand along those lines, I spent the next several days more or less taking it easy. My familiars were itching to go hunting, of course, so it couldn’t last forever.

I was just lounging about in my living room and thinking about how I’d have to visit the Adventurer’s guild in the next day or so when Luke’s voice rang out.

“Hey, Mukohda?” he shouted from the entryway. “There’s an elf here to see you! Says he’s a friend of yours.”

I got up and headed to the front door, where I found Luke looking more than a little troubled. It was his job to man the front gate that day.

“Dunno what his deal is, but he keeps insisting he knows you and demanding that we let him in. Figured we should check in with you before anything else, so I have Irvine holding him back for now.”

“An elf? Who could that be?” I wondered out loud. “I’ll go take a look.”

I then followed Luke out to the gate, where I found...

“Mukohda! There you are! I heard everything, and I just couldn’t keep myself away! I *had* to come!”

“Ugh!” I grunted. There, with a smile that was almost *too* brilliant plastered all over his face, stood the biggest dragon lover I’d ever met, and a guy who I could’ve *sworn* was supposed to be in Dolan right about now. “What are you doing here, Elrand?!”

“Isn’t it obvious?! There I was, in Dolan’s Adventurer’s guild like always, when we got a message from another guild through our teleportation device. I’m telling you, I’ve *never* been as shocked as I was when I read that letter! An ancient dragon! An *ancient!* *Dragon!* How could I have *possibly* sat still after getting news like *that*?!” Elrand rattled off in a rapid-paced, half-crazed shout. “The moment I learned that the adventurer who’d tamed the ancient dragon was none other than Mukohda, my closest compatriot in the whole wide world, I was so overcome with furious envy I practically wept tears of blood! But then I realized that what’s done is done, and got over it! My *feelings* weren’t important at all. No, what was *really* important was the fact that I had to go meet with the ancient dragon at *once*, no matter what it took!”

Whoa, slow down, Elrand! Shouldn’t you be trying to, I don’t know, make up an excuse or something?! And what do you mean, you were jealous of me? Since when was I your “closest compatriot”? It feels like we only just met the other day, and we definitely haven’t spent a closest-compatriot-worthy amount of time together!

“You *already* had Dora-chan, and now you have an ancient dragon on top of that!” Elrand continued. “This is a sign. It’s a divine revelation, no mistaking it! The gods themselves are telling me that I *must* go back to being an adventurer, join your party, and set out on a journey by your side!”

What? Nooope, nope nope nope! You are making no sense right now, Elrand! Calm down, please! Putting aside Elrand’s frenzy, though, there was a certain part of his rant that had caught my attention. “Umm, wait a second. What do you mean, you’re going back to being an adventurer? Aren’t you supposed to be the guildmaster of the Dolan branch?”

“Oh, that’s no obstacle whatsoever!” said Elrand. “I quit!”

A long, *long* pause ensued.

“You *what*?” I finally choked out, unable to comprehend how he could say something like *that* without letting his smile drop for even a second.

“I quit! I’m not the guildmaster anymore. I used the guild’s teleportation device to send a letter of resignation to the capital and left a note to my sub-guildmaster, Ugohl, explaining that I’d quit. It’s already taken care of, so there’s no issue!”

No, no, hold up a second. It is definitely an issue in all sorts of ways! You sent a letter to the guild headquarters, left a note for Ugohl, and just skipped off into the night?! What were you thinking?! You didn’t get any sort of permission for this! You just did it unilaterally!

I’d only just reunited with Elrand, and I was already at a loss. Dolan was a huge city, and having its guildmaster quit at the drop of a hat and vanish into thin air would almost certainly have caused an uproar both there *and* back at the guild headquarters. I could imagine Ugohl in particular being absolutely beside himself with rage.

“More importantly, where’s the ancient dragon?” asked Elrand.

I’m sorry, “more importantly”? How could anything be more important than you ditching your job?! I thought, then decided to say it out loud for good measure. “What do you mean, ‘more importantly’?!” From the sound of things, you unilaterally abandoned your position to come here, right? You can’t just *do* that, Elrand! Ugohl’s going to be *furious*!”

“Oh, didn’t I mention? I left Ugohl a note, so that’s no problem at all!” said Elrand.

“You did mention, and it’s still a huge problem! If a note was enough to let you get away with stuff like this, he wouldn’t be mad at you all the time to begin with!”

“W-Well, nevertheless,” Elrand said, awkwardly breaking eye contact.

That settles it. This crime was premeditated. “Trust me. You should go back to Dolan right now and fix this while the wound’s still fresh.”

“No way! I’ve made my choice, and it’s final. I’m going to go on adventures with you and your party!” Elrand insisted, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. Unfortunately for him, the same could not be said for mine.

“You know you can’t just declare yourself a member of my party without asking, right? And before you do, the answer’s no. It’d make Dora-chan super uncomfortable,” I said. Elrand had managed to creep the pixie dragon out in a major way the last time they’d met, and I knew for a fact that Dora-chan held a grudge.

“Th-That can’t be,” Elrand gasped as he crumpled to his knees, tears dribbling down his cheeks. Apparently, the thought that I might refuse him

hadn't even crossed his mind. "It can't—it just *can't* be... Mukohda, *please*, don't be that way! Aren't we friends? Aren't we?! Please, I'm begging you, *pleeease!*" he sobbed, crawling over to me and clinging to my feet.

"H-Hey, stop it! Let go!" I shouted. I tried to shake him off, but the elf proved surprisingly tenacious and I just couldn't seem to dislodge his grip.

"Please! Please, Mukohdaaa! *Pleeeeease!*" Elrand wailed as he tightened his death grip.

"Elrand! For crying out loud, stop it!" *Nobody wants to have some weird elf dude cling to them, I promise you! Let go, please!*

Elrand just wouldn't release me, no matter what I did, and I was at a loss. Meanwhile, I heard the distinct sound of whispering coming from outside my estate's gateway. I looked over, and found that the townsfolk who were passing by had started to stop and stare. *Gah! I totally forgot! We're pretty much having this conversation in plain view!*

"Is *that* the sort of person Mukohda's interested in?" whispered Luke, who was standing with Irvine a little ways away.

"I'm not one to criticize and there's no accounting for taste, but wow. Not just men, but *old* men? Must be rough to live that way," Irvine whispered back.

"Wait a second, you two! It's *not* like that, so don't even *start!*" I shouted, desperate to dispel the misunderstanding before it spiraled out of control. However, Luke and Irvine—and the random passersby outside the gate—looked more than a little skeptical in spite of my protests. It didn't help that Elrand, aka the root of all my current problems, was still clinging to my feet that whole time. *I have to do something about this pointy-eared geezer, or my dignity won't last the day!*

"Look, Elrand, this really isn't the place for this conversation! Let's go inside and talk there, okay?" I said as I pulled the elf back up to his feet and quickly ushered him away from my front gate.

"I knew I could count on you, Mukohda! You really *are* a friend for the ages!" Elrand declared with a grin so ecstatic it *almost* made me forget that he'd been blubbering away just seconds before.

"Whoa, don't get the wrong idea about this," I said. "I didn't say *anything* about letting you into my party! I have *not* given you my permission for that!"

"Oh, don't worry! I understand perfectly. All's well, never fret!" said Elrand.

"All's definitely *not* well, and you definitely *don't* understand!" I snapped.

Elrand, unsurprisingly, was proving that his love for dragons exceeded his ability to listen to people once again. "So, now that that's all settled, where's the

ancient dragon? I can't see it anywhere in your garden... Ah! Is it too big to fit on your estate's grounds? Is it somewhere outside the city?!" he asked as he excitedly glanced around my front yard.

I could tell at this point that he was so excited to meet an ancient dragon, he wouldn't hear a single word on any other subject. I didn't want to introduce him to Gon, but I could tell that he wouldn't give up until he saw the dragon one way or another. *Ugggh... I don't have a choice, do I? He's not going to get out of my hair unless I let him take a look at Gon. I really, really don't like this, but I think it's my only option.*

I sighed. "The ancient dragon's in my house," I explained. "He can shrink himself down, so he fits inside no problem."

"What?! Really?! I had *no idea* ancient dragons could do that!" Elrand exclaimed, gleeful at the newfound piece of dragon lore he'd uncovered. Before I knew it, he'd gotten me to lead him all the way to my front door. "Come on, then, time's a wasting! Please, introduce me to the ancient dragon right away!"

I knew for a fact that letting him into my house could only make this *more* aggravating in the long run, and I really didn't want to, but I also couldn't think up a good alternative in the moment and wound up showing him inside anyway. We proceeded right on into the living room, where Gon was lazing about with Fel, his wings spread wide open as he lounged on the floor.

"Mukohda?" Elrand said as he took in the sight. "Thank you. I have never been as profoundly moved as I find myself at this moment. To think I would live to see a living, breathing ancient dragon, right before my eyes. I...I simply..." Elrand sniffed loudly, then started bawling like an infant.

«Oh, hell no! What's *he* doing here?!» Dora-chan telepathically transmitted to me with an incredibly disgruntled scowl. Elrand's presence must have triggered his instinctive sense for danger or something, because he had picked up on our uninvited guest's presence before anyone else.

«Hmm...? Oh, the elf we explored a dungeon with,» Fel commented apathetically.

«Ah! The old elf man!» exclaimed Sui. It seemed everyone remembered Elrand fairly well, though only Dora-chan seemed on edge around him. It made sense, considering the other two hadn't been subjected to Elrand's constant attention.

«Is he a friend of yours?» asked Gon, the only one of us still out of the loop.

«Let me get this out of the way in advance, Gon: I am so, so sorry,» I

transmitted back.

«For what?» Gon asked in a quizzical tone, but in the end, I didn't have to answer. «Hmm? What is he *doing*?» he followed up immediately, now sounding bewildered as Elrand tottered forward like he was being drawn to Gon by an irresistible force, then finally threw his arms around Gon's neck.

“Ahh, joy! *Purest* joy! To touch an ancient dragon—a *dragon's* dragon! If I keeled over this very second, I'd die a happy man,” Elrand muttered, his ramblings getting less and less comprehensible by the second as he rubbed his chin against Gon's shiny black scales.

«Blech! Boy, am I glad I never let that freak touch me!» said Dora-chan. On the one hand, he was cringing for all he was worth, but on the other hand, the relief he was exuding over *not* being subjected to Elrand's hug himself was palpable.

“My liege, there is something *wrong* with this elf! Get him off me!” Gon shouted with a scowl that told me he'd had enough and wouldn't be tolerating another second of Elrand's antics one way or another.



“H-Hey, Elrand? This might be a good time to back off,” I said.

“Ah!” Elrand gasped. “My apologies! I was so profoundly moved, I’m afraid I let my impulses get the better of me.”

I’d call that your desires running wild more than your impulses winning out, personally.

“**Hey,**” Fel, who’d been lounging about off to the side this whole time, said out loud. “**Why is the elf here? What has he come for?**”

“An excellent question, Sir Fel! I, Elrand, have made my way to the fair town of Karelina to join your merry band and accompany you on your adventures!” said Elrand with his brightest smile yet. I, meanwhile, buried my face in my hands.

«Okay, but seriously though, what’re you gonna do about this guy?» Dora-chan asked telepathically as Gon shot Elrand a glare of purest distaste.

«Trust me, if I had any good ideas he’d already be gone,» I replied, doing my best to keep a straight face. «He’s not the sort of person you can just ask to leave and expect it to work. He’s totally dead set on this adventuring-with-us idea too.»

«**I, for one, could hardly care less whether he travels with us or not.**»

«Sui too! Sui wouldn’t mind if mister elf comes along.»

Considering *they* wouldn’t be at the mercy of his excessive fascination, I wasn’t surprised to see those two react with apathy.

Dora-chan, however, was a different story. «You wouldn’t be saying that if *you* had to put up with his crap! He *never* stops staring at me, and he tries to touch me whenever he thinks I’m not paying attention! That lunatic creeps me out so much, I can’t even stand to be *near* him!» he ranted. You’d think Elrand had murdered his family rather than giving him a little too much attention, the way Dora-chan talked about him.

Not to say I didn’t understand the tiny dragon’s distaste, of course. Elrand really *had* seized every possible opportunity to invade his personal space while we had been exploring the Aveling dungeon together. Whenever an opening had presented itself, the elf had always tried to casually pet him.

«I am *not* being in a party with that freak! I veto it! *Out* of the question!» Dora-chan insisted.

«Okay, okay, I get the picture,» I replied. «I don’t mind having him around every once in a while, personally, but I’d rather not have him travel with us *all* the time either, if I’m being perfectly honest. He won’t listen if we just ask him to leave, though, so I don’t know what I can... Oh, wait!»

An idea struck me. I was acquainted with a man called Ugohl back in Dolan who knew Elrand better than anyone. The instant the elf had gone missing, Ugohl surely would've been able to put the pieces together and realize that he was heading for the city I lived in. That meant he'd probably already taken steps to get in touch with our Adventurer's guild.

«I'm not a hundred percent positive about this, but I'd bet that somebody from Dolan has already contacted the Karelina Adventurer's guild,» I said.

«I'll go get in touch with them right away.»

«I'll go too!» said Dora-chan. «He's obsessed with Old Man Gon for now, sure, but there's no telling what that nutjob would do to me if I stay here with him,» he continued as he shot Elrand a distrustful glare. He had absolutely zero faith in the elf, and I had to say that Elrand had really brought it upon himself.

Speaking of Elrand, as Dora-chan had said, he was still completely fixated on Gon. Meeting a dragon who could speak the human tongue had him over the moon with excitement, and he was subjecting Gon to a whirlwind of questions. Gon seemed to find the interrogation unbearably tedious, but Elrand *was* my guest, at least in theory, and Gon seemed to have decided that he was therefore obligated to at least *pretend* to humor the elf's whims. I felt a little bad for leaving him in that situation, but the longer he could keep stalling Elrand, the better.

«Hey, Gon?» I said telepathically. «I'll be heading over to the Adventurer's guild. Can you keep Elrand—the elf, I mean—occupied in the meantime?»

«Wh-What?! Wait a moment!» replied Gon. «My tolerance for this elf's senseless prattle will barely last another *minute*! I've had to stop myself from reducing him to ash with my breath more times than I can count already!»

«No dragon's breath! Absolutely *not*!» I snapped, partially out of concern for Elrand, but mostly out of concern for my house, which would definitely get caught up in the inferno.

«Then do something about the elf before you leave!» Gon begged.

«He's *why* we're leaving,» I explained. «If we don't, then for all I know, he'll end up freeloading in this house forever.»

«*Forever*?!»

«Seriously. That's why we're going to the guild—to make sure that *doesn't* happen!»

«Grrr... Will going to the Adventurer's guild *truly* make a difference?»

«It will, trust me,» I said. I was certain Ugohl would've done *something* to get in touch with them by now. Well, pretty certain, anyway.

Gon transmitted a telepathic sigh. «Then I suppose I'll just have to suffer his blather for now,» he said. «Come back the *moment* you're finished, though!»

«I know, I know! Fel, Sui, keep an eye on Gon and Elrand, okay? Make sure that neither of them take anything too far.»

I was afraid that Elrand's excessive love for dragons would drive him into a frenzy, and I was afraid that Gon would lose patience and snap as a result. Fel was the only one who had any hope of stopping him if he flew into a frenzy. Sui, I mostly left behind to serve as a last-ditch source of support.

«Very well. I shall keep watch over both of them.»

«Sui'll keep watching too!»

«Hmm? What need is there for a guard? You're acting like I might do something wrong without them here,» said Gon, who sounded more than a little offended by the implied slight.

«You're the one who was talking about incinerating him a second ago,» I countered. «I don't *think* you'd do that under normal circumstances, but everyone makes decisions they regret when they're angry sometimes. Plus, I'm having them watch *him* as much as they're watching you. More, even. He's *way* too into dragons, and you wouldn't like him when he gets carried away.»

«W-Wait a moment. You mean to say he can get even *worse* than this?» Gon asked apprehensively.

«I-I mean, I can't be *totally* sure, but just to be safe,» I said. Elrand's dragon obsession was so beyond the realm of ordinary interest that I really wouldn't put anything past him.

Gon seemed to pick up on my line of thought, and shivered. «Fel, Sui, I'll be counting on you! If the elf does anything untoward, you *must* stop him at once!»

«Hah! Your pleas are music to my ears, old one. Worry not. I shall personally stop him, if it comes to it.»

«It's okay, Old Man Gon! Sui'll stop him too!»

«I-I'm not kidding! Keep him away from me!»

Best of luck, guys, I thought, then hurried off to the Adventurer's guild with Dora-chan.



The two of us rushed into the guild and made a beeline straight to the reception desk, where we asked a staff member to call the guildmaster over on the double.

It only took a moment for Willem to show up. “Oh, perfect timing! I was just hoping to ask you about something,” he said casually as he walked down the staircase.

“Guildmaster! We’ve got an emergency on our hands!” I shouted.

“An emergency? What is it?”

I quickly explained that the guildmaster of Dolan, Elrand, had shown up out of the blue at my house, and that he’d supposedly submitted his resignation to the guild’s main branch, left a note for his sub-guildmaster, Ugohl, and then absconded from Dolan without a second thought. The longer my explanation of the elf’s rampage went on, the more horrified Willem looked, and by the end of it, he was clasping his head in his hands.

“What in the *hell* does he think he’s doing?” Willem groaned.

“Don’t ask *me*,” I replied.

It turned out that Willem had received an unusual number of inquiries from the Dolan branch over the past several days. He’d thought it was strange, but none of them had specifically mentioned anything about Elrand coming in his direction, and he hadn’t heard any reports about the elf’s arrival, so he hadn’t paid the issue much mind.

The inquiries hadn’t exactly been specific either, at least initially. The first one had supposedly just asked “Has our guildmaster made any requests of your branch recently?” while the letter that had arrived in Willem’s teleportation device today had read, “Our guildmaster may pay a visit to Mukohda’s home in the near future. If he does, please send word to the Dolan branch on the double.” Seeing as my name had cropped up, Willem had been just about to send somebody over to my place to try and figure out what exactly was going on.

“I certainly didn’t think he’d *actually* be at your house,” Willem said. “And what’s this about him sending in notice of his resignation? He told his sub-guildmaster with a *letter*? He’d have to be crazy to think that’d be enough to clear things up!”

I couldn’t agree more, but I don’t know what you think you’re accomplishing by telling me that!

“What a sorry excuse for a guildmaster! An absolute disgrace,” Willem continued, shaking his head. He explained that becoming a guildmaster wasn’t an easy task at all. The requirements were stringent. One had to be at least a B-

rank adventurer, in most cases, and also receive an endorsement from the branch's departing guildmaster. For a non-adventurer to be promoted to the post, they'd have to get at least *three* personal recommendations, and that was only the beginning. The list of requirements went on and on, which made perfect sense to me. After all, being a guildmaster carried some serious responsibilities.

A guildmaster's work was so important and so exhausting that the guild had apparently had a difficult time finding enough candidates who were up to the task. That wasn't to say they hadn't made an effort to provide tempting incentives, of course. Being a guildmaster entitled you to numerous benefits. You'd be paid a salary that would easily make you one of the highest earners in town, to start, and you'd be provided housing free of charge as well.

In retrospect, I remembered Elrand mentioning something about the guild paying for his housing. Considering that this world was probably *several* centuries away from coming up with the concept of social security, it struck me that benefits like that were probably beyond exceptional by local standards. After all, conventional wisdom here was that if an injury or sickness rendered you unable to work, you'd be right off to the slums or a slave trader's inventory.

"See, that's exactly the thing," said Willem. "If you've been getting solid pay and free housing, do you *really* think the guild would let you go, just like that? This isn't the sorta job you can just up and quit by sending a letter to HQ! If you want out, you're gonna have to be so old or sick you can't work. Otherwise, your only option's to drop dead. The man *should've* already heard all this from the guildmaster who recommended him long before he took on the job."

Oh, is that how it works? That would mean that Elrand's antics were an even bigger issue than I'd given them credit for. "S-So anyway, I think the person most likely to get this under control would be Ugohl, Dolan's sub-guildmaster," I said. "I was hoping you might be able to get me in contact with him?"

"I can arrange that, of course," said Willem. I suggested that he write a letter and send it off using the guild's teleportation device, but he shook his head. "This is an emergency, and you're the one who knows the most about what's been going on. You should be the one to write it."

I agreed, and was presented with a letter around half the size of a piece of printer paper to write on. Apparently, standard procedure with the teleportation devices was to use small sheets and to write as concisely as possible. It felt less like a letter and more like a postcard, really, so I tried to keep my message short and to the point.

“This is Mukohda. Elrand has barged into my house. I would like someone to take him away again as soon as possible. If he stays, I can’t be held responsible for what the stress might make my familiars do. Thank you in advance.”

We loaded the note into the guild’s teleportation device and sent it off to the Dolan branch at once, addressed to Ugohl. The device itself was actually quite simple in appearance. It looked like a small plain wooden box, and to use it we simply put the letter inside, then placed a magic stone into an indentation on its lid. The magic stone was somewhat remarkable, though. I’d made it sound like getting in touch with Ugohl would be simple, but as it turned out, using the tool required one to use a medium-sized stone every time.

I wanted to pay Willem back, but I didn’t have any medium magic stones on hand, only large ones. I offered him one of those, but he told me that I’d earned his branch plenty of profit already, and waved the expense off. “If you want to make it up to us, just be sure to do plenty of quests from now on,” he said.

I’ll have to check what everyone else thinks about that, but I’ll see what I can do.

A short while later, I heard a rustling noise from within the box. “Oh! That’ll be the reply from Dolan,” Willem said as he opened it up and pulled out a letter, which he showed to me.

“Message received. I will depart immediately to personally resolve the issue. Please take all measures necessary to ensure that brainless sack of shite doesn’t escape before I get my hands on him. Do not let him leave under any circumstances.”

Willem and I spent a moment simply standing there in awkward silence.

“So, uhh, it looks like he’s pretty mad, huh?” I said. Even the rushed, aggressive brushstrokes the letter was written in painted a painfully clear image of Ugohl’s current state of mind.

“And no wonder,” said Willem. “His guildmaster traipsed away with a single letter, so of course he’d be furious.”

Can’t argue with that. All the more so considering how much stress Elrand put Ugohl through on a daily basis, even when he was ostensibly doing his job. Just thinking about how upset Ugohl must’ve been sent a chill down my spine.

«H-Hey, what’s the deal? I think I’m getting the gist from the way you two’re talking, but what’s the letter say?» asked Dora-chan, who couldn’t read.

I'd been trying to keep him up to speed telepathically, but my focus had been a little divided and I hadn't summarized it to him yet.

«Basically, the sub-guildmaster of the Dolan branch, Ugohl—you know, the guy who was always chewing Elrand out—is going to come here and make him leave. We're supposed to make sure he doesn't get away until Ugohl shows up.»

«Oh, that human! Yeah, I remember him. That guy can probably handle this,» Dora-chan said with a sigh of relief. «So, when's he gonna show up?»

«Oh. Uh...»

Right, yeah. Travel time. I was so used to riding around on Fel that I'd sort of forgotten that most people couldn't move about as rapidly as we made a habit of. “Do you know how long it takes to get from Dolan to Karelina, on average?” I asked Willem.

“Hm? Oh, right. You have the Fenrir,” said Willem. “For most people, it'd be around a twenty-three, twenty-four-day trip, if the journey's a smooth one.”

So three weeks and change, then. Ugohl's definitely not going to be taking his time, though. Maybe that'll help? “What about if you're in a hurry?” I followed up.

“If speed's your *only* priority and you're traveling light with a small party, I'd say, oh, fifteen, sixteen days would be the limit,” said Willem.

So over two weeks, at the absolute earliest. And in the meantime, I'll have to live with Elrand. I wasn't exactly happy to hear it, but I knew this was the best deal we were going to get. «You heard him, Dora-chan.»

A moment of silence passed, after which Dora-chan fluttered to the ground and collapsed.

“D-Dora-chan?”

«We have to *live* with that guy? For weeks...?»

I'm right there with you, buddy, but we're just gonna have to tough it out. I scooped Dora-chan up from the ground and made my way out of the guild hall.



“Ah! Come to think of it, it would've been way faster for us to go to Ugohl than for him to come here!”

We have Gon to fly us around, after all. We could've made it from here to Dolan in the blink of an eye if we rode him, and Elrand would've been so happy to ride an ancient dragon, he wouldn't have even questioned it! We could've just

kept mum about our destination, and he'd have been too distracted to even notice until we'd already touched down in Dolan! It totally would've worked. Actually, it might still work! We could climb aboard Gon and be off right away!

Even if Ugohl had already departed from Dolan, the road from there to Karelina was a straight, unbranching highway. We'd have Fel with us too, and he'd be able to sense Ugohl once we got close to him and make sure we didn't miss him en route. *All right, I'm sold! I'll talk everyone into getting in on this as soon as I get home!*

When Dora-chan and I arrived back at my estate, we found that a palpable aura of discomfort had settled over the place in our absence. Elrand was off in a corner of the living room, somehow simultaneously hanging his head and staring at Gon with a constant twinkle of excitement in his eyes, while Gon stared back at him with a look of utter indignant contempt. Fel was keeping a watchful eye on Elrand, while Sui was sitting in front of him, wobbling in place and apparently keeping him from leaving his corner.

Wh-What the heck happened here? “H-Hey, I’m home,” I said as I stepped into the room.

«**At long last,**» said Fel. He almost sounded relieved, but I figured I was probably just imagining it.

“So, uh, did something happen?” I asked.

«**Indeed it did,**» Fel replied, then launched into the full story of what had happened while I was out—a story so absurd, it had me clutching at my head long before Fel was finished.

Why must you do this to me, you pointy-eared fossil?

It seemed that after Dora-chan and I had left, Elrand had proceeded to badger Gon into revealing his name, then carried on questioning him for some time without much in the way of incident. Gon had been not-so-subtly irritated with the elf’s incessant interrogation, but he’d been doing a decent enough job of putting up with it. That hadn’t lasted, though, as Elrand had apparently been emboldened by the dragon’s forbearance and had decided to take it a step too far.

“If I might ask a teeensy little favor, oh great and mighty Gon, do you suppose you could spare just a smidgen of blood for the sake of my research?” Elrand had apparently asked, making it sound like the pettiest request in the world.

Gon had already been fed up with appeasing Elrand, and this, it seemed, had been a step too far. “Do not *trifle* with me, elf!” he’d roared. “Why should I have

to spare so much as a drop of my lifesblood for the likes of *you*?!”

I like to think that if Elrand had apologized, backpedaled, and changed the subject, it could’ve ended there easily enough. This was Elrand, though, so of course he didn’t do any of those things. According to Fel, he’d said, “Oh, my apologies! Of course blood would be out of the question, how silly of me! We’d need to *injure* you to harvest your blood, after all. Oh, but of course—how about your drool? I only need the tiniest amount!”

Gon—understandably—was repulsed. Who *wouldn’t* be? I certainly hadn’t imagined that Elrand would go quite *that* far. What sort of person could look somebody in the eye and ask them for a saliva sample?

At that point, it seemed that Fel had judged Elrand’s behavior as crossing a line and had chosen to intervene, plucking the elf up by the head with his paw and telling him **“You have gone too far. Sit in the corner and stay silent,”** in the most menacing tone he could manage.

That more or less brought us up to the moment I’d walked into the room. Well, apparently Elrand had started muttering complaints shortly after Fel put him in his time-out, but a glare from Fel and a “Do not talk with me! Stay away from me!” from Gon had left him silent and crestfallen. Fel and Sui had been keeping their guards up ever since, just in case.

«I instructed Sui that if the elf made any attempt to take so much as one step out of the corner, it was to use an acid bullet to end him without hesitation,» Fel concluded in a tone so blasé I knew in an instant he was being completely literal.

I took a lengthy pause and a deep breath. Normally, I’d chew Fel out for giving Sui that sort of over-the-top order, but this time? I just couldn’t. I was well and truly disappointed in Elrand—or rather, the creepy old elf in the corner. *Like, his spit? Really? That’s just not okay, man! That’s so many steps too far! What kind of pervert are you?* Dora-chan, who’d been listening in on the whole story, looked downright appalled and flapped over to try and console Gon—and possibly be consoled by him as well, from what I could tell.

I didn’t think that Elrand was a bad person, at least when dragons weren’t the subject at hand, but this time I just couldn’t bring myself to try and pull him out of the fire. You can’t excuse behavior that’s by definition inexcusable, for crying out loud! I sighed as I looked over at him, and found him looking back at me, his gaze full of expectations. It wasn’t going to do him any good this time, though.

At that point, I finally noticed that his characteristically unblemished elven face was now sporting a set of lengthy, bloody scratches, like he’d been attacked

by a huge cat or something. *Are those from Fel's claws? If so, nicely done, Fel.* For once, I was actually totally on board with my familiar's violent streak. One of Sui's special-made lesser potions would fix him up right away, and I had plenty of them in stock, but I had *no* intentions of handing one over. He'd brought this upon himself, and he'd have to suffer the consequences. *Ugh, I feel a migraine coming on... Somebody, please, take this disaster of an elf off my hands!*

The plan I'd come up with on the way home—riding on Gon, meeting up with Ugohl, and dropping Elrand off with him, thus getting him out of our hands as quickly as possible—still seemed ideal in some ways, but with how things were, I had serious doubts about whether or not Gon would be willing to play along. Getting rid of Elrand quickly would be great, of course, but letting him ride on Gon's back...? I decided to at least ask Gon what he thought via telepathy, and his reply was predictable.

«*Absolutely not! Never!* There's no telling what that monster would do if I let him on my back for so much as a second!» he shouted back at me, and I really couldn't bring myself to disagree. There wasn't much Gon could do to guard his back while he was in the air, and it was very easy to imagine why he wouldn't want the pointy-eared perv anywhere *near* him under those circumstances. Like he'd said, there was no telling what Elrand might do to him.

All that said, if riding Gon was out of the question, we were back to square one. Our only option was to sit tight and wait for Ugohl to show up. The problem, of course, was how to handle our uninvited houseguest in the meantime. Ugohl had been very clear that we weren't supposed to let him escape, after all.

I guess I can just ask him to stick around town for now, then find him an inn to stay at? I was pretty confident that he wouldn't try to skip town as long as Gon was still in the vicinity, so I wasn't worried about that possibility.

“Hey, Elrand,” I said, “would you mind sticking around these parts for the next few weeks?”

“Eeeeeeee!” Elrand squealed. “You mean you'll let me stay here?!”

“Nope. Not a chance in hell,” I said.

Elrand recoiled and fell to his hands and knees on the spot. “B-But then, where will I go?”

“You can just find an inn, can't you? Karelina's a big city! There's tons of them around here.”

“An *inn*?” Elrand whined pathetically.

I know how much you get paid, so don't try playing the pity card on me! You could afford to stay at inns for years on end!

"Please! Please, I implore you! Let me stay here! I'll do anything! Let me staaay!" he begged, once again starting to sob, but it just wasn't going to happen. Considering Gon and Dora-chan's distaste for the elf, putting him up for the night was completely out of the question. Heck, even I felt apprehensive about having the creeper around in my house twenty-four seven after what I'd just heard.

"It's not happening, Elrand. I need you to take a moment and really think about what you've done today. You looked a living being in the eye and asked him to *give you his drool*, for crying out loud! Don't you think that's just a little, I dunno, *insane*?" I asked, shooting the elf a glare as I did so.

Elrand broke eye contact. Apparently, he was finally starting to register how far beyond the pale his behavior had been. "Umm, well, the thing is, I guess you could say I was just a little worked up at the time. I've dedicated my entire life to researching dragonkind, after all! I'd just met Gon, the most magnificent specimen of an ancient dragon—the very pinnacle of the species!—and we seemed to be getting along splendidly, so I thought, well, why not? Maybe he'd be willing to give me a chance," he explained, glancing back over at me every few words. The bashful act might've gotten to me if he'd been a woman, but having some old dude look at me like that was just plain gross, no matter *how* pretty he was.

"Okay, so it was an impulse," I said. "I get that, but just think about it. How would *you* feel if someone asked *you* for something like that? Wouldn't you be grossed out if someone just walked up to you and asked you to drool in a cup for them?"

"Well, yes, but the *circumstances*..."

"Look, I'm sorry, but Gon and Dora-chan are going to be constantly on edge if you're around. I just can't let you stay in this house," I explained, shutting down any further attempt at protest.

Elrand—who, again, was *definitely* too old for this—broke down in tears. "But I don't *wanna*! I don't *wanna* leave Gon and Dora-chan! I'll be good, I promise! I won't do it again, so *pleeease*," he bawled. I didn't exactly enjoy seeing him like that, but I hardened my heart and stood my ground.

Selja was doing chores in the house at the time, and I asked her to go out and fetch the five former adventurers.

"Wh-What the hell...?" muttered Tabatha, her jaw dropping as she and the

others stepped into the room and caught sight of the old elf dude crying himself a puddle to wallow in.

“Yeah, uhh, don’t worry about it. The only way to come out ahead here is to ignore him,” I said.

Tabatha shook off the shock remarkably quickly, then took a closer look at the spectacle before her. “H-Hey, wait a second. Is that the guildmaster of Dolan?” she asked.

“Yeah, it is,” I said. “Do you know him?”

“Sorta. I wound up in Dolan once before I partied up with my brothers, see. So, uh...what’s Dolan’s guildmaster doing *here*?” she asked. The other four nodded enthusiastically to second the question.

“It’s kinda complicated,” I said, then gave them a quick rundown of the situation as it stood.

“Oh, yikes...”

“Yikes doesn’t even do it justice, my man.”

“He just asked for his spit, straight up? Who *does* that?”

“I heard rumors he had a thing for dragons, but I never imagined it could be *this* bad...”

“That’s elves for ya. You can always count on a few of ‘em being totally off their rockers.”

All five of the former adventurers were immediately repulsed by Elrand’s antics. “So, yeah. I really need him out, but I just can’t get him to leave on my own...”

“So you called us in to help deal with him?” asked Tabatha.

“Pretty much. Sorry to ask this, but could you take him to an inn or something? You can drag him there, if you have to. He *is* a guildmaster and he definitely has money, so make it a reasonably nice one, okay?”

“You sure about that?” she asked. “I’ve heard that Dolan’s guildmaster is supposed to be a former S-ranker. Is this really a good idea?”

Oh, right. He was technically an S-ranked adventurer at one point, huh? I could understand why Tabatha would be worried, but with four people backing her up, I had a feeling they’d be able to manage. Plus, I had an ace up my sleeve.

“Elrand!” I said, turning to face the bawling elf. “If you don’t shape up *right* now, I’ll never let you see Gon or Dora-chan again!”

Elrand froze, then let out his highest pitched whimper yet. “Nooo, not that! Anything but that! But I don’t wanna stay at an inn eitheer! I don’t wanna leave Gon and Dora-chan behiind! I wanna stay near them! Mukohda, pleeeease!” he

wailed, snot dripping down from his nose as he crawled toward me.

“Ah, no, gah! Get away! Hey, if any of you feel like helping, now would be a great time for it!” I shouted.

“I-I’d love to, really, but, well,” Tabatha said as she and the other former adventurers flinched away from him.

“Agggh, *fine!*” I shouted. “You can stay in my estate, but *not* in the main building, and you are *not* allowed to come inside without my express permission! If you do, you’ll never get to see either of the dragons ever again! I’m *completely* serious about this!” I paused to let out a weary sigh, then turned to Tabatha’s crew again. “Sorry to ask this, but could you put him up in your place?”

Luke and Irving started voicing their displeasure, but I ignored them.

“He’s not a bad person as long as dragons aren’t involved, I promise! Just *don’t* bring up dragons *at all*,” I continued, then whispered into Tabatha’s ear. “Somebody’s coming from Dolan to pick him up. We just have to keep him here until then, okay?”

“Got it,” Tabatha said without protest. She seemed to understand how rough of a day I’d been going through.

With that, the five former adventurers hauled Elrand away, and peace finally returned to my household.

“Are you truly certain that this will be for the best?” Fel muttered as he watched them escort the elf away.

“No clue,” I said, “but if threatening to never let him see Gon and Dora-chan doesn’t work, I don’t think anything will...”

Chapter 3: A Long-Awaited Visitor

Elrand had arrived like a storm, but now that he was gone, I could finally pause to heave a sigh of relief. Fel went straight back to his afternoon nap, while Gon and Dora-chan spent some time smack-talking Elrand together. After a little while, though, their conversation started to grow even more enthusiastic as it drifted toward topics that I couldn't make heads or tails of, but which were apparently super relatable for fellow dragons. It was kind of hard for me to believe that two creatures so profoundly different in size could have that much in common, but I wasn't a dragon, so I supposed it only made sense that I wouldn't get it.

I decided to find something to do to take my mind off the recent disaster as well. For a moment I considered getting an early start on my dinner preparations, but then I remembered that I was running low on ground meat. This seemed as good a time as any to replenish my supply, then use it to whip up dinner while I was at it.

While I was thinking through my plans for the afternoon, Sui, who was wobbling away on my lap, looked up at me. «Hey, Master?» it said. «Sui's bored! Let's go play!»

“Hmm, I dunno. I was just about to start working on dinner, and I have a lot to get done this time,” I said. “Oh, I know! Why not come help me out?”

«Okay! Sui'll help cook!»

Sui couldn't have been happier to help me out, so I brought the slime with me into the kitchen.

“All right!” I said as I brought my meat grinder out from my Item Box and set it up on my kitchen counter.

Sui hopped right up onto the counter alongside it. «Ooh, that's the thingy Sui made!» it squealed.

“That's right,” I said. “It's what I use to make our ground meat! You did a great job too. It's super handy!”

«Really? Yay!» Sui said with a happy little jiggle.

“I've got a lot of meat to grind today. Feel like helping me out?”

«Okay! What should Sui do?»

“I’ll feed the meat into the chute, and you just have to crank this handle.”

«All right!»

“Okay then, let’s get started! The meat’s going in, so you can go ahead and start cranking.”

«Okaaay!» Sui said, then stretched out a tentacle and started turning the meat grinder’s handle. «Oh, wow, the meat’s squirting out the other end!»

“That’s right! That’s ground meat. It’s the stuff that I use to make hamburger steaks and mincemeat cutlets. You love those, right?”

«Hamburger steaks!» Sui yelped with glee. Just the name of the dish was enough to motivate the slime.

“That’s right!” I said with a nod. “I can use ground meat in a ton of other dishes too, so I’m planning on making a ton of it today. You’re gonna have to keep that handle turning so we can grind up a whole bunch of meat, okay, Sui?”

«Okay! Sui’ll do its best!»

“Ha ha, great! Thanks!”

Sui was in high spirits, and we spent a solid chunk of time running meat through the grinder together.

“Okay! I think that should just about do it,” I finally said. By the time we were done, the whole counter was filled from end to end with bowls brimming with ground dungeon pork and beef.

«We’re done already?» asked Sui.

“Yup,” I said. “This should be enough meat to last us for a pretty long while. Wanna help again when I need more, though?”

«Okay! Sui’ll help!»

Thanks to my favorite slime lending me a tentacle, my ground meat supplies were fully replenished. Now it was time to move on to my dinner preparations, so I told Sui it could go back and hang out with the others in the living room in the meantime.

“All right, what to cook?” I muttered to myself. “Today was kind of an ordeal, so I’d really like to make something with a bit of a punch that’ll help everyone get their spirits back up. What would be good for that, though...?”

As I pondered my options, my gaze fell upon a sack of vegetables that Alban had given to me earlier that day. His field was thriving, and he brought a variety of veggies over just about every day for me to share. Today’s delivery included potatoes, cabbage, carrots, tomatoes, green peppers... *Oh, and these! I almost forgot!*

I pulled a particularly distinctive vegetable out from the bag. They weren’t

native to this world, it seemed, and Alban had ended up having to ask me to teach him a couple recipes since he wasn't sure how they were supposed to be eaten. I held in my hand a fresh, glossy, deeply purple eggplant.

"Hmm, eggplants... I could go spicy and make mapo eggplant, maybe? Oh, and I could make them into rice bowls! That'd be nice and filling! I'll add plenty of ground meat as well, to make sure the carnivores'll be satisfied too. Yeah, this'll be great! Tonight's dinner will be mapo eggplant bowls with extra ground meat!"

With that decided, I opened my Online Supermarket to pick up the ingredients I would need and didn't have on hand already. I had to buy some doubanjiang—a spicy fermented bean paste—and tianmianjiang—a sweet bean sauce. I also picked up some ginger and garlic, plus some granulated chicken bouillon and some really nice Japanese peppers called hawk claw chilis. I threw them all into my cart, then checked out.

I *could've* bought a premade mapo eggplant sauce mix to make the whole meal come together super easily, but I was in the mood for something on the spicier side that night and wanted to handle the seasoning myself. I'd be making a separate milder portion for Sui, of course, since it couldn't handle really hot foods!

"All right, let's get cooking!"

First, I had to chop up the eggplant, peppers, garlic, and ginger, then get my seasonings all sorted out. Normally, I'd slice the eggplant into eighths vertically, but since the ones Alban had grown were so huge, I ended up slicing them into centimeter-thick half-rounds instead. I did the peppers a little differently as well—normally I'd slice them up into really fine strips, but this time I cut them into larger chunks to match the eggplant instead. I figured that would give the dish a nicer appearance.

Next, I finely minced the garlic and ginger before moving on to the seasoning mix. The first step for making that was to dissolve the chicken bouillon in some water. Then I added the doubanjiang, tianmianjiang, and soy sauce, plus a little bit of sugar. I mixed it all together, tasted it, and fine-tuned it with a little extra doubanjiang to get it to just the right level of spiciness.

With the veggies and seasoning mix ready, now I just had to stir-fry it all together! I heated some oil in a frying pan and threw in the eggplant first. Once it was partially cooked through, I added the peppers, and when they were fully cooked, I pulled them back out of the pan for the moment.

Next, I added some sesame oil along with the minced garlic and ginger. Once

they started getting fragrant, I added the ground dungeon pork and got it all nice and browned. The seasoning mix went in next, and I let the mixture bubble away for a little while before tossing in the precooked eggplant and peppers, once again stir-frying it all together. The final step was to add a potato starch slurry to thicken the whole dish up, and with that, it was ready to serve!

Sui could only stand the tiniest hint of spice, so I went really light on the heat for its portion. Dora-chan was okay with spicy foods and Gon was still an unknown factor, so I prepared theirs at a roughly normal spice level. Finally, since Fel didn't mind spice at all—and seemed to like it, in fact—I gave his portion a little extra kick. I'd been craving spice lately, so I prepared mine at the same level of heat as Fel's.

I piled my familiars' plates high with freshly-cooked white rice I'd stored some time ago in my Item Box, then loaded them up with plenty of the dungeon-pork-packed mapo eggplant. "All right," I said to myself, "One dinner's worth of mapo eggplant bowls, ready to go!"

I called out to my familiars, who rushed into the dining room without delay.

"What dinner have you prepared tonight?" asked Fel, his impatience palpable.

"Mapo eggplant bowls," I replied as I set the dishes out in front of everyone.

"Ugh," Fel grunted with a scowl as he caught sight of the peppers and eggplant in his meal.

"Come on, don't give me that look," I said. "It's full of ground dungeon pork too, and I'm *positive* that it'll match your palate perfectly."

"Oh, are you?" Fel asked skeptically.

"Yup," I replied. "It's got a real spicy kick, and it's tasty to boot! Oh, but don't worry, Sui. I made yours mild. Dora-chan and Gon's are a normal level of spicy, and mine and Fel's are pretty darn hot. Anyway, that's enough talk. Just give it a try!"

"If you are so certain, then I shall," said Fel, and with that, everyone dug in.

«Ooh! This stuff's got a kick, but I like it!» said Dora-chan.

"Yes, the spice *does* add a certain something to the dish! It's delectable!" Gon agreed. It seemed I'd tailored the dragons' servings to their spice tolerance perfectly.

«It's a little burny, but it's really yummy!» said Sui, confirming that I'd nailed the slime's threshold for heat as well.

"Mmmh! Yes, the heat of this dish does indeed suit my taste. I would

perhaps have made it even spicier,” said Fel. I’d already made his dish pretty dang spicy, but it seemed he could still go hotter.

“In that case, try putting some of this on top,” I said. “It’ll kick the spice up a notch!”

“Oh? What is it?”

“It’s called chili oil. Want me to put some on? Here, I’ll just—wait, you finished already?!”

“Indeed, and I would have seconds now.”

«Same over here!»

“For me as well.”

«Sui too!»

“Seriously, guys, do you even chew?” I sighed, then prepared another helping all around.

“This spice whets the appetite like nothing else,” said Gon as he stuffed his face with his second mapo eggplant bowl.

«You said it! And since the rice goes so well with the spicy stuff on top, you can just keep shoveling it down,» Dora-chan agreed. His mouth was a fraction of the size of Gon’s, but he was managing to keep up in terms of enthusiasm, at least.

«Sui helped chop up all the teeny tiny meat bits! It turned out reeeeally tasty, Master!» said Sui.

“Yup, you sure did.” I acknowledged its contribution with a nod. “Thanks to you, it’ll be a long time before we have to worry about grinding more meat.”

“Oh, did you? A job well done, Sui!”

«Yeah, good going!»

«Hee hee hee!»

While Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui had their own conversation, Fel butted in to get my attention. **“Hey! Do not forget about me! Season my dish with this ‘chili oil,’ at once!”**

Oh, right. I gave Fel’s helping a sprinkle of chili oil, going a little light on it to start. “How’s that look?” I asked, but Fel dug in without even bothering to answer.

“Hmm... Not bad, but it could use even more spice,” he said after a moment.

“Huh? More? You sure?” I asked. I’d made his serving pretty spicy to begin with, and I had a hard time believing the chili oil hadn’t kicked it up a notch further. I’d gone light on it, sure, but the brand I’d bought was awfully hot.

“Quite sure. Now hurry up,” said Fel. I could only shrug, do as he said, and watch as he resumed his feast. **“Yes, now *this* is to my taste! Delectable! It is all too rare for food to have such bite, and I would be pleased to eat the likes of it more often!”** he said as he happily shoveled it down.

“Ha ha, okay, wow. Can’t believe you can keep eating that quickly after all that chili oil,” I said, a little taken aback as I watched him devour his meal. “Oh, whoops. Almost forgot to give it a try myself!”

It was time for me to sample the fruits of my labor. I took my first bite of my extra-meaty mapo eggplant bowl. “Whoa, that’s spicy, but dang, is it good!” I exclaimed. My tongue was burning already, but it wasn’t just spicy. The dish followed up on the initial hit of heat with an intense umami that kept me coming back for another bite again and again.

“Agh, tea! I need tea!” I yelled as the heat finally got the better of me. I pulled a bottle of chilled green tea out from my Item Box and nursed it as I ate. “Man, that was *great*,” I sighed as I polished the bowl off.

“Another helping! And with chili oil, as well.”

«Think I could fit in one more plate of this stuff too!»

“I’ll have another as well!”

«Sui too!»

“Okay, okay, coming right up!”

We all enjoyed our special spicy dinner of mapo eggplant bowls, finally forgetting about the ancient elven disaster that had visited us earlier that day.



I’d entrusted Elrand to the former adventurer crew, and I’d gotten them to keep him at their place for meals and whatnot as well, but there was only so much that they could do to hold his irrepressible love for dragons in check. Unsurprisingly, it wasn’t long before he started causing trouble again.

I had instructed the former adventurers to keep him under close and constant surveillance, but for all his many, *many* faults, the old geezer was a former S-ranked adventurer. He took any and every opportunity to slip away and press his face up against one of my home’s windows, or hide himself in my garden in hopes of catching me and my familiars out on a walk.

The one upside was that I had really driven in the fact that I’d never let him see my draconic familiars again if he took so much as a single step into my estate’s main building, and I’d managed to get that through to him well enough

that I was pretty sure he wouldn't risk sneaking in. That didn't make his antics any less obnoxious, of course, and whenever we caught him leering at us through the windows, Fel, Sui, and I would always take the time to drive him away again.

All that being said, I wasn't *totally* incapable of making lemonade out of the elf-shaped lemons we'd been given. For one thing, ever since Elrand had shown up, our bonds as a party seemed to have grown deeper. Once his eccentric—or rather, degenerate—behavior became clear, it felt like we'd all banded together to fight against a common enemy.

Take Fel and Sui, for instance. Normally, they would've been clamoring to go out hunting after this many days at home, but the two of them actually seemed to be deferring to Gon and Dora-chan's needs for once and *didn't* demand it anywhere near as insistently as they usually would've. They still *hinted* that they wanted to go hunting, so it wasn't a total turnaround in attitude, but compared to their usual tantrums, it still felt like they'd really leveled up in maturity. I was downright moved to see my familiars show some consideration for their teammates.

It would sound weird to call this a substitute for our usual hunting trips, but what Fel, Sui, and I *did* do over the course of that period was keep an eye out for Elrand and drive him away whenever he showed up to do something bizarre in our vicinity. It more or less became a daily routine for us before long, and as a result, Gon and Dora-chan were able to relax in relative peace and comfort in my estate's main building.

They couldn't just stay cooped up inside all that time without *something* to occupy themselves with, of course, so I ended up buying a Reversi board off my online supermarket for them to play around with. The rules were nice and simple, and just as I thought, everyone was hooked on the game before long. Fel and Gon in particular established a pitched Reversi rivalry, though since neither of them had hands small enough to place and flip the pieces properly, I always ended up getting pulled in to serve as their proxy player. It was a slight flaw in the plan, but eh, I could live with it.

In the end, we'd managed to stay cooped up in my estate with only a single outing into town so far. That outing consisted of Sui and I paying a visit to the Adventurer's guild together. I'd needed to speak with the guildmaster and ask him to deliver a set of luxurious gifts to the king: a zlatorog pelt plus a ring, necklace, and brooch, each of which was adorned with emeralds. I'd meant to get that task done shortly after I had arrived at home from our dungeon trip, but

then Elrand had barged in and the matter had completely slipped my mind.

When Willem saw the items in question—all spoils from our conquest of the Brixt dungeon—he let out a sigh and muttered something along the lines of, “You just *had* to bring in another absurd set of items, didn’t you,” under his breath. He knew that Ugohl was on his way, of course, so he told me that as soon as he’d arrived and brought the current incident to a resolution, Willem would depart for the capital to deliver my gifts.

It seemed that Lambert had had a trip to the capital planned quite soon anyway (to deliver a shipment of a certain hair tonic that had been flying off the shelves lately), so the guildmaster would be taking advantage of that convenient coincidence and traveling along with his caravan. I was Lambert’s supplier, of course, and as soon as I got home I’d set my slav—*ahem*, my employees to work getting a huge stock of the stuff ready for him.

Between all of that and a few personal matters—my usual offering to Demiurge, and whatnot—I more or less managed to keep myself occupied for the two weeks and change we found ourselves holed up in my home. The former adventurer crew were in charge of guarding the front gate, as usual, and I’d instructed them that if someone who called himself Ugohl showed up, they were to show him to the main building on the double. I figured he couldn’t be more than a few days away at that point, and awaited his arrival with bated breath.

Finally, Barthel’s voice rang out from the entryway. “Heeey, Mukohda! The visitor you’ve been waiting for’s here!”

I rushed over at once. “Ugohl!” I shouted, grateful and relieved from the bottom of my heart to see that he’d arrived even earlier than my best-case scenario had estimated.



“I can’t apologize enough for the trouble we’ve caused you, Sir Mukohda,” Ugohl said with an apologetic bow. The bags under his eyes told me he’d been through a lot lately.

“Please don’t apologize, Ugohl,” I said. “Elrand’s the only one in the wrong here! This isn’t your fault at all. Actually, I don’t even know what we would’ve done if we didn’t have you to rely on... I’m sure you must be busy with your work in Dolan too, so I feel bad for dragging you all the way out here.”

“Nobody’s less responsible for this mess than you are, Sir Mukohda, so you’re the last person who should be feeling bad about any of it. No, the

responsibility here lies with my hare-brained oaf of a guildmaster, and nobody else,” said Ugohl. I could practically see the flames of rage roiling behind him. “So? Where is he?”

“Well,” I began, then gave Ugohl the long and short of what had transpired over the course of his trip. The longer my story dragged on, the more pronounced the vein bulging in his forehead grew.

“Oh, that thrice-damned degenerate...”

Uh, Ugohl? You look like you’re about to burst a blood vessel, buddy! “So, yeah. Since I couldn’t exactly let him stay *here*, I ended up having to ask some of my sl—employees who used to be adventurers to put him up in their house.”

“Well, again, you have my apologies for all the trouble our fool of a guildmaster’s caused you,” said Ugohl. “I’ll collect him and be on my way at once, so you can just show me to the house in question and I’ll take it from there.”

“Ah, you can probably just wait here, actually,” I said. “To be honest, I had him stay with the former adventurers since that meant they could keep an eye on him, but Elrand *was* an S-ranked adventurer, so it hasn’t been very hard for him to give them the slip. He always ends up here whenever he does, and it’s only a matter of time before he shows up for today’s visit.”

Just then, I received a telepathic message from Dora-chan. «Hey! Looks like he’s back again. I just caught him peeking through the same window as usual. I’m seriously *so* sick of that guy’s face, you wouldn’t believe it,» he said, sounding every bit as annoyed as he claimed to be.

«That elf ought to learn the meaning of restraint. I’ve long since lost patience with him,» added Gon, who sounded just as aggravated.

“Well, that worked out nicely. Sounds like he’s here right now, Ugohl. Apparently, he’s trying to peek in through the living room window,” I said as I glanced over toward the living room, at the window on its right side.

“Words cannot express the shame I feel because of that man. I’ll go catch him at once,” said Ugohl, his words dripping with righteous fury.

“U-Umm, are you sure about that?” I asked. “I mean, he *was* an S-ranked adventurer, right?” Ugohl, to my understanding, had ended his adventuring career while he was still B-ranked. In terms of pure combat potential, I had to assume that Elrand had him plainly outmatched.

“Heh heh heh. No need to worry about that. He may be a useless pain in the arse, but I know better than anyone that he used to be an S-ranker. I wouldn’t try something like this without backup,” Ugohl said, then gestured toward the living

room.

What was that? Some sort of hand signal?

A second later, I heard a scream. “Huh?! What’re you people doing here?!” Elrand’s voice suddenly sounded out from the yard. “What—hey, no, stop—ow! What do you think you’re doing?! Stop that at once! Do you know who I am?!”

At that point, the sounds of combat began to ring out. “A quest’s a quest! Don’t hold it against us!” said a low, masculine voice amid the clamor.

A quest? Wait, what the hell is going on out there? I was flabbergasted by all of this, but it wasn’t long before a group of four men entered through the door. They looked like they were in their mid-to-late thirties or so, and it was obvious at a glance that they were all veteran adventurers. Two of them—a human and a beastman, both heavily muscular—were dragging Elrand behind them, freshly bound in a cocoon of chains.

“Mission accomplished,” said the man at the front of their group. He had a pair of swords strapped to his waist and a scar that ran from his cheek to his chin, giving him a grizzled but still handsome look.

The adventurers unceremoniously dumped Elrand onto the ground in front of us. “Mmmnghphhh!” the elf shouted. On closer inspection, I saw that he’d been bound *and* gagged.

“Whoops. Sorry ’bout that, Guildmaster,” one of the muscular men who’d been carrying him said in a less than sincere tone.

“He was pitching a fit, so we stuffed a rag in his mouth to shut him up,” the other explained to Ugohl. He didn’t sound even remotely sorry either.

“Not a problem,” said Ugohl. “Considering the hell this imbecile’s put us through, he can’t very well complain about getting a little roughed up. Isn’t that right,” he continued as he planted a foot squarely on Elrand’s chain-wrapped chest.

Oh, boy. That’s the look of a man with a grudge if ever I’ve seen one. He looks downright terrifying.

“MMMMMMMPH!” Elrand grunted wildly.

“Quiet, you!” shouted Ugohl as he ground his heel into Elrand’s gut.

Yeesh. Ugohl’s out for blood, all right. I could sympathize, to be fair.



“Oh, that’s right,” Ugohl continued. “Allow me to introduce you to everyone, Sir Mukohda. These are the members of the S-ranked adventuring party Abyss Watchers. They were kind enough to cooperate with my plan to drag our guildmaster’s sorry arse back to where it belongs.”

“Well, uh, nice to meet you, I guess,” I said with an awkward nod toward the adventurers.

“I really lucked out that all of you were on the surface when this happened,” Ugohl continued. “Our idiot-in-chief might have a brick for a brain, but he’s still a damn fine fighter when he puts his mind to it. I wouldn’t have been able to pull this off without a team who could fight on his level. As far as I’m concerned, it’s all thanks to you four that we were able to capture him without any issues.”

“The thanks are appreciated, even if this isn’t really our area of expertise. We specialize in dungeon exploration, after all. We could hardly refuse a request from the sub-guildmaster who’s done so much for us over the years, though,” said one of the adventurers, a man wearing what looked like a priest’s outfit with a mace hanging at his waist. Between his garb and his polite, mild-mannered demeanor, I assumed he was a healer of some sort. The rest of his party’s members nodded in agreement with his words.

They went on to explain that their party, the Abyss Watchers, was a group of adventurers who specialized in clearing dungeons. They’d been centering their operations around Dolan and its dungeon for the past two years, it seemed. “You beat us to the punch in the end, but we made it pretty far down there before you swooped in,” the tough-looking beastman said in a joking tone.

“Well, you know,” I awkwardly mumbled. Considering I had a literally legendary Fenrir on my team, not to mention a pixie dragon and a super-powered slime, I couldn’t exactly take the credit for conquering the dungeon.

“No hard feelings, though. Sometimes you just have to live with the fact that someone else was the better man,” said the muscular human as he patted the beastman on the shoulder.

“Come to think of it, where are Fel and the others?” asked Ugohl. “It’s my understanding that they’ve been inconvenienced by this debacle as well. Your new familiar, the ancient dragon, seems to have been particularly troubled, and I feel obligated to offer my apologies.”

Fel and the others had met with Ugohl back in Dolan, so it made sense to me that he’d include them in his considerations. He was aware that Fel could speak and understand the human tongue, needless to say. The four members of the Abyss Watchers seemed keenly interested in meeting Fel and the rumored

ancient dragon as well.

“They’re all in the living room, but, well,” I said, trailing off awkwardly as I glanced down at Elrand, who was thrashing about on the ground and grunting incoherently.

“Hmph. Quiet down, guildmoron,” said Ugohl as he leaned heavily onto Elrand’s torso. “We’ve got *him* under control, don’t you worry,” he continued, turning back to me. “I can say with certainty that he’s not breaking these chains any time soon.”

Ugohl explained with great confidence that the chains Elrand was bound with had been specially made on the request of some nobleman. They’d been crafted using specialized techniques and materials (all paid for by the noble in question, of course), and were as sturdy as chains could possibly be. They’d fulfilled the request, but the noble had experienced a change of heart and refused to accept them in the end, so ultimately, the guild just kept them. Thankfully, they were tough enough that no matter how strong Elrand was, him breaking them and escaping was entirely out of the question.

“You hear that?” Ugohl said to Elrand. “The chains you’re tied up with are the ones that’ve been lying on the storehouse’s floor for half an age! Looks like they finally came in handy after all, eh? Not even *you* could break ‘em, so just sit still and stay quiet.”

At that point, Elrand finally seemed to resign himself to his fate and stopped thrashing about.

Huh. Well, in that case, I guess there wouldn’t be any harm in calling everyone in. I sent out a telepathic message, summoning my familiars into the entryway.

«*Hah hah! Serves ya right, looser!*» Dora-chan gleefully yelled the moment he saw Elrand chained up on the floor.

«*He earned those bindings, of that there’s no question,*» agreed Gon. Normally, I’d chastise them for being rude, but this time, I was more or less in total agreement.

«**And with this, we can finally go on the hunt once more,**» added Fel.

«*Hurray! We get to play outside!*» squealed Sui.

“It’s a pleasure to see you once more, Fel,” said Ugohl. “I offer my sincerest apologies to you and your associates for the trouble that this *idiot* has caused you. I will be removing him from the premises at once, I assure you.”

“That’s all well and good,” said Gon, “but I hope you’re planning on *keeping* him away as well. I’d rather not have to deal with him again, so I trust you have

a plan to keep him from slipping away?” he asked, shooting Ugohl a suspicious glance.

“Oh, right!” I said. “Ugohl, this is my newest familiar, Gon the ancient dragon.”

“It’s a pleasure, and your concern is understandable,” said Ugohl. “However, there is no need to worry. Listen up, guildmoron! This is important,” he added, giving Elrand another firm trampling.

“Mmgphgh!” Elrand grunted.

“It would seem that the higher-ups at the central guild in the capital are less than pleased with this turn of events,” said Ugohl. “To make a long story short, they’re appalled that anyone would abandon their post like that after all the benefits and compensation they’ve given you. They called you a slacker, a wage thief, and a few other things I’d rather not repeat in polite company. In short, they’re livid, and they’re not about to let this incident pass unaddressed. Your salary will be cut for the next year, and you’ll be placed under constant surveillance until the higher-ups decide you’ve had enough.”

O-Oh, wow. Constant surveillance, huh? Sounds like Elrand’s mischief has finally landed him in water that’s too hot to handle.

“Oh, and by the way, you already know the observer they’ve assigned to the task. It’s another elf, Lady Moira,” Ugohl continued. “She retired a while back, but she was *more* than happy to take on the task once they explained to her what it would entail.”

“MMMMMMMPHGHHH!!!”

Elrand let out his loudest grunt yet and started thrashing more violently than ever. I asked Ugohl what the deal was, and he explained that while Moira was an elf, just like Elrand, her personality could hardly have been less like his. It seemed they were as poorly matched as a pair could get, and had virtually nothing they could see eye to eye on.

Moira was also a former big shot in the capital’s Adventurer’s guild, and had the skills one would need to climb to such an illustrious position. Unlike Elrand, she was the sort of person who handled each and every aspect of her job with care and precision, and she was very much willing to call out behavior that she considered inappropriate. That, of course, meant that whenever Elrand the habitual slacker ended up anywhere near her, he ended up suffering a relentless barrage of criticism.

And he’s gonna have a person like that watching over him, day in and day out, for potentially years on end...? My condolences, Elrand. You totally deserve

it, but still.

“Well, I’m relieved to hear it,” I said.

“I thought you might be,” said Ugohl. “And if—purely hypothetically, mind you—Elrand were to somehow escape from Lady Moira’s watchful eye, we’ve made arrangements to distribute wanted posters for him all throughout the kingdom. He’ll never be able to make it to you with every adventurer in the nation doing their best to chase him down, I assure you! You can take these measures as a sign of just how upset the guild’s administration is about this incident.”

Wanted posters throughout the entire kingdom? Okay, but if he does manage to make his way to us under those circumstances, that’d be a huge issue in its own right! I had a feeling that both Elrand *and* any prospective bounty hunters trying to catch him would all be on the lookout for us, if it came to that.

“Hey, Elrand? I think it’d probably be for the best if you just gave up and tried not to cause any more trouble,” I said, only for Elrand to immediately burst into tears. “I-I mean, it’s not like we’ll never meet again, or anything!” I backpedaled, causing his expression to do an immediate one-eighty, his eyes now sparkling with hope and expectations. “Not right away, of course! I’m sure we’ll end up in Dolan eventually, though, and we’ll see you then. Probably.” *I’ll just keep quiet about the fact that I’m not going anywhere near that town anytime soon.*

While Ugohl and I were talking, the members of the Abyss Watchers were off to the side, mouths agape as they stared at Fel and Gon. I would give ten-to-one odds that they were totally overwhelmed by the sheer presence of the two massive beasts.

“Welp, no wonder he got the jump on us with familiars like *those* on his side,” muttered the muscular beastman. The rest of their party nodded in agreement.

In truth, of course, I’d only had Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui on my team back when we conquered the Dolan dungeon. Gon had joined up with us way after that point. I explained that to the Abyss Watchers, and they seemed to think it was very funny, though I couldn’t help but notice there was something strained about their laughter.

“Well, bringing our guildmoron into custody was our biggest objective here, so we’ll be on our way now,” said Ugohl.

“Fair enough. How much longer are you planning on staying in Karelina?” I asked. He’d come all the way here at least partially in order to help us out, so I

wanted to at least treat him to a meal before he left.

“Not long at all. In fact, we’re leaving right away,” Ugohl replied.

“Huh? Right away?”

“That’s right. I have to get this brainless oaf back to his desk and doing his job as soon as possible.”

So they’re not even spending the night? That’s rough. “In that case, please wait here for just a moment!” I said, then hustled off into the kitchen.

I had fried up a stock of dungeon beef cutlets while I was making dinner the night before, so now I could use them to throw together a supply of beef cutlet sandwiches for Ugohl and the Abyss Watchers. I also bought something from my Online Supermarket to give Ugohl as a gift for his wife, Thyrza, as well as his son, Michael, and his daughter, Milana. Their husband and father had left home for weeks on end at my request, so I wanted to do something to pay them back for his absence. It just felt right.

“Thanks for waiting,” I said as I rushed back into the entryway. “It’s nothing substantial, but here. Have these to eat on the trip back.”

“I greatly appreciate it,” said Ugohl. “Your cooking is superb, so I’m sure this will be a treat for all of us. Except our guildmoron, of course. *He* won’t be getting a portion.”

Heh heh heh! No need to worry, I didn’t make him one to begin with! “And here, have this as well. It’s for your wife and children. I’m sure they weren’t happy about you going away so suddenly, and I hope this makes up for it,” I said as I passed him a bottle of hard candies similar to the ones they sold in tin containers back in Japan. “They’re a type of candy. I remember hearing that your wife was fond of sweets, and I think your kids will like them too! Just be sure to tell them not to chew them.”

“That’s most kind of you, Sir Mukohda. My family will be delighted,” said Ugohl as he accepted the bottle and carefully stowed it in his bag. “And with that, I believe it’s time for us to depart.”

“Thank you again for traveling so far for our sakes,” I said.

“Think nothing of it! And again, I apologize profusely for all the trouble our guildmoron has caused you.”

And just like that, Ugohl and the Abyss Watchers were back on the road, the latter carrying Elrand along, still bound up in chains.

I let out a sigh. “Well, I guess that wraps that up.”

“Indeed. And with that bother behind us, tomorrow we go on the hunt!”

«Ooh, I like the sound of that! That freak kept us holed up inside for so

long, I think I'm starting to go soft. Let's get out there and bring down a mountain of prey!»

«Huntiiing! Sui's gonna pew-pew all sorts of monsters!»

“Oh? Hunting, you say? A fine pastime! I shall join you!”

After weeks of Elrand-imposed house arrest, all of my familiars were chomping at the bit to go out and hunt.

“I can't say I'm excited about hunting, but you guys *were* really patient throughout all the trouble we just went through, so y'know what? Sure, I'll play along.”

And so, we were all in agreement. Tomorrow, we'd be going out for our first hunting trip in quite a long time.

Chapter 4: A Wild Behemoth

Everyone got up bright, early, and full of energy the next morning. It was finally time for our long-awaited hunting trip, and my familiars weren't about to let me forget it. They wolfed down breakfast with even more vigor than usual and were ready to go before I knew it, though I, in contrast, took my time and ate at my usual pace.

Just as we were about to set out on our excursion, Gon stopped me to make a proposal. "I've been considering the hunting grounds we could choose to visit, and I've remembered a place I believe will be quite amusing. Shall we proceed there?" he asked.

"Amusing, huh?" I said.

"Indeed. Deep within a vast woodland, a pillar of earth soars to the heavens. Upon its top lies more forest still, and within those woods live a plethora of monsters I found quite entertaining," he explained.

A pillar of earth? "You mean, like, a mountain?"

"No, not a mountain. Hmm... How to explain... Oh, of course! Imagine, if you will, the board upon which you lay our food."

The what now? "Oh... You mean our dining table?"

"I don't know what your people call it, but probably, yes. In any case, this stretch of land much resembles one of your so-called dining tables in that its upper surface lies level. Hence how a forest could grow there."

A table-shaped rock, sticking up into the sky...? My mind drifted back to a particular mountain I'd seen on a nature program on TV once. The region it was in was called the Guiana Highlands, if memory served. *Maybe the forest Gon's describing is something like that place?*

If it was, I was already prepared to reject the proposal outright. The real-world Guiana Highlands were supposed to contain a ton of largely unexplored territory, and I could easily imagine that this world's equivalent of the region would be the sort of place that no man had ever set foot in. Fel and the others had dragged me to enough crazy places that I'd developed an instinct for these things. *And that's why...*

"Nope. Vetoed," I said.

“B-But why?!” barked Gon. “The region is home to all sorts of prey that can *only* be found there! It’s well worth our time!”

“Okay, no, back up,” I said. “I don’t know exactly where this place is, but if it’s that high up, we’d have to ride on you and fly to get there, right?”

“Yes, quite. That would be the quickest and easiest way, in any case.”

“Right, and that’s why it’s out. You remember how much of a fuss they kicked up about us riding you here from Brixt, don’t you?”

Gon had to grow to his full, enormous size to fly us around, and the Adventurer’s guild had needed to go to extraordinary lengths and get in contact with all sorts of organizations to prevent people from panicking when they saw him flying overhead. I had a hard time believing they’d be willing to go to all that trouble again just so that we could go on a hunting excursion.

“So, yeah, that’s off the table. We’re gonna have to go somewhere *nearby*, okay?” I said. The area around Karelina was lousy with woods, so there were plenty of options. In fact, as a general rule, anywhere in this world that wasn’t a large city was dominated by untamed wilderness. Heavy machinery wasn’t a thing yet, so all development had to be done with man power alone, and it didn’t progress especially quickly.

“**A moment, Gon,**” said Fel, who’d remained silent up until that point.
“**Does the place that you speak of feature a lake at its center?**”

“Oh, yes, it does! There was a basin of the purest water right in the middle of the woods,” said Gon.

“**I knew it! I, too, have been there, though not since some time ago. It is indeed a worthwhile hunting ground. I’m certain there was a be—**” Fel started, but then broke off his sentence at a less-than-natural stopping point.

“A be? A be-what?” I asked.

“**N-Never you mind,**” said Fel.

Well, that’s suspicious.

“**A word, Gon. Over here.**”

“Huh? Why?”

“**Cease your questions and follow me.**”

“Now, don’t go thinking you can order me around that easily!”

“**Enough quibbling! Just come over here!**”

“If you want to talk so badly, then why don’t you come over *here*? ”

Fel caved and plodded his way over to Gon, grumbling all the while. He leaned in toward the dragon’s ear and started whispering.

“...near there...moth...quite certain.”

“Oh, is...but then...likely...not too much...then...”

“**...with our...there...it would seem...**”

“Hmm...right in...lake, there's...”

“**...upon the...it should...make him...delicious...wouldn't you...?**”



What the heck are those two talking about? Why are they giving each other that look? And why are they nodding now?

“It is decided,” said Fel as he turned to look at me. **“We shall make for Gon’s hunting grounds.”**

“Huh? Weren’t you listening to what I told Gon just a second ago? I definitely said it was off the table, didn’t I?” I protested.

“Worry not,” said Fel. **“It is not excessively far. If we ride upon his back, it will not take long.”**

“Okay, so you weren’t listening! That’s exactly the problem! Gon’ll have to get big if we ride on him, and that’ll cause a huge commotion!”

“But what if he were to become less large? If he chose a moderate size—not his full stature—the issue would be solved, would it not?”

“Excuse me?” A moderate size? What?

“Such a thing would be child’s play, I should think,” Fel said as he shot Gon a glance.

“But of course! ‘A moderate size’ would be around the same size as an ordinary dragon, yes?” said Gon.

“Indeed. That will leave ample room for us to ride upon you.”

Wait, wait, no! What do you mean, the size of an ordinary dragon? Are you two listening to yourselves? Don’t you know that an ordinary dragon showing up out of nowhere would cause a panic in all the nearby towns too?!

“Well, with that settled,” Gon said, then paused. “Oh, yes. Can’t do it here, of course. We’ll have to move outside the town first! In any case, let us be off!”

“On, no you don’t! We’re not going anywhere!” I said. “I told you it was vetoed, and I meant it! We’re going hunting somewhere *nearby*, do you hear me?”

“All too loudly. Cease your whining and climb onto my back,” said Fel, who proceeded to keep browbeating me until I reluctantly did as he asked.

«Well, sounds like we’re going to that place Gon was talking about, eh, Sui?» said Dora-chan. «If Fel thinks it’s a good spot too, I’ve got a feeling we’re gonna have a great time! I’m excited now!»

«Yeah! Sui’s super excited too!»

“I know you two are interested in the place Gon was talking about, and I’m sorry, but we’re *not* going there!” I said.

“We depart! Cease your chatter lest you bite your tongue,” said Fel.

I didn’t have much of a choice other than to take his advice and clamp my jaw shut. We made our way through the streets of Karelina, passing through the

city gates and emerging into the outside world.

“Now then, we are surely far enough from the city now, so this place will serve as well as any. The time has come, Gon.”

“Quite!”

“Wait, wait, *wait!* I said *no!*” I wailed, but Gon had made himself grow before the words even finished leaving my mouth.

“Come on, then! Climb atop me!”

«Arright!»

«Okaaay!»

Dora-chan and Sui were more than happy to hop aboard and perch themselves on Gon’s back.

“Come *on*, you two, don’t just get on him! How many times have I said we’re not going there?! I mean it! We’re *not*! How’re we supposed to get back in a day if it’s so far from here that the only way we can make the trip in the first place is to ride Gon?!”

“Well, I’d hardly call it a long journey at the speed I fly,” said Gon, “but yes, returning today is probably out of the question. We’d hardly have time to hunt at all if we did!”

“See?! I only told everyone at home we’d be going out to hunt! I didn’t say anything about us staying out overnight! They’re gonna worry about us!”

“I cannot imagine how that would be any problem for us.”

“Quit making it sound so simple, Fel! Of course it’ll be a problem! A *huge* problem!”

“Grr, enough of this! Still your tongue and get on!” Fel shouted, then grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and chucked me onto Gon’s back.

“Hey! What was that for?! Whoa, gah!” I shouted as Fel swiftly leaped aboard after me.

“We depart!” Fel shouted.

“All right!” Gon acknowledged, then soared up into the sky without waiting another moment.

Why is it that you two can only cooperate at times like these?! That’s not fair! “What do you mean, ‘all right’?! There’s *nothing* all right about this! You had better land this very instant, Old Man Gon!”

“Are you sure you should be talking, my liege?” Gon shouted. “I’m smaller than usual, which means this will be a less stable flight than last time! Careful, or you could fall!”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying you should hold on tight!”

I reflexively grabbed onto Gon’s neck and held on for dear life.

“That’s better! We’re all set, then. Away!”

“How many times have I said noooooo?!” I wailed as Gon jetted off into the sky with me, Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui on his back, soaring with ease toward a destination I wanted nothing to do with.

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“Hey! We have arrived,” said Fel as he prodded at my head. I was still clinging to Gon’s neck, my eyes clamped shut.

“Quit poking me, okay?” I grumbled irritably as I gingerly climbed down to the ground. We’d left Karelina first thing in the morning, but now that we’d finally arrived at our destination, the sun was right overhead. “For crying out loud, you guys! I said no over and over, but you just wouldn’t listen, would you?” I muttered as I glanced around, then suddenly stopped to gape at my surroundings.

“Holy... How old *are* those trees?” I murmured to myself. Even from a distance I could tell that the trees around us were absolutely enormous, their thick crowns towering over the nearby landscape.

«Oh, wooow!» squealed Sui. «Look, Master! There’s so many big trees!»

«Now *that’s* a forest with some real atmosphere,» Dora-chan added.

«You can just tell there’s gonna be some prey worth hunting in there!» He and Sui were already frolicking about with excitement.

“So, I guess this is the place you were talking about, Gon?” I asked.

“Quite,” Gon replied. “We’re toward the center of the forest that stretches across the summit of the pillar. This clearing marks the site of a pitched battle I fought long ago to bring down my quarry.”

Well, that’d explain why there’s a huge open space like this in the middle of a forest. And dang, this place might be even farther on the unexplored-wilderness side of the spectrum than I was giving it credit for... It was like a Jurassic-era jungle straight out of the movies, and I wouldn’t have been at all surprised to see a dinosaur come crashing out of the treeline. The incessant cries and roars of the local wildlife around us certainly didn’t do anything to dispel that impression either.

Little too late to worry about this now, but it looks like I’ve found myself

somewhere super dangerous, huh? I thought, my expression already spasming from stress. The rest of my party, however, had no such concerns and already looked ready to let loose.

“Enough gaping,” said Fel. **“It is time for us to hunt!”**

“You certainly are an impatient one,” said Gon. “But, well, I suppose I can’t complain. Let’s be off!”

«Hell yeah! Let’s do this! I’m itching for a fight,» shouted Dora-chan.

«Sui’s gonna beat the most monsters out of all of us!» the slime squealed.

«Oh, you did *not* just go there, Sui,» said Dora-chan. «I’ll take down the most for sure, just watch me!»

«No, Sui’s gonna beat the most!»

«All right, you’re on! It’s a contest!»

My familiars were all chomping at the bit to dash off into the woods and go hunting, but I wasn’t quite so prepared. “Hey, wait a second! What am *I* supposed to do?” I asked.

“Hm? The same as always. Stay here and see to our dinner while we are gone,” said Fel.

“Are you kidding me? You’re gonna leave me alone *here*?! Are you trying to scare me to death?!”

“I shall raise a barrier. There is nothing to fear.”

“You always make it sound so easy, don’t you? I don’t wanna be alone in a hellhole like this!” *How am I supposed to relax and cook under these conditions? Seriously!*

“Are you certain your barrier can withstand a blow from a behemoth, Fel?” asked Gon.

Hmm...? Is it just me, or did Gon just casually drop an incredibly ominous name? Was I just imagining it? “Hey, Gon? A blow from a what?”

“Hmm? From a behemoth, of course.”

“Did we not promise to keep that matter between the two of us, old one?” Fel huffed indignantly.

“Ah! That’s right! But, well, we’ve already arrived. What does it matter at this point?”

For a moment, all I could do was stand there, silently gaping at them. “Behemoths are like that thing we fought at the bottom of the Dolan dungeon, right?” I finally asked.

“Indeed.”

“So, they live here?”

“They do. Or at least they did when I was here last.”

“They were around when I visited too.”

“They’re wild? Not dungeon monsters?”

“I would have to presume as much.”

Once again, I fell into horrified silence.

«Hey, you hear that, Sui? Wild behemoths! Oh, *man*, I can’t believe I get to throw down with one of *those* again! I’m so psyched now!»

«‘Behemoths’?»

«That’s right! Y’know, like the boss we fought on the last floor of the Dolan dungeon.»

«Oooh, Sui remembers now! Sui pew-pewed it, but it was so hard it didn’t work well!»

«Yeah, that’s the one! Apparently there’s a buncha those around here.»

«Oh, yaaay! Sui can’t wait!»

I just stood there, silent and petrified, as I listened to Sui and Dora-chan’s conversation. It would’ve sounded so heartwarming if I didn’t know enough to realize how brutal of a discussion it actually was. More importantly, though...

“Nobody said *anything* about wild friggin’ behemoths, dammiiiiit!”

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The nearby branches rustled in the breeze, making me jump about a foot in the air and whirl around to face the source of the noise. “*Phew!* Just the wind, I guess,” I sighed to myself.

I was busy doing what I apparently did best: cooking. In the end, it was decided that I’d stick around in the same spot where we’d initially landed and make dinner for everyone as I waited for them to return. Fel had put up one of his barriers, and since Gon was capable of using Barrier magic as well, he’d added one of his own on top of it, giving me two sturdy layers of protection. According to them, even if a behemoth *did* show up, I could rest easy knowing it would never be able to get at me. As such, I knew I was safe...probably. *Fel, Gon, I’m counting on you two!*

In any case, the moment the barriers were up, my quartet of familiars had set off into the wilderness to hunt. I really didn’t want to be alone in a place like this and hadn’t been at all excited about how things had turned out, but Fel had gone on and on about how he’d want to eat right after he got back, so it’d be better for me to start cooking ahead of time, and he wouldn’t be able to fight at his full

strength if I went along anyway. He hadn't outright *said* that I'd just be in the way, but I could tell that was the point he was getting at with all of his excuses. Whether that was him trying to spare my feelings or not, I couldn't say, and honestly, I wished he'd just been upfront about it. That sort of consideration hurt my feelings more than having it given to me straight!

Anyway, I'd ended up telling them that I'd just wait in the clearing. Fel was probably right about me being in the way, and I didn't see any need to force myself to go along. He and the others had been all too happy to set off the instant I said so. And I do mean the *instant* too—like, *really* quickly—and with them gone, I was left all on my lonesome. Well, mostly.

“Graaauughhh...”

A bestial roar echoed from far off in the distance, and I jumped once again. Being left alone in a place like this had me freaking out at the slightest of noises. “O-Okay, calm down. Fel and Gon both said their barriers could hold up against anything! I’ll be fine!” I told myself. “Come on, deep breaths! Just focus on your cooking and block it all out!”

On the subject of cooking, I had decided to make meatballs out of the meat that Sui had helped me grind up the other day. I was planning on serving them with a sweet vinegar sauce as the main dish, and also making some extra meatballs to put in a soup on the side.

I started out by dumping a bunch of ground dungeon pork into a bowl, along with minced onions, eggs, panko, sake, sesame oil, grated ginger (the stuff that comes in a little tube), soy sauce, salt, and pepper. I mixed them all up together, paused for a second to calm down and regain my composure, carried on mixing until the meat felt slightly sticky, paused again to empty my mind and center my consciousness, then kneaded the meat for just a little longer.

“All right! That should do it,” I said to myself. With the meat mixture complete, the last thing I needed to do was form it up into balls, and the prep work would be finished. Meatballs tend to shrink when you fry them in oil, like I was planning to, so I made them a little on the larger side. Once I had them all in the right shape, I just gave them a nice, slow panfry until they turned golden brown. “Looking good, looking good!”

I lined a tray with paper towels and moved the first batch of perfectly browned meatballs onto it to drain. After that, it was just a process of frying up batch after batch after batch of the things. Considering my familiars’ appetites, I knew I’d need a veritable mountain of meatballs to satisfy them, so I just kept frying and frying nonstop.

“Phew! That should do the trick,” I finally said.

Next up was the sweet vinegar sauce. I combined water, ketchup, vinegar, soy sauce, sugar, sake, mirin, and potato starch in a saucepan, then heated it until it thickened up nicely. Once it reached that stage, I threw some of the meatballs back into my frying pan along with a scoop of the sauce, then stirred until they had a nice coating all over. Finally, I laid out some lettuce leaves on a plate and piled the saucy meatballs on top of it, finishing them off with a sprinkle of white sesame seeds.

“There we go! One plate of sweet-vinegar-sauced meatballs, ready to serve!” I took a moment to snag a meatball for myself and gave it a taste. “Ooh, ouch! Hot, hot...but good! The outside’s crispy, but the inside’s nice and soft, and the sweetness of the sauce just can’t be beat!”

I was just thinking about sneaking another meatball when suddenly, an ear-piercing roar rang out behind me.

“GRAAAAAAUUUGHHH!”

I jumped and spun around, just in time to see a massive creature that I was all too familiar with crash its way out of the treeline and into the clearing.

“A b-b-behemooth!” I shrieked. As I flew into a blind panic, the behemoth locked its gaze right onto me and made a beeline across the clearing in my direction, the ground rumbling with each massive footstep. “Wha—wait, no, stop stop stop stop! Get away! Get awaaay!”

I made the split-second choice to abandon my precious magic stove and run for dear life, but the behemoth was far faster than its massive size would have suggested. It was on me in seconds.

“GROOOAAAAAAAHHH!” the behemoth roared as it swung a huge, thick foreleg down toward me.

I’m dead! I thought, squeezing my eyes shut and resigning myself to my imminent squishing, but then... Huh? Nothing’s happening? I thought getting stepped on by something that size would finish me off instantly. How am I still conscious?

I gingerly cracked my eyes open to find a gargantuan shadow looming above me. Looking closer, I realized it was the sole of the behemoth’s forefoot.

“Fel and Gon’s barrier must be keeping it away from me! I’m saved!” I cheered. Just as I was ready to breathe a sigh of relief, though, the behemoth, seemingly irritated by its failure to smoosh me, reared back and brought its foot down again, and again, smashing away at the barrier in an effort to crush me underfoot.

“GROOOAAAAAAHHH!” *Wham! Wham! Wham!*

“S-Stop it!”

Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham!

“Okay, seriously, just give up already! How durable are these barriers, anyway? Are they really gonna hold up to this?” The barriers had saved my bacon so far, but I was starting to worry that the behemoth’s onslaught would wear through their protective capacity. “Come on, go away! Please!”

I couldn’t tell if my plea had actually worked or not, but one way or another, the behemoth ceased its assault. Or so I thought.

“Wait—oh crap, now it’s trying to bite mееееeee?!?” I wailed as the beast opened its mouth wide and brought its sharp, lethal fangs down toward me. That, however, proved just as fruitless as the stomping, and my familiars’ barrier reflected this new attack as well. The behemoth roared once more, and started coming at me from all directions in a desperate attempt to chew me to death, glaring at me all the while.

“Get lost! Go away! Hurry up and beat it, you stupid thing! And would my familiars *please* come back, already?!”

The prospect of the barrier eventually folding had me sweating bullets as I waited and prayed for the behemoth to lose interest and go away. Unfortunately, my prayers were in vain. It *did* stop focusing so single-mindedly on me eventually, but instead, it turned its attention to the pile of meatballs still sitting where I’d left them beside my magic stove.

The creature thundered its way over to my impromptu kitchen and devoured the whole pile of meatballs, along with the platter they were on for good measure. For a moment I thought it would finally go away once it was done eating, but instead it went for the stuff on the stove itself next, snarfing down the leftover oil and sauce, pans and all.

“Nooooooooo! Stoooooop! Get your horrible fangs away from my stooooooove!” I cried. *My precious magic stove’s about to get chewed to pieces!*

«Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, Sui! Wherever you are, get back here, *now!!!*» I shouted at the top of my telepathic lungs. I had no clue where they all were, and I didn’t know if my message would reach them, but it was all I could do right then.

In the meantime, the behemoth kept running rampant over my kitchen, moving on to the ingredients I’d been saving to make my meatball soup with, then wiping out all the sauces and seasonings I’d left off to the side. My magic stove was battered from all directions until it was dented, warped, and eventually

even tipped over onto its side.

By that point, the spectacle was just too much for me. I was *pissed*. “Oh, that’s *it* you behemoth son of a bitch!” I screamed as I pulled out Sui’s specially made mithril spear, charged forward, and struck at the monster with all my might! “Gah, crap! Why’s it have to be so *tough*?!” I yelped as my spear rebounded without leaving a scratch. Its blade could hardly have been sharper, but it bounced right off of the behemoth’s thick, leathery hide.

“You little... Take this! And this!” I shouted, stabbing at the beast again and again, but I didn’t have any more luck than I’d had on my first attempt. Eventually, the behemoth turned to look at me—to laugh at me, it felt like—and swung a leg in my direction.

“Bwahaugh!” I grunted as it swatted me away, sending me flying a couple dozen meters before I bounced across the ground and finally came to a rolling stop. “D-Dammiiit!”

“Graaaugh!”

“Agh, it’s here already?!”

The behemoth was right in front of me before I knew it, but instead of trying to eat me again, this time it started swatting me around like a soccer ball. It felt like it was telling me to bring out more food for it, almost.

“Oh, for crying out loud! Just go *away* already!” I wailed. I hadn’t taken any actual damage thanks to Fel’s and Gon’s barriers, but my freshly made meatballs had been stolen, my precious magic stove was ruined, and the behemoth that had caused all that damage was now toying with me. The only thing I wanted, with all my heart and soul, was for it to just *leave* already.

It took a little while, but finally, the behemoth suddenly stopped in its tracks. A moment later, it spun about and hightailed it into the woods as fast as its legs could carry it.

“Wh-What the hell?” I muttered as I watched the monster depart. I could finally breathe a sigh of relief and stand back up, only for my shoulders to slump as I once again looked over the disaster zone before me.

“Agggh, this is the *worst*!” The food wasn’t that big of a deal. I could always make more, after all. The heavily dented and damaged magic stove, on the other hand, would not be so easily replaced. “I wonder if it’s possible to repair it. Or is it too far gone...?” I muttered as I looked over the damage. I’d taken such good care of the thing up till now that seeing it reduced to so much scrap metal was deeply disheartening.

As I was standing there, shoulders slumped with disappointment, Fel and the

others finally strolled back up to our camp. “**We received your message and hurried here atop Gon’s back,**” he said, then turned to gape at the remains of my magic stove. All four of them seemed shocked by the sight. “**What happened here?**”

“What does it look like? A behemoth happened!” I shouted, then briefly explained how I’d been getting dinner ready when the creature showed up and tore the place to pieces. “At least your barrier kept *me* safe, so it wasn’t a total disaster,” I concluded.

“But of course. A two-layer barrier made by me and Gon would not be so easily breached, especially by the likes of a behemoth.”

“True!” Gon chimed in. “Your foe would have to be at least as strong as one of us to penetrate it.”

“Yeah, but it *did* eat all the meatballs I made for dinner and wreck my magic stove,” I said.

“It what?! The beast devoured our dinner?!”

“Yup. That behemoth ate it all in one sitting.”

“How dare it! If that creature believes it can pilfer my food and live to tell the tale, it will soon discover just how sorely mistaken it is!”

“Well said!” Gon declared. “Stealing food from *us* is a crime worthy of death!”

«You better believe *I’m* pissed about this too! Let’s kill that behemoth bastard good!»

“Fel, Dora...and Sui, though perhaps you aren’t following this,” said Gon. “What say you to going out on a behemoth hunt tomorrow?”

“I say that such a hunt is our obvious course of action,” said Fel. **“It seems we will have to prove that none can steal from us and live to tell the tale.”**

«Ha ha ha, you said it! That punk must think we’re a bunch of chumps, but oh boy, is he ever about to learn a hard lesson!» said Dora-chan. He, Fel, and Gon all grinned wickedly at each other.

Jeez, guys, you’re kinda freaking me out here. But I was feeling just as spiteful toward the behemoth as they were, so I had no interest in stopping them. I sure was tired, though. Now that everyone had come back and the crisis was over, the exhaustion washed over me like a wave.

«Hey, Master? Are you okay?» Sui asked, hopping over as I plopped down onto my backside.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said. “Just a little tired, that’s all.”

«Umm, Master? Sui's pretty hungry.»

“Yeah, I bet. Sorry, though. I had dinner all ready for you, but the behemoth ate everything. We’re gonna have to settle for bread and pastries tonight,” I said, then opened up my Online Supermarket’s menu and placed an order for a ton of individually-packaged snack breads.

«Aww,» said Sui. «Sui loves sweets, but Sui wanted meat for dinner!»

“Sorry, Sui. I was planning on feeding you meatballs today, but I can make them again tomorrow after we get home! You’ll just have to do without tonight.”

«Booo!»

«Eh, don’t sulk about it, Sui,» said Dora-chan. «It’s not his fault. The stupid behemoth that ate our dinner’s to blame, so we’re gonna go beat the crap out of it tomorrow!»

«The behemoth ate Sui’s meal? Then it’s a baddie! Sui’s gonna pew-pew the baddie behemoth and beat it up good!» the slime declared with a dauntless wobble. It was now fully on board with the behemoth hunt.

“Oh, speaking of which, I’ll tag along tomorrow,” I said.

“Hm? Will you, now?”

“Yeah. I’m a little scared, sure, but I’ll go anyway. That thing wrecked my magic stove, and I’m not gonna be satisfied unless I get at least one good hit in on it!”

It was settled. Tomorrow we’d hunt the behemoth, and I’d be coming along for the ride. Before that, though, we had our first store-bought bread meal in what felt like ages, gorging ourselves and then bedding down early in preparation for tomorrow.



My magic stove was far too badly damaged for me to make breakfast on it the next morning, so instead, I broke out my trusty old portable burner, which I hadn’t used in quite a long time now. I made barbecue bowls piled high with meat at my familiars’ request, and all of us ate together. Then, after we’d finished off our very substantial first meal of the day, we set out to hunt down a behemoth!

For the sake of expediency, we rode on Gon’s back to track the creature down. I wasn’t a fan of flying around, but there wasn’t much I wouldn’t have put up with if it meant getting vengeance for my poor magic stove, so I was going full steam ahead for once.

“Okay, Gon, I’m all ready!” I said once I’d climbed onto his back.

“I, too, am prepared to depart.”

«Yeah, I think all of us are on board!»

«Yaaay! Flying, flying!»

“Then let us be off!” Gon said, then flung himself skyward with a beat of his mighty wings.

“O-Oooh, crap,” I gasped as we ascended. I’d never been a fan of heights.

“I leave the search to you, Fel!” Gon shouted.

“Of course. It shall be done,” Fel said. I knew he’d be able to handle the job without a hitch. **“There! Fly that way, Gon!”**

“All right!”

Gon sped above the thick canopy of the forest, following Fel’s instructions for somewhere close to half an hour.

“**There,**” Fel finally said. I followed his gaze, and my eyes landed on a cave in the middle of the woods, much to my surprise. I probably never would’ve been able to find it without our current overhead perspective.

“Even I can tell the beast is there from this distance,” Gon said. Then he dove down toward the cave and alighted before it.

«So the behemoth’s somewhere in here, eh?» asked Dora-chan as he fluttered up to the entrance and stared into the darkness.

«Come out, baddie behemoth!» shouted Sui, who was bouncing about with enthusiasm for the fight to come. Seeing it act that way helped me cope with the nasty case of nerves that had come over me when I realized it was finally time for us to take the behemoth on.

That said, sorry, Sui. The behemoth can’t hear your telepathy.

“We know you are in there! Come out and face us!” Fel shouted into the darkness. We waited for a few moments, but no reaction came.

“You’re *totally* sure it’s in there, right?” I asked. I didn’t doubt Fel’s word, really, but I had to say *something*. You could’ve heard a pin drop in that cave.

“I am,” said Fel. **“There is not the slightest of chances that I am mistaken. The behemoth lies within.”**

Upon hearing that, Dora-chan and Sui both turned to the cave and started shouting. «Hey, behemoth breath! Get’cher ass out here and fight us already!»

«Come ooout, behemoth!»

Again, guys, telepathy. It can’t hear you at all. I couldn’t help but crack a smile at their enthusiastic but fruitless taunting.

“If you won’t come out to face us, then *we* shall come in to find *you!*” Gon

shouted, just checking to be extra sure that the behemoth wasn't going to let itself be baited out. But that, it seemed, had finally done the trick. A series of loud, pounding footsteps began to echo from the cavern's depths, moving in our direction.

"It comes!" said Fel. Everyone jumped clear of the cave's opening, and just in time.

"GROOOAAAAAAAHHH!" the behemoth roared as it thundered out from the cave.

«Ha hah! *There* you are, punk!» shouted Dora-chan.

«Sui's gonna beat you up, baddie behemoth!» Sui added. Both of them were raring to jump into action.

"You dared to steal my dinner. Death is the only suitable recompense," growled Fel.

"You've chosen foes you've no hope of besting, I'm afraid. Of course, I'm sure you know full well that the strong survive and the weak are consumed in these lands. Don't hold it against us," said Gon.

The two of them were just as ready to go as my smaller familiars. Having *all* of them take on our foe at once seemed like a little—actually, make that a *lot*—more firepower than we strictly needed, but then again, we *were* up against a raging behemoth. It was better to play it safe, in my book.

«Hey, Fel, Gon, stay outta this!» Dora-chan shouted barely a moment after that thought had struck me.

«Sui's gonna beat it up!» Sui added as it jumped into battle as well.

The two of them were really tough, no doubt about that, but just an instant before they could unleash their attacks, I noticed something that changed the situation. "Waaait!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, frantically calling them back.

«What the hell?!» Dora-chan snapped at me.

«Why'd you stop us, Master?» Sui pouted.

"Look under it! Right beneath its belly!" I said. There, hiding between the beast's hind legs, were a pair of smaller behemoths, huddled up to each other as the full-sized one stood guard over them.

«Oh, what, it's got *kids*?»

«Itty-bitty behemoths!»

There was no doubt about it at this point: the behemoth that had assaulted me had children.

"GROOOAAAAAAAHHH!" it roared, menacing us in an effort to drive us

away from its offspring. Fel and Gon unmistakably outclassed it in every way, but even with the two of them flanking it, it still held its ground, intent on protecting its family to the bitter end.

“It has children, yes. What of it?” asked Fel.

“Well, I mean, that kinda changes the situation a little, doesn’t it...? And wait a second, did you *know* it had kids, Fel?”

“But of course.”

“Well, you could’ve said something!”

“For what purpose? Do you believe that having children ought to spare it from my wrath?”

“No, I mean...there are other things to think about besides getting back at it for what it did, I guess? It’s just that it’d leave a bad taste in my mouth to kill a monster with kids, y’know? We have no idea if they’ll be able to survive without their parent.”

The mother behemoth probably had to gorge itself to make the milk its kids needed to survive. Thinking about yesterday’s attack with that added context made my desire to stick the monster with my spear vanish like it had never been there at all.

“Such is the law of nature, my liege,” said Gon. “If the children are truly strong then they will survive, come what may.”

“I concur.”

I mean, I get that, but still. “I know they’re baby *behemoths* and all, but this isn’t exactly a friendly part of the world! I’m not so sure they’ll manage to get by here,” I said.

“I tire of your incessant prattle. If leaving the children to fend for themselves bothers you so, then we shall have to hunt them as well!” Fel growled impatiently as he stepped forward.

“What? No! *Absolutely not!*” I shouted. The mother behemoth had trashed my magic stove, and just thinking about it made my blood boil, but its kids hadn’t done anything wrong at all. I couldn’t let Fel murder them for no reason!

“You are far too naive for your own good, my liege,” Gon said. “What would you have us do, then?”

That’s the real question, isn’t it...?

«C’mon, what’s our move? Are we offing the thing or not?» Dora-chan asked.

«We’re not gonna beat up the baddie behemoth?» Sui added.

Just then, I heard a pair of tiny cries coming from beneath the behemoth.

“Grauuu!”

“Gruaaau!”

The behemoth calves were shivering and whining anxiously. That settled the matter for me. I could never watch a baby animal like *that* get killed.

“Nope, we’re done here. I’m calling it off. Let’s go home.” My familiars let out a synchronized, exasperated groan, but I was unswayed. *Call me naive if you want, but this is who I am, and you’re just going to have to live with it.* “I don’t even care anymore! I can just buy another magic stove anyway. I’ve got more than enough money for it, thanks to you guys.”

Fel let out a heavy sigh. **“I suppose I should know to expect weakness and gutlessness from you, by this point.”**

“Hey! My being weak has nothing to do with this, Fel!”

“No, no, he has a point,” Gon said. “But in that case, how would you have us release our pent-up rage for the meal that was stolen from us?”

“Oh, right. I’ll just make the same thing when we get back to the house. You’ll get meatballs for dinner, don’t worry.”

«Okay, but that just means we’re coming out even, right? We’re not *getting* anything out of it,» Dora-chan grumbled.

I didn’t have a counterargument for that one. “Okay, okay! In that case, I’ll go all out tonight! I still have plenty of ground meat, so I’ll make hamburger steaks, mincemeat cutlets, and a bunch of other stuff!”

«Yaaay, hamburger steak! Master, Master, Sui wants hamburgers with that white gloopy cheese inside them!» said Sui, who was absolutely crazy for cheese-stuffed hamburger steaks.

“Cheese in yours, then. You got it! I’ll make a ton of them.”

«Yaaay! Yippee!» the slime squealed as it bounced around with glee.

“Fine, then. Let us return home. Immediately,” said Fel, who must’ve been thinking back on the last time I made hamburger steaks, because he had already started drooling.

“Gra ha ha! It seems I’ll have a chance to try all sorts of dishes I’ve never had before! I can hardly wait!” said Gon. The prospect of new foods had lured him to my side in an instant.

“All right! Let’s head home and gorge ourselves on ground meat!”

Our party once again climbed aboard Gon’s back and departed from the forest immediately.

Chapter 5: Mukohda Gets an Earful From the Guildmaster

“We’re back!” I called out as we approached my estate’s front gate. We’d landed a ways outside Karelina, made our way into the city proper, and were now finally home once more.

“I told ‘em he’d be fine,” one of the twins grumbled as I walked up to them. The two of them seemed to be on guard duty that day.

“Yeah, sorry about that! I wasn’t planning on staying out overnight, honestly,” I replied. “We ended up going a lot farther away for our hunt than I expected us to.”

“All of us adventuring types knew that you were okay, but Tony, Alban, and their families were worried sick,” one of them said.

“Sure were,” said the other. “We kept telling ‘em that it’d be crazy for something to happen to you with Fel and Gon along, but they just wouldn’t listen.”

Hah, yeah, true enough. It’d be downright shocking if something happened to me when I have a Fenrir and an ancient dragon protecting me. But putting that aside, I felt a little bad for making everyone else worry about me...though of course, it was ultimately Fel and Gon’s fault for dragging me all the way out there in the first place.

«Hey. What are you glaring at us for?»

«Have we done something to earn your ire, my liege?»

I sighed. *Y’know what? Never mind. Let’s just hurry inside and set everyone’s minds at ease.*

“I’m home!” I called out to Tony, Alban, and the rest of the men, who were all out taking care of the garden as I walked into my estate’s grounds.

“Mukohda!” shouted Alban, who was the closest to us. He immediately turned away from the tree he’d been working on to look directly at me, surprise written all over his face.

“Hey, Alban,” I said. “You’re not tending your field today?”

“I finished everything I needed to do with it this morning, actually,” he replied. “But what does that matter? I’m just glad to see you safe!”

The rest of the men had gathered up to join the conversation by this point. “Ha ha, yeah, sorry, everyone! I hadn’t planned on being out overnight, but Fel and Gon ended up taking us somewhere a little farther away to hunt than I’d bargained on.”

Everyone really did seem relieved that we—or rather, that *I*, specifically—had made it home unharmed. I felt sorry for troubling them like that, and resolved to always inform them of my plans whenever I went out in the future. No sense in making them fret over me, after all. The women, who were at work inside the main building, turned out to have been waiting for us just as anxiously, and were also transparently relieved to see us return.

“Where’d you go, big brother Mukohda?! You’re not supposed to leave without saying anything!” Lotte scolded. It seemed she’d ended up getting pretty sad after seeing the adults start to worry when I didn’t come home last night.

For the record, I told Fel and Gon over and over that I didn’t want to go all the way out there! It’s their fault this time, I’m telling you! One thing was now very clear to me: “not too far” by Gon’s standards was *extremely* far by the standards of an ordinary human. *I’ll have to be a lot more careful next time, that’s for sure.*

Anyway, after making sure that everyone had gotten a little peace of mind, I set about making the ground meat feast that I’d promised my familiars. I sort of felt like I’d been taken for a ride, considering that it was Fel and Gon’s fault we’d ended up in the godforsaken middle of nowhere to begin with, but a promise was a promise.

I remade the meatballs that the behemoth had eaten, and also threw together the meatball soup that I’d been planning on making during our trip as well. Then I cooked up the cheese-stuffed hamburger steaks that Sui had requested, and made meatloaf, minced meat cutlets, some Scotch eggs, and pretty much all the other ground meat dishes I could think of as well.

Everyone dug in ecstatically the second I set our feast out on the table. As they ate, though, Fel glanced over at Gon.

“Come to think of it, we forgot to partake of the fish in the hunting grounds’ lake.”

“Now that you mention it, I suppose we did!”

“Well, there will be ample opportunities to go back and acquire some later.”

“I’ll second that!”

I decided to pretend that I hadn’t heard them.



The next morning, Fel came up to me as I was enjoying a cup of after-breakfast coffee and told me that I should make karaage for dinner tonight. I asked him why, and he explained that they'd hunted down special varieties of rockbird and cockatrice that could only be found on that one plateau, and he was hoping that I would use their meat to make a fried meal for him.

That reminds me. With all the trouble that behemoth caused, I totally forgot to ask what sort of prey they actually managed to track down! I vaguely remembered taking my magic bag back from Fel, but I had no clue what was inside it. This seemed as good a time as any, so I went out into the garden to see what they'd caught for me. I started pulling monsters from my magic bag...and more monsters...and even *more* monsters...

"Okay, seriously, how'd you catch *this* many of them?" I asked.

"For a hunter of my might, it is trivial to bring in such a haul," said Fel.

"In fact, that bag of yours was too small to carry our spoils in their entirety," noted Gon. "We had to hold back on account of it!"

If this is what you call "holding back," I think we need to have a talk about that phrase's definition! I'd given Fel his usual magic bag, which was supposed to be an extra large one! "Now that I'm taking a closer look at them, aren't these kinda different from the normal monsters we see around here? Like, is it just me, or is that cockatrice bigger than they're supposed to be? And the color of that rockbird's feathers is a lot darker than the ones I've seen before too..."

There were some orcs among the monster haul as well, but their skin was an odd reddish shade I'd never seen on an orc before. I also noticed a weirdly huge goblin with skin that was sort of blueish-green. I couldn't even begin to imagine why they had bothered to bring it back with them.

"That would be on account of the fact that all of them are rare or unique subspecies," said Gon.

They're...what? Excuse me? Did he just say what I think he just said? "These are *all* rare subspecies?! All of them?!"

"Indeed they are! I have to assume it's the influence of the unique environment they were born in," said Gon.

"I-I mean, sure, it was a pretty weird place, but is that seriously how it—"

«Master, Master, look! Sui beat up this big one over here!» said Sui as it bounced around on top of a big brownish-skinned troll.

Yup, that's big, all right! Bigger than any of the trolls I've seen before now,

that's for sure!

«I got one too! Took out this big spider with a single magic blast!» said Dora-chan, who was hovering over a discomfitingly huge spider corpse.

I'm sorry, but what the hell is that? I gave it an appraisal and learned that it was apparently a variant of the queen nephila spider species. The explanation text also noted that it was “an unusual subspecies found only in the land of Ouranos.”

“Hey, is that place we went hunting called Ouranos, or something?” I asked.

“I do not have the faintest idea what it is called,” said Fel.

Gon, however, proved slightly more informed. “Yes,” he said, “I believe the humans who live in those parts *do* call it Ouranos, though some also call it ‘The Heavens’ Woodland,’” he said.

Well, I guess that settles it. I appraised a few of the other corpses, and all of their explanations specified that they were unique breeds found only in the land of Ouranos. *Ha ha haaa. Great. Just awesome.* There was also a two-headed black anaconda, a big green tiger with fur that looked like a camouflage pattern, and so many other monsters, it was just about enough to make me throw my hands in the air and storm back inside.

“Wonder if I can just dump all of these off at the Adventurer’s guild and let them handle it?” I muttered to myself.

Surprisingly, Fel was actually in favor of my offhanded grousing for once. **“Why not?”** he said. **“So long as we obtain the meat from those that are edible as soon as possible, I see no reason to refrain.”**

Yeah, that would be nice, wouldn’t it? Ugh...y’know what, fine, sure. “In that case, I guess we should head to the guild,” I said. I packed all the prey that my familiars had hunted down into my Item Box, and we set off to the Adventurer’s guild together.



Willem the Guildmaster burst onto the scene the very instant we arrived at the Adventurer’s guild.

“*Yooooou!*” he shouted with a scowl. “You just *had* to go and do it again, didn’t you?!”

“Huh?” I said, a little taken aback. “What did I do this time?”

“What did you do? *What did you do?!* You threw the Valenzuela branch of the guild into a state of chaos after eyewitnesses reported there was a black

dragon flying right toward them, *that's what you did!*"

Oh. Whoopsie... I'd never heard of Valenzuela before, but I could definitely guess who the black dragon in question had probably been. I'd totally forgotten thanks to the behemoth fiasco, but the fact that I'd been riding around on Gon probably *had* caused a bit of a panic in the regions we'd passed over. He and Fel had claimed that only growing to the size of an ordinary dragon would mean we wouldn't have any issues, but I wasn't at all surprised to find that it would, in fact, be a pretty big problem after all. I shot Gon and Fel a glare, which they responded to with blank looks of pure indifference.

"So. Black dragon. It was yours, wasn't it?" asked Willem. I had to assume that the moment he heard that the dragon in question had been sighted flying away from the Karelina region, he'd jumped straight to the conclusion that Gon was the one responsible.

"Well, um, prooobably, yeah," I replied awkwardly.

"Look, I'm begging you, please, just *think* about these things for once! How could you not realize that a dragon flying around in the open's going to cause a panic?!" Willem sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead.

Yup. Couldn't agree more, honestly. "I was against it, for whatever that's worth, but they kept insisting that it'd be fine as long as he stayed small enough to pass for an ordinary dragon," I explained, glaring at Fel and Gon once again. They certainly didn't seem to think this was their problem, in spite of the fact that it had been entirely their idea. The guildmaster gave them a glare as well...then looked away again barely a second later.

**Willem the
Guildmaster**

“Of course it’s not fine,” Willem said. “*Anyone* could tell you it’d be a gigantic problem! An enormous ancient dragon with human-level smarts flying around would be a *bigger* problem, sure—hell, that’d have anyone running around thinking the world’s about to end—but what you’re calling an ‘ordinary dragon’ is enough to give the average person a heart attack!”

You’re absolutely right. Can’t argue with that in the slightest. However, I couldn’t help but notice that he was making a point of very specifically aiming his lecture at *me* and not directly addressing Fel and Gon at all. *That part’s just not fair.*

“You’re their master, aren’t you? If you’re gonna keep familiars like them around, you have to keep them on a shorter leash!” Willem continued.

Ugh! I can’t argue with that either, but give me a break! They’re a Fenrir and an ancient dragon! Try to imagine the sort of stress I go through trying to control them!

“Sure, they’re a Fenrir and an ancient dragon. Sure, they’re beasts straight out of the storybooks. That doesn’t change the fact that they’re *your* familiars! You need to take your responsibilities as their master more seriously,” Willem carried on without letting up. His lecture just kept going and going.

Grrr! This is all Fel and Gon’s fault, I swear! I tried to stop them! I really did!

“But, well, I think you get the point,” Willem finally concluded. “What I’m trying to say is that you *have* to let the guild know in advance if you’re going to travel by dragon. All you’re accomplishing by taking off without a word is causing pointless panic for kilometers around, so *please*, just spare the time to get it done.”

“It won’t happen again, I promise,” I said. I was just glad his sermon was finally over. I’d had plenty of arguments I could’ve used to defend myself, but he hadn’t let me get a single word in edgewise.

«Hey, Master, are you done talking yet? Sui’s bored!»

«Whoa, Sui, better back off for now! It’s bad form to interrupt when a guy’s getting chewed out,» said Dora-chan.

You sure picked a painful subject to bother being considerate about, Dora-chan! And don’t think I don’t see you two yawning over there, Fel and Gon! Why do the actual culprits get to sit off to the side and be bored while I get an earful?! This isn’t fair!

I’ll get you back for this, I promise! Just you wait!



“There’s this, and this, and this one too,” I said as I pulled the monsters that my familiars had hunted out from my Item Box. A pile of corpses was rapidly accumulating in front of Willem and Johan, the guild employee who might as well have been appointed as my personal butcher at that point. I’d come to the guild to sell off the materials we’d obtained from Fel and the others’ exploits, after all, not to get a lecture, and once I’d made that clear, we were led into the usual storehouse to make the sale.

“Oh, and also this, and this one as well,” I continued. Adding Gon to the team had resulted in an even larger haul than usual. The pile was quickly turning into a small mountain, and while Willem and Johan had gotten pretty used to our exploits at that point, I found them gaping at the sight before them all over again.

“And I think this should be the last of them! Oof, that’s a biggun,” I said as I deposited the final monster, a colossal moss-covered frog that looked more like a boulder than a living creature and landed with a ground-shaking thud on the storehouse’s floor. An appraisal revealed that it was a giant mimic frog, a B-ranked monster that lurked in the woods, keeping perfectly still until its prey wandered close enough for it to snap it up in a single bite. Needless to say, the one I’d obtained was a unique subspecies.

Its meat was supposedly delicious, so I was hoping to get the edible parts returned to me. I was a *little* apprehensive about eating frog meat, sure, but after all the snakes I’d eaten, it felt a little silly to be picky about that sort of thing anymore. Plus, I was pretty sure that people ate frogs in my old world as well, albeit not in Japan. Most importantly of all, the self-proclaimed gourmets Fel and Gon both gave the species’ meat their seal of approval, so it had to be pretty good stuff.

“Gods,” said Willem. “This is even more than you usually bring!”

“We have Gon on the team now, so it sort of just turned out that way,” I explained.

“That’d do it,” Willem sighed. “I just hope we have the funds on hand to handle all this...”

Would you mind not staring off into the middle distance like that while you talk to me, Willem? Thanks. To be fair, it *would* be up to him and his guild to turn the high-ranking monster materials we’d brought to them into actual profit. Some of them would probably sell right away, but I assumed that others would end up sitting in their stockroom for quite some time. Of course, the ones who

were most to blame for the inconvenient surplus would definitely be my familiars and their insistence on going out hunting so often.

“So, umm, will you just want to buy a few of them this time, in that case?” I asked.

“Hmm. Give me a minute to think this though,” Willem said before lapsing into silence. The incredible amount of money and merchandise that had been moving through this guild lately must’ve made the numbers harder to balance. Of course, what was left unsaid was the fact that this situation was definitely my party’s fault.

“Whoa, what the hell? Where’d you *find* this thing?” yelped Johan, who’d been sorting through the pile of monster corpses.

Oh, boy. I guess it was too much to hope they wouldn’t notice.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Johan?” asked Willem.

“See for yourself, Guildmaster! Take a closer look at these!”

“Oh, for the—just give it to me straight, please,” Willem grumbled as he inspected the monster pile at Johan’s urging. “Hmm... They’re all big, I guess, but monsters come in all shapes and sizes, don’t they?”

“Not like *this!* Here, take a look at this troll. That should make it obvious,” said Johan, giving the troll corpse in question a slap.

Yuuup, I figured as much! Even I could tell something was up with that one! Ordinary trolls tended to be, like...a greenish-grayish sort of color. Anyway, whatever you called it, they most certainly *weren’t* supposed to be reddish-brown, like the one we’d brought in was.

“Okay, so it’s a different color,” said Willem. “What, is it a unique breed or something? Not like *that’d* be anything new for Mukohda and his lot, right? What’s the big shock?”

He made it sound like we were something of a force of nature, which I’d normally be quick to deny, but this didn’t feel like a moment that really gave me that option. We *had* kind of caused a big ol’ incident just the day before, after all.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought at first too, but then I saw this one, and this one, and *this* one... Look closely enough, and *all* of ‘em are a step away from the normal sorts you see out there. That’s when I remembered this old book I read way back whenever. I might not look it, but I’ve got quite the scholarly streak when it comes to monsters, y’know?”

O-Oh no. I was starting to get a bad feeling that Johan had sussed out where we’d hunted the monsters.

"If you weren't the one who brought all these in, I'd be laughing at myself for even considering it, but, well, this *is* you we're talking about. From you I could actually see it," Johan continued, glancing over my shoulder at Fel and Gon, who were lounging about like they owned the place.

"You can fill me in any day now, Johan! Quit beating around the bush and spit it out already," said Willem.

"First, lemme ask you one more time," Johan said as he turned to me. "Where *exactly* did you track these monsters down?"

There's no getting out of answering this, is there? But boy, actually answering is going to be just as hard! I only learned this after I was already there, but it turned out the place we'd gone hunting definitely wasn't the sort of place people were supposed to casually pop out to for a day trip. *Gah, now they're both giving me a look! Those stares are painful, guys!*

"Umm, well...we found them in The Heavens' Woodland," I said.

"Gods, I knew it," Johan said as he pressed his face into his hands.

"Hm? That's weird. I think I must've been hearing things for a second there," said Willem. "Run that by me again?"

I hate to say it, guildmaster, but the only thing you were hearing was my voice! No hallucinations here! Sure, though, I'll say it again. "I said we found them in The Heavens' Woodland. I guess it's also called Ouranos, sometimes, supposedly."

"O-O-O-Ouranooooos?!" Willem shrieked so loudly, I thought my eardrums would burst.

"I can tell what you're thinking from the look on your face, pal, and for the record, most people would react like the guildmaster just did." Johan sighed, then launched into a deeply exasperated lecture.

It seemed that a little over a century ago, a group of the era's finest adventurers had banded together to have a go at a place that was, at the time, entirely unexplored territory: the land of Ouranos. Fifty adventurers set out in the highest of spirits to seek fame and glory, but in the end, only one ever managed to return home. That sole survivor was reportedly found wandering the wilderness in a state of broken delirium. They couldn't even talk at first, and retired from the adventuring business without ever taking on another mission.

Years later, toward the end of that sole survivor's life, they wrote a single autobiographical piece describing their journey to Ouranos. The book that Johan had read was, in fact, a transcript of that very account. It described Ouranos as "a forbidden land onto which man was not meant to step, and which man could

never truly fathom the full extent of,” apparently.

W-Well, yeah, I guess that probably would be true for most normal people. A typical party would have to climb all the way up a sheer cliff face to get there, so they'd be risking their lives before the adventure even started! And there my quartet of familiars was, treating it like just another hunting ground. Ha ha ha...

Whatever cover we'd had was completely blown at that point, so I decided to just say screw it and tell them everything. I explained that Fel and Gon had both been to Ouranos a long time ago, that they thought of it as a perfectly ordinary hunting ground, and that we'd encountered all sorts of outlandish monster variants that supposedly couldn't be found anywhere else.

Willem and Johan listened to my speech, paused for a minute to chuckle once I'd finished, then let out a synchronized sigh. “Well, they *are* a Fenrir and an ancient dragon,” Willem muttered.

“They sure are,” said Johan, who had a sort of faraway look in his eyes.

I cleared my throat. “So, what's the plan? Am I going to have to take most of these back home with me?”

That seemed to snap Willem back to reality. “No, unique monsters from the land of Ouranos are in a league of their own. We'll buy all of them,” he declared immediately. I assumed his mental abacus had been clicking away frantically during the awkward silence that had fallen. “We'll have your money ready, oh...around midday tomorrow, I'd say. I'd ask for more time to collect the funds under ordinary circumstances, but I'm due to head to the capital the day after tomorrow, so my hands are tied.”

“Oh, right! Thanks again for your help with that,” I said. Willem was referring to the luxurious gifts I'd asked him to deliver to the king for me. Lambert's caravan was apparently just about ready to depart, and they were planning on leaving the day after tomorrow.

“Oh, and about the meat,” I began, but Johan cut me off.

“Yeah, pal, we know the drill. All the edible cuts are going right back to you, don't you worry,” he said. We really did seem to have an understanding. “But anyway, I've got a way more important question than that. Did you see any behemoths while you were up there?” he asked. It seemed that the sole surviving adventurer from that old expedition had mentioned the behemoths in the piece he'd written about the trip.

“There were, yeah,” I replied.

“Well, where are they, then? Don't tell me your lot couldn't handle 'em?”
Johan urged, glancing over at Fel and Gon again as he spoke.

"I mean, we *could've*, but it was a little complicated," I said, then gave him the short version of the behemoth incident.

"Oh, of all the bleeding heart stupidity." Johan sighed. "Y'know, most people would be giving you a real earful right about now."

"No kidding," Willem said in agreement. "Speaking as a guildmaster, part of me wants to drill it into your head how much damage one of those things could do to the people who live around it...but considering where all of this happened, I guess that's not so much of a factor."

Yeah, there isn't exactly anyone living on Ouranos to begin with. I'd made sure to double check that with Fel and Gon before we settled on letting the behemoths go. It hadn't escaped my notice that letting them live could've been seriously dangerous if anyone else was nearby. Between what Fel had told me and the physical barriers someone would have to surmount to even get there, though, I felt pretty confident in saying that nobody would be wandering into the region any time soon. But, yeah, it wasn't that I had *just* decided to let it go because I thought it was sad to kill a creature with kids. I did actually put some consideration into my decisions, believe it or not.

"Well, I won't get on your case for it this time, but just don't do it again if there's anyone nearby who could get hurt," the guildmaster said in a pretty stern tone.

"Understood," I said. "We're very much on the same page here."

"Oh, and while we're talking, you remember how I said I'd be going to the capital the day after tomorrow? Well, until I'm back, Johan here'll be responsible for purchasing anything you happen to bring in for us. Try to restrain yourself a little while I'm gone, though, would you?"

"You can take that to be a request from me too," said Johan. "If you bring in stuff like *this* again while the guildmaster's out, you sure as hell shouldn't expect to get paid what it's really worth. There's only so much I can do for you on my own."

"Exactly," Willem said with a nod.

"I'll, uh, do my best," I said. I would've loved to go light on the hunting while he was gone, but whether or not that would be possible mostly depended on how my familiars felt about it. *E-Eh, worst case, I'll just have to throw a bunch of stuff into deep freeze in my Item Box!*

One way or another, I'd managed to sell off all the materials from the monsters my crew had hunted. My mission accomplished, we left the guild together. "There's one more place I was planning on stopping while we're out,"

I said to my familiars. “This way!”

«**Hm? Another stop?**» Fel grunted.

«Where would that be?» Gon asked.

«We hitting up the food stalls?» Dora-chan said.

«Oooh, meat!» Sui squealed.

“Nope, no food stalls this time, Dora-chan, and we can have some meat after we get home, okay, Sui? Right now, I’m planning on heading to a magic tool shop!”

I had visited a magic tool shop in town before to buy a magical security system for my home, and I was planning on stopping by that same store again to see if they could fix up my magic stove. I knew it might be hopeless, but I was really attached to the thing, and I figured it was worth a shot. If they couldn’t repair my old one, then I would just have to try and get a new stove with similar capabilities. One way or another, a magic stove was an indispensable tool for me, and I knew I couldn’t get by without one for long!



I sighed heavily, shoulders slumped as I plodded my way home. I’d paid a visit to the magic tool shop, but as I’d feared, my magic stove was beyond saving. It wouldn’t have been *impossible* to get it fixed, strictly speaking, but I’d been told that just buying a new one would’ve been the easier option. As the shopkeeper had put it, “Hmm... If you absolutely *must* keep using this one, then I could probably get it working again, but it’s going to take a lot of time and cost a lot of money.”

I wouldn’t have minded paying through the nose to get my old stove fixed, but the time aspect was the real problem. I’d asked how long “a long time” would be, and the shopkeep had explained that considering the state it was in, it could’ve taken upward of a year to get it fully repaired. They’d have to start by fixing up all of its external components, then completely recreate the magic circles that powered the burners. That meant carting the thing around to multiple different specialists, and a stove as large as mine could apparently only be serviced by craftsmen who were especially skilled.

Finding specialists with that sort of talent would mean hauling the stove off to either the capital or Dolan, and between those specialists’ schedules and the time it would take to transport the stove, a year was supposedly on the *low* end of the time it could take to get the job done. A project that lengthy would cost a

pretty penny, of course, to the point that it would've been vastly more expensive to get my old one fixed than it would've been to just replace it.

Once I'd gotten the full story, I made the tragic but inevitable decision to give up on fixing my stove. No matter how attached to it I was, I just couldn't do without it for a whole year. Things only got worse when I asked about buying a new one, though. I explained that I wanted one with the same degree of functionality as my old one, and the shopkeeper had immediately informed me that they didn't have one in stock. It seemed that my stove had been high-end enough that only certain shops would have anything like it. Your everyday restaurant in a town of Karelina's size wouldn't be able to afford a stove like that, so the only demand came from high-end restaurants and nobles who wanted to furnish their mansions. In other words, if I wanted to replace my stove, I'd have to make my way to a larger city that experienced that sort of demand first.

The shopkeep had told me that my best bets would be heading to the capital or to Dolan. There'd be no doubt that I'd find what I was looking for in the capital, but the thing was, I had a lot of apprehensions about going anywhere near that place. I had a feeling that showing my face in the capital would get me summoned to the royal palace, and the timing made that issue all the worse, considering the guildmaster would be bringing the king my gifts in very short order. If I was actually present in the capital when he received them, the odds of him offering me an audience would skyrocket, and I had absolutely no interest in meeting with the nation's bigwigs. Frankly, it sounded like a huge pain to me.

On the other hand, going to Dolan meant being around Elrand. I'd only just seen him the other day, and if I went to his town of operations *now*, I knew for a fact he'd get the wrong idea, so that was out of the question as well. I had asked the shopkeeper if there were any places I could go other than the capital or Dolan, and according to him, "If you want to stay within the Kingdom, your next best bet would be Ronkainen. You *might* find one around Aveling as well, but I make no promises, and if those two fail you, you'll probably have to think about crossing a border."

The way he had talked about Ronkainen had made me a little hopeful, so I had asked him for more details, and he had then explained that there was a reason he hadn't brought it up initially. Apparently, the city was situated right near the borders with the Quine Republic and a number of minor nations that lay outside the Kingdom of Leonhardt, giving it ample access to a wide variety of foreign trade. It was also the third biggest city in the Kingdom, behind only the capital and Dolan.

That wasn't to say that Ronkainen was without its flaws, though. It seemed a lot of unsavory characters tended to drift across the borders with the Quine Republic and the minor nations nearby, and the city wasn't the safest place all around as a result. The political situation in the Quine Republic was apparently pretty stable at the moment, to be fair, but the smaller nations were still ruled over by local warlords who made a habit of raiding and skirmishing with each other. The people who drifted in from those nations, as a natural consequence, were typically a pretty rough bunch. That was why the shopkeeper had recommended the capital and Dolan before bringing Ronkainen up.

Once the owner of the magical tool shop had filled me in about Ronkainen, I decided I'd learned everything I wanted to and left the store behind. That brings us back to my long, sad trip home. I had considered all of my options for getting a new stove pretty carefully, and it seemed like Ronkainen was my only really valid option, but I just couldn't get over what I'd heard about the place being less than safe to visit...

Of course, it's not like I don't have a magic stove in my kitchen at home. No need to go too far out of the way to buy a new one literally right now. I decided that I would talk to everyone at home about this and hear their opinions on the matter before making my choice, then did my best to shake off my depression and pick up the pace.



Heh heh heh! I cackled inwardly with a smirk. It was finally dinner time, and needless to say, Fel and Gon were almost certainly convinced they'd be treated to a meat-filled feast, like always. Today, however, they were in for a rude awakening. I hadn't forgotten how unfair it was that I was the only one who was subjected to the guildmaster's lecture, and this was my perfect chance to get even!

If there was one aspect of our party's dynamic that I had a firm hold over and one thing that could make them regret their decisions more than any other, it was our food. How, I wondered, would Fen and Gon, the pathological carnivores, react if I served up a whole meal full of nothing but veggies? I'd slipped a few veggie-heavy dishes in here and there to get passive-aggressive payback on Fel in the past, but this time, I was planning on going all out with it.

Well, mostly all out. I'd be adding at least a *little* meat to accompany the plant matter. Dora-chan and Sui would be getting caught up in my vengeance as

collateral damage, after all, and I didn't want to make it *too* hard on them. I was planning on going even heavier on the meat after this to make up for my little stunt as well, so I just had to hope that those two would be willing to play along for one evening. They'd never hated veggies as much as their larger compatriots anyway, so I had a feeling they'd be cooperative. With that plan in mind, it was time for me to work out a truly vegetable-centric meal!

Hah hah hah! I've got a mountain of veggies from Alban's daily offerings, so I have all the raw ingredients I could possibly ask for! I'd been feeling some curry cravings recently, so I decided to go with a veggie-heavy dry curry for the night's main course, plus a side of consommé soup with just as many vegetables. There'd be a *little* meat in both of them, despite the dishes' vegetable-centric nature, so I wasn't about to let Fel and Gon complain about my choice of recipes!

Once I'd settled on my meal plan, I opened my Online Supermarket to snag all the ingredients I was missing. There wasn't much this time, really. All I had to buy was a package of mini sausages and some curry roux. I could've made my own roux, but I decided to use the store-bought stuff for the dry curry I'd be putting together today. I went with a brand that has a reputation for its smooth, mellow flavor this time, by the way.

After finishing up my shopping, I started by making the extra-chunky, veggie-filled soup. I chopped up a cabbage first, then peeled some potatoes and carrots before cutting them into bite-size pieces. Lastly, I sliced some onions into thin strips and chopped the sausages I'd bought in half.

I filled a pot with water, threw in the potatoes, carrots, onions, and consommé bouillon, and then brought the whole thing up to a simmer until the potatoes and carrots were nice and soft. At that point, I added the cabbage and sausages, keeping the mixture simmering until the cabbage had softened as well, and finished the soup off with salt and black pepper, fine-tuning the seasonings until I was satisfied with how it tasted.

Next up was the main dish: the dry curry! I started by finely chopping some onions, carrots, green peppers, and eggplant. Needless to say, I made sure I had plenty of everything! Next, I heated some oil in a frying pan and threw in a bit of ground dungeon pork and beef, plus a little grated garlic and ginger—the stuff that comes in tubes works just fine!—as well as some salt and pepper to taste. I stir-fried the mixture until the meat was cooked through, at which point I added all the chopped veggies and then continued with my stirring until they were soft.

Next, I mixed in the blended sauce I'd made out of water, ketchup,

Worcestershire sauce, and some granulated consommé bouillon, as well as the curry roux, which I had chopped up in advance to make sure it incorporated easily. All I had left to do at that point was to keep stirring until the curry roux was fully dissolved and a good bit of its water content had been cooked off!

“Oh, *man*, does that ever smell good,” I muttered to myself. It had been quite some time since I’d gotten a whiff of that distinctive curry smell, and it had me drooling already. I loaded up a bowl with freshly cooked rice, then scooped a hearty portion of dry curry on top of it, finishing the dish up with a sprinkle of dried parsley. *Yup, that looks delicious, all right! Heh heh heh, I can’t wait to see how everyone reacts. Especially Fen and Gon!*

“Okay, guys, dinner’s ready!” I called out to my familiars, who were napping in the living room. I brought out their food, presenting each of them with a bowl full of chunky, veggie-packed consommé soup and a bowl of equally veggie-heavy dry curry.

Fel was the first to react. “**What is this?**” he asked with a revolted scowl.

“What does it look like? It’s dinner! I made a really chunky consommé soup and dry curry tonight,” I said, playing it cool and acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Fel just grimaced at me.

“Is there any meat in this dish at all, my liege?” asked Gon, who sounded just plain dejected at the sight of his food.

“There is, yeah! A little less than usual, though,” I replied. *And by a little less, I mean a lot less!*

«Master, Master! There isn’t much meat in this, but it’s still really yummy!»

“Oh, it is? Thanks, Sui! Glad to hear it!”

«Yeah, I wouldn’t want food like this *every* day or anything, but it’s kinda nice every once in a while.»

“I know, right, Dora-chan? There’s plenty left, so feel free to ask for seconds!”

Dora-chan’s and Sui’s reactions were even better than I’d hoped for. The two of them dug right in without a word of complaint, and I quickly followed their example, starting with the dry curry.

Yup, that’s awesome! Nothing beats a big ol’ plate of curry and rice! I started powering through my helping, but then it struck me that even though it was already good, it’d be even *better* with a soft-boiled egg on top to help mellow out the flavor even more. Once I’d had the idea, I just couldn’t resist trying it, so I bought a package of slow-cooked, soft-boiled eggs off my Online Supermarket,

cracked one of them over my plate of curry, mixed it all together, and took a bite, making sure to scoop up plenty of egg yolk.

“Now that’s good! The way the egg rounds out all the flavors is just perfect, in my book!”

«What are those, Master?»

“Oh, these? Soft-boiled eggs! They make the curry really nice and mellow if you mix one in. Wanna try?”

«Yeah! Sui wants one!»

«Hey, those look pretty good! Gimme one on mine too!»

“Coming right up,” I said, then cracked a couple eggs over Sui’s and Dora-chan’s plates of curry and mixed them in thoroughly. “Well? What do you think?”

«Oh, wow! It really is even yummier this way!»

«Yeah, I like it! This takes the edge off the spice in a real nice sorta way.»

However, while the three of us were eating our dinner and chatting just as we would have on any other night, Fel and Gon were still just staring at their curry and soup. Neither of them had taken so much as a single bite. Eventually, Fel turned to glare at me and Gon gave me a look that just screamed, “But why, though?”

“What? If you don’t wanna eat, you’re welcome to skip dinner tonight!” I said, then casually added, “Oh, and by the way, I haven’t forgotten that *I* took all the blame for our little hunting trip even though *you two* were the ones who came up with the idea.”

“**Grrrrrr!**”

“Wha—?!”

The pieces finally seemed to click together at that point, and the two of them realized why they had been served a heaping pile of plant matter. They looked *very* unhappy about it, but they also finally dug in, wolfing down their soup and dry curry, and even asking for seconds.

Hmm. If they liked it enough to ask for more, does this really count as me getting even? Okay, that settles it. We’ll be having another veggie-packed meal tomorrow morning as well! What should I make this time, I wonder?



My plan to use last night’s dinner to get even with Fel and Gon hadn’t proven very effective, so I decided to see if dragging it out for two meals in a row would

do the trick and whipped up a breakfast that was heavy on the vegetables and very, very light on the meat. I'd always preferred light, simple Japanese food for breakfast, incidentally, so this would also be a rare treat from my perspective.

First up on our morning menu was miso soup, made with potatoes and onions from Alban's field. I also made a rolled omelet with just a little ground cockatrice meat that I'd seasoned to be wonderfully sweet and salty. All you really have to do is mix the meat and egg together, then cook it up, but it makes for a surprisingly tasty dish that's perfect for breakfast! Last but not least, I made rice balls filled with seasoned bonito flakes and simmered dungeon beef. Oh, and I also put out some lightly pickled eggplant and cucumbers to serve as palate cleansers!

When Fel and Gon saw our breakfast, their jaws dropped and they froze solid. Fel asked where the meat was, and I replied that it was in the eggs and the rice balls. He made a face like he'd just bit straight into a whole lemon. I, of course, ignored their displeasure and dug right in, savoring a rare chance to have a breakfast that was to my liking. That must have convinced the two of them that there was no getting out of this, and they once again started sulkily and silently devouring their portions. Dora-chan and Sui, on the other hand, groused a little bit about the lack of meat but were still happy to chow down and even asked for several extra helpings.

After I finished breakfast, I spent the rest of the morning taking it easy. Before long, it was time for me to get our lunch ready. I figured that Fel and Gon were probably underestimating me and assuming that I wouldn't *dare* to pull the same stunt three meals in a row, but boy were they about to get a rude awakening! My plan to get even was still in full swing, and I had no intention of stopping! Well, unless they could swallow their pride for long enough to just say they were sorry, that is.

Fel and Gon were both in a class of their own, known far and wide as being the ultimate apex predators, and the word "sorry" was barely in either of their vocabularies. Surely three veggie-filled meals in a row would get them to realize what they had to do to make it stop, though. I sure as hell *hoped* it would, anyway!

The point I'm getting at is that we were in for another high-veg, low-meat meal for lunch. I spent a little while thinking about what I could cook, and quickly decided that since I had tons of ground meat left, I'd make something that I could use a little of that and a ton of vegetables in. One recipe sprang to mind in an instant: I could make pad krapow! Well, an unusually veggie-heavy

version thereof, that is. I also figured I'd keep the Asian food theme going and use artificial crab to make some quick and easy spring rolls.

First things first, I had to stock up on the ingredients I didn't have on hand. I opened my Online Supermarket to buy fish sauce, oyster sauce, some fresh basil, rice paper, artificial crab, and a bottle of sweet chili sauce. Now that I had everything I needed, it was time to get cooking!

I decided to make the pad krapow first. I sliced some onions, carrots, eggplant, and green peppers into small chunks—around a centimeter wide or so. Then I minced some garlic and sliced some hawk claw chilis into rounds (not too many, since Sui would be eating this), both of which I threw into a frying pan with some oil to stir-fry until they were nice and fragrant. The onions went in next, and once they started to turn a little translucent, I added a mixture of ground dungeon pork and beef.

I tossed in the carrots when the meat was mostly cooked through, and when those were close to ready, the eggplant and peppers went in as well. Once the whole thing was just about finished, I added the fish sauce and oyster sauce, then gave it a vigorous mixing to really meld all those flavors together. Last but not least, I shredded and threw in the fresh basil leaves, giving them just a quick stir-fry before I pulled the pan off the burner. All I had left to do at that point was load our bowls up with white rice and scoop the pad krapow on top! Oh, and also top it with a fried egg, cooked just long enough to keep the yolk nice and runny in a separate frying pan I had going off to the side.

Next up were my quick and easy spring rolls. First, I shredded some lettuce, then julienned some carrots and cucumbers. Then I soaked one of the rice paper wrappers in warm water until it was nice and soft, piled all those veggies plus some of the artificial crab on top of it, and rolled it up. That was all the recipe took. I just had to slice them in half, line them up on a plate, and add some sweet chili sauce to the side. They were ready to eat, just like that!

Now that's a nice green lunch spread! Gotta love stuffing yourself with veggies every once in a while! All right, let's bring these out and see how everyone reacts. "Okay, guys, lunch is ready!"

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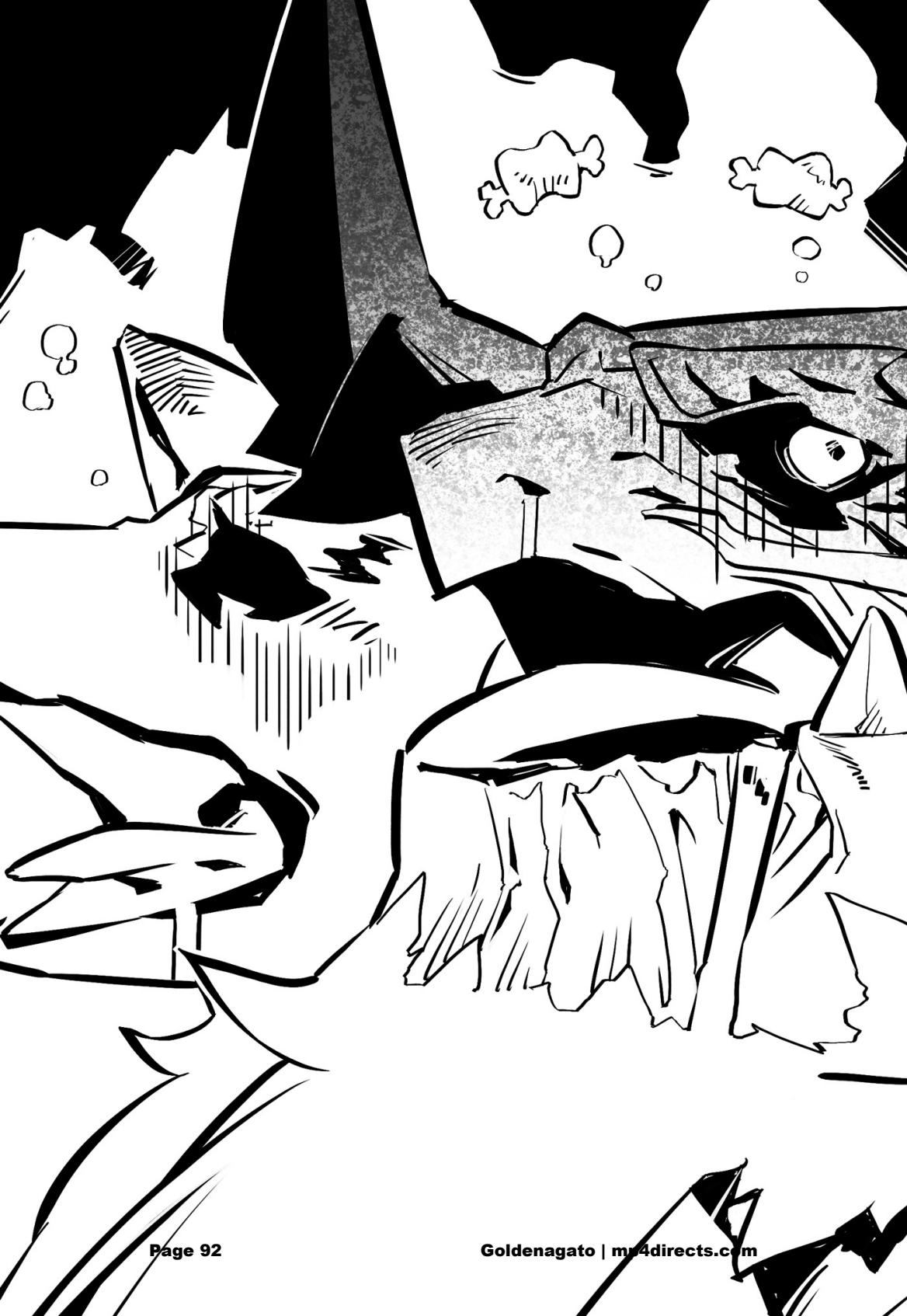
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Pfff!

I knew I shouldn't laugh, but I couldn't help myself. Just *thinking* about the faces that Fel and Gon had made was enough to crack me up. I'd brought out the

veggie-heavy pad krapow and spring rolls in the hopes that they'd further my plan to get even with those two, and boy did it ever work! The second Fel and Gon saw their meal, their eyes widened and their jaws just about fell off. The closest they could come to coherent speech were weak mutters of "**M-Meat...?**" and "**Wh-Where's the meat...?**"

When I replied, "Oh, there's meat in the pad krapow! Just a little, though," the look of despair that came over their faces was enough to make you think their world had just come to an end. I *really* wanted to tell them that not eating meat for once wasn't worth making a face like *that* over, honestly.



Of course, three meals in a row was enough to get Dora-chan and Sui griping about how they wanted to eat meat again as well. Just when I was thinking about calling the plan off and serving meat for dinner, Fel and Gon shocked me by saying a quick and succinct, “Sorry.” Three veggie-filled meals in a row had finally worn through their stubborn endurance, apparently, and seeing how downright heartbroken they looked made me actually feel a little bad for carrying it this far. To try and offset that guilt, I promised everyone that I’d make them high-grade dungeon beef and gigant minotaur steaks for dinner that night, which perked them up in an instant. *You guys are so easy to bribe, I swear.*

With our lunch wrapped up, it was time to move on to the day’s next objective. All of us headed over to the Adventurer’s guild, where we’d receive our payment for the monster materials we’d dropped off previously. I had to wonder just how much money all those monsters from Ouranos possibly could’ve earned us...



I arrived at the guild to find Willem so busy getting ready for his trip, he barely had time to talk with me at all. “The preparations for your payment are all ready! Johan will pass the money off to you,” he said before returning to his work. That was good enough for me, so I headed for the usual storehouse.

As my familiars and I shuffled into the storehouse, Johan caught sight of us and called out, “Oh, hey! You made it!”

“We did, yeah,” I said. “The guildmaster told us that you’d be taking care of us today.”

“Right, right. Hold on just a minute. Okay, umm, guess I’m supposed to break down the whole list for you first? Let’s see here...”

“Wait. Hand over the meat before anything else,” said Fel, butting into the conversation just as Johan was about to begin his explanation.

“That’s right! Hand over the meat!” echoed Gon, who hadn’t been paying attention but seemed to have reacted to the word “meat.”

Hey, guys, maybe try not to get all up in Johan’s personal space like that? You’re gonna terrify the guy!

“L-Little help, here?” Johan grunted as he shot me a desperate glance. The poor man was frozen stiff.

“Right, okay, I think he gets the point! You two can back off now,” I said.

“But the meat!”

“Indeed! The meat!”

“What, are you planning on eating it here and now? Have you started getting raw meat cravings, or something?” I asked. It wasn’t like I could cook the stuff in the guild’s storehouse.

“Raw will do! You have deprived us of meat for so long, I crave it in any form!”

“Well said, and seconded!”

I guess three mostly vegetable-based meals in a row got to those two more than I thought, huh? “Okay, okay, I get the picture!” I said, then asked Johan to bring out the meat before anything else.

“Let’s see. We’ve got cockatrice, rockbird, and orc meat here, looks like,” I said as I looked over the stock Johan handed to me. We had more orc meat than the other varieties, so I grabbed a couple of fairly small slabs and held them out to Fel and Gon. I was planning on making them an extra-luxurious steak feast that night, so I didn’t want them filling themselves up too much in advance.

“Here, have these for now!”

“Is that all?” Fel asked incredulously.

“Surely you can spare a little more, my liege?” Gon begged.

“I’m making steaks tonight, remember? The more you eat now, the less good they’ll taste when the time comes. You sure you want to spoil your dinner?” I asked. The two of them scowled, but they seemed convinced and stopped trying to argue for a larger helping.

«How about you two, Dora-chan and Sui? Want some?» I asked telepathically. They’d gotten caught up in my vegetable vengeance, so it seemed only fair to offer.

«Nah, I’ll pass,» said Dora-chan. «Raw meat just doesn’t do it for me anymore.»

«Sui doesn’t want any either. The meat that you cook is way yummier, Master!»

«Gotcha. I’ll cook up a ton of steaks tonight, so you can look forward to stuffing yourselves then!»

«Oh, you’d better believe I will!»

«Sui’s gonna eat sooo much!»

“Hey, pal! I’ve still got tons of this stuff to pass on to you. Feel like picking up the pace, or what?” said Johan.

Whoops! Right, I still wasn’t finished collecting all the meat! I quickly swept

the meat pile that was currently on the workbench into my Item Box, and Johan got back to work hauling out even more.

“All right, this should be the last of it,” he finally said as he dragged out a cart with an enormous chunk of meat on it.

That's one weirdly shaped meat lump, actually... No, wait, is that just a whole monster?

“It’s the giant mimic frog,” Johan explained. He’d peeled off its skin and gutted it, but it was still readily identifiable as the frog it had been in life. “Sure do wish you’d sell this one to us, not gonna lie,” he added.

According to Johan, giant mimic frog meat was just about as rare and sought-after as meat could be. If the guild put a frog’s worth of meat out onto the market, it was apparently guaranteed that a frantic bidding war would ensue. The stuff was just *that* highly valued. It sure did look gross and froggy to me, though, and I was seriously considering taking Johan up on the offer and selling it when Gon spoke up.

“The meat of those frogs happens to be a favorite of mine. I’m looking forward to seeing what you do with it, my liege,” he said.

Ugh... Well, I can't exactly sell it after a line like that. I felt my face twitch a little as I stowed the giant mimic frog meat away in my Item Box after all.

“All right, now I’ll go over the whole itemized list for you. First up,” Johan began, then proceeded to talk me through each and every material that the guild would be buying from me. It was way too long and way too intricate of an explanation, frankly, and the whole thing went in one ear and out the other for me. “...And that brings the total to 3,610 gold coins,” he finally concluded.

Yeeesh! Now that is one absurd pile of cash! We didn't even take on a dungeon this time! Guess I shouldn't be complaining since I'm the one who brought it all in to sell in the first place, though.

My eyes had widened with shock, and Johan let out a barking laugh. “They’re Ouranos monsters! What’d you expect?” he asked.

I had to admit that monsters that lived in an environment like that, and extraordinarily rare variant monsters at that, probably *were* just that hard to come by. Even so, I felt kind of dirty for making such a crazy amount of money from a single hunting trip.

“We got the money together in platinum and large gold coins again this time. Go ahead and count ‘em,” said Johan as he set down a small sack in front of me. I peeked inside to find it full of shiny, precious coinage.

All right, that's one platinum, two platinum, three platinum...and, thirty-six!

Plus just one large gold coin to go along with them. All the money I'd been promised was present and accounted for. "Yeah, this all looks in order," I said.

"I swear, my job's never gonna be boring when you're in town, pal," said Johan. "Here's hoping you bring something fun again next time you show up!"

"I dunno. If I keep stressing out the guildmaster, he's going to tear his brand new head of hair out by the roots, so I think I'd better take it easy for a little while," I countered.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha! You got a point there, pal!"

"Anyway, I'll see you around."

"Yup. Safe travels!"

That concluded my business at the guild, so we went on our way. As we walked home, though, I noticed that Fel and Gon were both acting awfully fidgety.

"What's going on, you two?" I asked.

«**We should return home as soon as possible,**» said Fel.

«Indeed!» Gon concurred. «And then you'll feed us our meat at once, my liege!»

Oh, that explains it. They just had a case of the not-enough-meat shakes. Come on, you two, I thought, failing to hold in a chuckle.

«**Hey! This is no laughing matter!**» barked Fel.

"I know, I know! My bad," I said. "Okay, then! It's a little early, but let's have dinner right away after we get home."

«**Yes!**»

«I always had faith in you, my liege!»

«Hell yeah, steak time!»

«Meeeat!»

The second an early dinner was on the metaphorical table, all of my familiars took off toward home.

"H-Hey! Wait up, guys!" I shouted. I grabbed onto Fel's fur to try and slow him down, but it didn't work, and *he* just yelled at *me* to hurry up instead.

Sheesh. You four just don't know the meaning of "compromise" when it comes to meals! Buncha gluttons, I swear.

Chapter 6: Charitable Contributions in the Town of Karelina

“Phew,” I sighed. We’d just finished breakfast, and I was relaxing in my living room with a cup of roasted green tea. It had been quite some time since I’d brewed tea of that variety, and I’d picked it out because I wanted something that’d be nice and easy on my stomach after the all-out meat fest I’d treated my familiars to the night before.

Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui had all taken the chance to absolutely gorge themselves on meat. I had kept grilling thick-cut steak after steak after steak, but I never felt like I was even keeping up with their appetites, much less outpacing them. I’d started with salt and pepper steaks, moved on to my usual flavored steak sauces, then tried making some with salt blends flavored with lemon, wasabi, and the like. But even after I had done all that work and had them sample each of the different varieties I’d come up with, it still wasn’t enough to fill them up, and they went straight to requesting more of their favorite kinds.

Fel and Gon had been especially meat-starved, and they’d eaten so much I had been left shaking my head in stupefied bemusement. I’d gotten caught up in the excitement and wolfed down a big, thick steak myself, but even one of them had been a little too much for me...

And yet, in spite of the outlandish pile of meat they’d eaten the night before, my gluttonous quartet had woken up the next morning and excitedly demanded *more* meat for breakfast. Fel had even gone out of his way to specifically ask for the rare cockatrice meat that we’d gotten back from the guild yesterday!

I had realized that there’d be no arguing with him, so I had pulled out the special cockatrice meat that I’d only just received and used it to whip up some cockatrice teriyaki bowls, which I’d topped with a healthy squeeze of mayo. Once again, I’d found myself sent right back to the kitchens for seconds, and thirds, and on and on. We’d gone *heavy* on the red meat the night before, but my familiars’ appetites had reminded me once again that their stomachs were *never* to be underestimated.

I, incidentally, had had some onion and potato miso soup left over from the morning before with an egg cracked into it, some braised kombu, a rice ball

filled with salmon flakes, and some pickled cucumbers and eggplant. That was just about the perfect breakfast, the way I saw it!

And with that, breakfast was over and I'd had the chance to sit back and lounge about. My familiars, meanwhile, had asked me to pour them some soda, which struck me as a pretty intense drink to be having first thing in the morning.

“Another! I will have cider next.”

“I’ll have another as well, though I’ll take the dark-colored one, myself. ‘Cola,’ was it?”

«More for me too! I’ll go with the cider, same as Fel.»

«Ooh, Sui too! Sui wants cola!»

“Okay, coming right up,” I said as I topped off their drinking vessels. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were all drinking from the deep dishes I’d bought for each of them back in Nijhoff. Fel’s was colored turquoise, Dora-chan’s was bright blue, and Sui’s was a pale purple. I hadn’t bought a dish specifically for Gon back then, but I’d gotten a fourth dark-green bowl when I’d bought the set, and it was the perfect depth for him. It would’ve been nice for him to have his own dish, but he’d only just joined up with us, and seemed to not pay much mind to that sort of thing, so I’d decided that the green bowl would work until I could get him something for himself.

I’m starting to feel a little strained in the tableware department regardless, though. I’ll have to go pick up a few more sets sometime soon, and if I’m gonna go to the trouble of making another shopping trip, I might as well get something nice, like the ones I found in Nijhoff... Oh, I know! I bet Marie would be able to tell me where I could find some decent dishes! Maybe I’ll stop by Lambert’s shop and ask her.

I wouldn’t be going dish-hunting just yet, though. I had something else that I needed to get done first today.



After we finished our post-breakfast break, we set out into town to accomplish my primary objective for the day.

“We will, of course, be visiting Ninrir’s temple first, I trust?” Fel asked.

“Nope, sure won’t,” I said. “The Goddess of Earth, Kisharle, has the closest temple to our place, so we’ll be stopping there first.”

“What?!”

“Oh, ‘what’ yourself. It only makes sense to start with the closest shrine and

then do the rest of them in order, doesn't it? We'll be going to the temple of the Goddess of Earth, then the Goddess of Water, then Wind, then Fire, and then the God of War's place. Ninrir's third in line today."

That's right, it was once again time for me to make the rounds and donate to all the local temples and orphanages! Despite the fact that I lived in Karelina, I had yet to do any charitable giving here. I'd already known that the four goddesses—Ninrir, Kisharle, Agni, and Rusalka—had churches in town, but I hadn't realized until today that the God of War had one as well.

That piece of information had made its way to me thanks to one of my slaves/employees, Peter, who was a Karelina native. It wasn't supposed to be a very large temple, and it was situated in a kind of out-of-the-way part of town, but I'd gotten precise instructions on how to get there and I was confident...well, I was *hopeful* that I wouldn't have any trouble finding it. Oh, and he'd also told me that all of the local churches had orphanages associated with them.

We soon arrived at our first destination: the church of the Goddess of Earth, Kisharle. It seemed that she had the most worshippers out of all the gods in this town. The Kingdoms of Leonhardt and Erman both boasted thriving agricultural industries, and since the Goddess of Earth was associated with the success or failure of harvests, an overwhelming majority of the people in those nations worshipped her.

I stepped into the church to find a big group of children hard at work tidying the place up. "Hold on just a moment, old man! I'll be right with you once we're finished cleaning," a lively-looking boy called out to me as he swept the hall up.

O-Old man...? That kinda hurts, for the record. "Umm, I was actually hoping to talk to one of the priests here," I said. "Would you mind finding someone for me?"

"Kay! Wait here," the boy said, then dashed off. It wasn't long before I heard his voice again as he made his way back to me. "Come on, hurry!"

"Now, now, there's no need to shove!" said another voice that I soon learned belonged to an elderly priest with a magnificent snow-white beard. The boy from earlier was literally pushing the priest toward me. "Well, now, I'm terribly sorry for the wait," he said as he stepped up to me.

"That's fine! So, umm," I began, only for the priest to preempt me.

"Mister Mukohda, I presume?" he said.

"Huh? I mean—you know me?"

"Well, of course! You're quite famous. Hoh hoh hoh!"

Famous? Me? Seriously? I thought, then glanced back at the quartet of

familiars behind me. *Okay, maybe that does kind of make sense, actually.* Fel and Gon in particular were enormous, so drawing attention was inevitable when I went out with them. Of course, I wasn't here to learn about my own reputation. I was here to offer my donation to the priest, and when I explained my intentions, he was beside himself with joy.

"Thank you! Oh, thank you so much, truly!" he said. "This town may be blessed with wealth and prosperity compared to our less fortunate neighbors, but alas, the children in need of aid are many, and we're always short of one thing or another to take care of them..."

The priest explained to me that the Earl of Karelina, Langridge, made an effort to support the church and the orphans it cared for, and as a result they were overall better off than the equivalent institutions in the nearby towns. I'd met the earl, and he'd struck me as something of a balding fop, but it seemed he knew his stuff when it came to taking care of his people. *Oh, and I guess he's not bald anymore thanks to my hair tonic.*

In any case, I handed over the three platinum pieces—the equivalent of three hundred gold coins—that I was planning to donate, and gave the priest a few big chunks of dungeon pork and beef as well, asking him to use it to treat the kids to a nice dinner. Said kids were still cleaning up around us while our conversation went down, and the meat didn't escape their notice. They started making a big ruckus before I knew it, and I quickly realized that even with the earl's backing, meat was still a very rare luxury for them. It felt pretty nice to see how happy my gift had made them.

The old priest, a nun who'd caught wind of what was going on and came around to take a peek, and the crowd of children all saw us off as we left Kisharle's church behind and moved on to our next destination. We went in order from that point, as planned, visiting Ruka's church next, followed by Ninrir's and Agni's. The clergy at each one recognized me just as quickly as Kisharle's priest had, and I was informed that between me being the town's only S-ranked adventurer and the fact that I had a huge wolf and a dragon as my familiars, there probably wasn't a single person in town who *didn't* know who I was.

Each time I made it to a new church, I explained I was there to make a donation and passed over three platinum coins and a stock of meat for the kids. The people I spoke with were all astonished by the sum of money I'd given them, but they also had the composure to graciously accept the donation and thank me for my help. I was really starting to understand that even the most

well-off orphanages still had to stretch to make ends meet.

I didn't get the full story from any of them, but from the bits and pieces I gathered, I concluded that all of them had made use of the earl's backing to take in as many children as their resources could possibly support. That, in retrospect, explained why all of the orphanages had so many kids compared to the places I'd been to before, and why I almost never saw kids living on the streets in Karelina. Between that and the fact that I was using this town as my home base, I decided it'd be a good idea to keep the donations flowing here on a fairly regular basis.

Finally, we made our way to Vahagn's church—in theory, anyway. I followed Peter's instructions to the letter, but...

"Is this *really* the place?" I wondered out loud. We'd wound up at what I could only see as an old, dilapidated home on the outskirts of town. It wasn't an especially big house either, though it did have a fairly large garden, at least. In any case, just standing in the street wasn't doing me any good, so I decided to take a look around.

"Hello?" I called out as I stepped through a gate built into the run-down wooden fence surrounding the place. It wasn't long before I spotted a few kids running around and play-fighting with wooden swords.

"Huh? Who's the old fart?" one of them asked as he noticed me.

O-Old fart...? Once again, I'd suffered brutal and unexpected emotional damage. "Umm, is this the church of the God of War?" I asked.

"Yup, sure is," said the kid. "What're you, some mercenary from another country or somethin'? You look a lil' scrawny for the job."

Excuse me, rude! You don't just call a guy scrawny to his face, kid!

"Seriously? Look behind him, moron! He's got familiars, so he's gotta be an adventurer!" said another of the kids, a girl who looked pretty strong-willed.

"I ain't no moron! Only morons call people morons!" shouted the boy.

"If you don't like it, then feel free to try'n beat me to prove me wrong! I'll take you on any time!" the girl snapped back.

Yeesh! You kids really need to work on your tempers! The boy and the girl looked like they were about to come to blows, and by that point the other kids had started egging them on. As they glared daggers at each other and the pressure built toward a breaking point, though, the house's front door burst open and an old man with an impressively large build came leaping out into the garden.

"Oi! You brats had better not be fighting again!" the man shouted.

“Gah, it’s the director! Cheese it, guys!” one of the kids shouted, and just like that, all seven or eight of them scattered to the winds.

“Ah, for the... They’re fast when they’re running away, at least,” the director grumbled. “So?” he said, turning to me. “What brings you to our door?”

“Umm, well, first off, this is the church of the God of War, right?” I asked.

“Grah hah hah! That’s what we call ourselves, anyway!” the director bellowed. “More of an orphanage in church’s clothing these days, though.”

“Right. Well, the thing is,” I began, then launched into an explanation of what I was doing. The director didn’t seem to know who I was, unlike the others I’d met with that day.

“Really?!” he exclaimed when I was finished, then turned back toward the house. “Noelia! Oi, Noelia! You better come quick!” he shouted.

Before long, an old woman emerged from the house. She looked like she was around the same age as the director, and I could tell she must’ve been a striking beauty in her youth. “What’s all this shouting for?” she asked.

“Umm, hi! So...” I then gave her the same speech I’d given the director.

“Really?!” she shouted, echoing the director’s reaction exactly.

“Yes, really,” I said, then passed them the same set of meat and three platinum coins that I’d given to the other churches. To my surprise, the director and the old lady instantly broke down in tears!

When they eventually managed to explain themselves, I learned that the two of them used to be mercenaries, and hailed from one of the many small nations that bordered Leonhardt. They’d moved here and opened their orphanage after retiring from the mercenary business. Both of them loved kids, but neither of them had ever had the chance to have a child of their own, so managing an orphanage had felt like their calling.

Running the place had been a struggle, though, and they’d received almost nothing in the way of donations recently, so they were barely staying afloat. Worse still, more and more orphans kept flowing in from their homeland, and as the scope of their operation increased, the odds of them keeping it going for much longer fell dramatically. Virtually none of Leonhardt’s citizens were devout followers of the God of War to begin with, and so they’d barely been able to squeak by on what little support the earl provided them.

The director and Noelia thanked me over and over, tears streaming down their cheeks. It was such an overblown display of gratitude that I felt pretty embarrassed—or rather, I was awkwardly at a loss as to what I should do next. I eventually managed to excuse myself, though, and they saw me off as I went on

my way. I could tell that the two of them had been through a lot, and I just hoped that my contribution would help relieve a little of the economic pressure they'd been operating under.

"All right! Next up's Lambert's shop," I said.

«Aww, we're still going more places? But Sui's hungry!»

«I, too, could do with a meal, my liege.»

«I'll third that!»

«**And I as well. We shall eat first.**»

"Ooh, yeah, I guess all those donations did take a little longer than I was counting on," I admitted. "Okay, then, how about this: we'll go home, have lunch, and *then* head over to Lambert's shop!"

My familiars gave my revised plan their unanimous approval, and so we set a course for home to stop in and fill my gluttonous quartet's stomachs.



When we arrived at home, my familiars surprised absolutely nobody by asking me to make them something meaty. I ended up cooking up a bunch of giant minotaur meat in yakiniku sauce and serving it over rice. It was a super easy meal that packed one heck of a tasty punch! Then, once we were finished eating, we headed to Lambert's shop.

«The meat you prepared for lunch was truly scrumptious, my liege! To think, there were this many ways to prepare meat that I'd never so much as heard of!» said Gon, who'd been in high spirits ever since he'd had his first bite of the yakiniku bowls.

«**Indeed there are. More than you know,**» said Fel.

«He's not kidding!» Dora-chan agreed. «Some of 'em are really out there too! He made this one thing outta these guts that dropped in a dungeon that was crazy good!»

«Ooh, yeah, in the meat dungeon! Sui really liked that stuff!»

«**Yes, I remember that dish well. I was certain that entrails could never delight the palate, but my expectations were betrayed. It was truly scrumptious.**»

«I know, right? Guts usually have that nasty *something* to 'em, right? It's not like they're inedible, but man, I never would've given them a chance on my own! *Dang*, are they ever good if you cook them right, though! One bite, and you'll be hooked for life! The flavor's just that top notch!»

«They were really, really yummy!»

I figured that all this talk about guts was them remembering the time I'd cooked offal for them. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were all excitedly reminiscing about the dish.

«Entrails?» Gon said with a rather skeptical look on his face. «But are they not always strange and foul-tasting? Could a dish with them in it truly be delicious?»

«It really could, believe it or not! That stuff was awesome,» said Dora-chan.

«**It was delicious indeed,**» Fel agreed.

«It was suuper yummy!» Sui added. I couldn't help but notice that the three of them had started drooling as they remembered it.

«Interesting! If entrails can truly be so tasty, I've a mind to try them myself. If only a chance would present itself, my liege,» Gon said as he stared at me hopefully. It seemed he wasn't exactly the subtle type when it came to begging.

«Yeah, I could go for a helping of that stuff myself! It's been a while.»

«**I would certainly not object.**»

«Sui wants to eat it again too!»

Now four hopeful stares were being directed toward me. *Sheesh, you guys too?* “Okay, okay, I get the picture!” I said. “I’ll grill us up some offal tonight for dinner. That sort of grilling makes a ton of smoke, though, so we’re gonna have to be outside, and if we’re having it for dinner, that means it’ll be nighttime. I’m gonna need one of you to put up a barrier to keep the bugs away!”

«No need to worry, my liege! I shall bear that responsibility as if my life depended upon it!» said Gon. I really wished he’d think about responsibility a little more when food *wasn’t* in the picture, but I would take what I could get.

While everyone was pressuring me into making them the dinner they wanted, we’d made it most of the way to Lambert’s store. When we arrived, I found the place once again packed with customers. Marie seemed especially busy. She was selling her soaps and shampoos to a swarm of women of all ages in her section of the store. I felt kind of overwhelmed by the thronging hoard of customers and couldn’t bring myself to call out to her, but thankfully, she noticed me pretty quickly and did the job for me.

“Oh, Mukohda! It’s so good to see you!” she shouted. “Do you need something?”

“Yes, actually. There’s something I was hoping to ask you about,” I said, then explained that I was in the market for tableware and asked if she knew a

shop where I could get some that were as nice as the ones I'd bought in Nijhoff.

"Oh, I know just the place," said Marie. "Go straight down the street, then take a turn at the second corner and it'll be right in front of you!"

Marie explained that the owner of the shop in question had quite the discerning eye when it came to the wares he chose to sell, and made a point of personally traveling to Nijhoff several times a year to buy up new stock. She assured me that anything I bought there would be high quality, guaranteed, and that she herself used a tea set she'd bought there for the tea parties she organized.

Yep! Sounds like a pretty great shop to me. Marie, I knew, had picked up plenty of business tricks from her husband, and I trusted the information she gave me implicitly. *Oh, right! While I'm at it, I should look into asking about getting the bath at my place expanded.*

"Thanks for the advice. I'll head there and check it out right away. Before I go, though, there's one more thing I wanted to ask you about," I said, then explained that I was thinking of getting my bathroom enlarged and asked if she knew anywhere I could go to commission that sort of construction project. Marie once again knew the exact place I needed in an instant, and told me about a construction company that Lambert had contracted to perform maintenance on the bathroom in their own home. She even wrote me a letter of introduction to smooth over my initial talks with them.

"Seriously, thanks so much! This is a huge help," I said.

"Oh, it's nothing! I'm available any time if you ever need more advice!" she said.

"Oh! Almost forgot," I muttered, then pulled something I'd prepared in advance out of my leather satchel. "This isn't much of a gift, but I thought you might appreciate it," I said as I showed her a bottle. It was one of the same sort of jam jar-esque bottles that her store sold its hair products in, and I'd filled it with an all-in-one skin lotion.

I'd had a feeling that Marie would appreciate beauty products more than anything else I could give her, but a full set of all the creams and lotions she'd want would've felt like a bit much. I had wanted to pick something that would work as a simple, singular gift, and an all-in-one lotion felt like the perfect option. My understanding was that lotions like it were popular since they made skincare as quick and easy as possible.

I took a moment to explain how to use it to Maire. "All you have to do is massage it in after you've washed your face, and it'll make your skin nice and

soft," I said.

"Oh, *will* it?" Marie said with a lot more interest than I'd been expecting. Her eyes were downright shining with excitement, actually. "I've always had problems with dry skin! Whenever it's arid, I have to rub myself down with oil over and over, and it leaves my skin unpleasantly greasy. It's caused me no end of troubles," she continued.

Whoops! There she goes, off into her own little world. I cleared my throat. "Well, in any case, here you go," I said as I handed her the bottle.

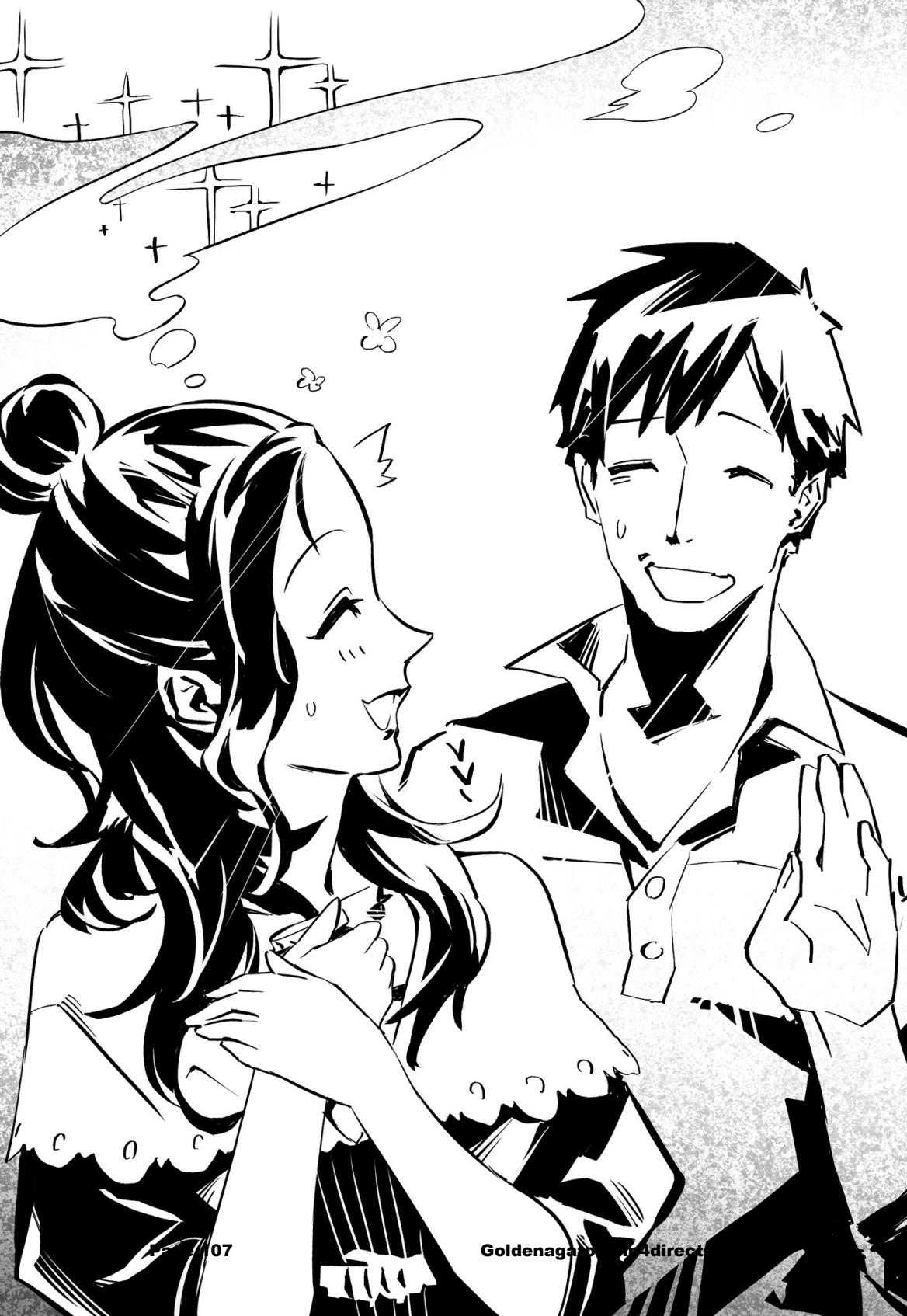
"Oh, my!" Marie said. "I'm ever so sorry! Look at me, prattling on and on like that! What an embarrassment! Ha ha!"

For all her embarrassment, she accepted the bottle of lotion without protest and held it like it was the most precious thing in the world.

"If you end up liking it, just let me know," I said. "I don't have all that much of it, but I can definitely spare a little more for you, at least."

"I'll take your word for it, and I'll be counting on you when the time comes!" said Marie.

Whoa, hold on there, Marie! The look in her eyes told me that she was *very* serious about taking me up on my offer, and I found myself so overpowered by her gaze that I ended up saying a hasty goodbye and fleeing the shop.



Phew... Maybe I should've thought things through a little more before I gave her that stuff? W-Well, it's too late to take it back now, anyway. Let's just move along!

I set my sights on my next destination: the tableware store that Marie had told me about. I was planning on talking with the construction company about my bath tomorrow, but I at least wanted to accomplish the objective I'd had when I set out and get a proper dining set for Gon before going home today.



I had Fel and the others wait outside as I entered the store that Marie had told me about.

“Welcome!” said a man who I assumed was the shopkeeper as I stepped inside. He had a fairly average build, and his most notable distinguishing trait was his small, stubby mustache. “What can I help you find today?”

“Well,” I began, then pulled my familiars’ bowls out from my Item Box to show to him. “I got these in Nijhoff, and I’m looking for something more or less similar to them, but in a different color.”

“May I take a closer look?” asked the mustached shopkeeper. I passed him the turquoise bowl. “Mhmm! These would be the work of the Firmino Workshop, I presume?”

I didn’t remember precisely which workshop had made the bowls, but that name sounded as plausible as any to me.

“Wait just a moment, if you would! I do believe I had a few Firmino pieces of a similar design somewhere around here,” the shopkeep said, then vanished into the back of the store. A short while later he returned with a bowl that looked identical in shape to my familiars’ dishes, but was colored a deep mustard-yellow. “This bowl is of Firmino make, just like yours, and it appears to have the same exact design as well! Does it suit your tastes?”

“Ooh, very nice!” I said. “That’s a great color, and it has the same sort of elegant, refined feel as the rest of my bowls.” I’d found Gon’s personal dinner dish, just as simple as that. I’d be buying that one for sure. *I just hope he actually likes it.*

I asked how much the bowl cost, and was told that it would run me twenty-one gold pieces. They hadn’t even cost twenty when I bought my other ones back in Nijhoff, but on the other hand, they were imported goods here, so I guess it was only natural that they’d be a little pricier. Getting them shipped over here

couldn't have been cheap, after all, so I decided that the markup wasn't worth complaining about and refrained from haggling. I wasn't quite done yet, though. I also wanted to buy some extra-extra-large plates for my familiars, since they were such outrageously big eaters, and asked if the shopkeeper had anything like that in stock.

"Have a look at these," he said. "They were produced by the Lawrence Workshop, whose designs have been all the rage lately!"

The shopkeeper showed me a set of very large off-white plates. They looked like they were made of porcelain, and had distinctive gold detail work lining their edges. Their size was exactly what I was looking for, and they certainly looked nice enough, but my one concern was how thin and fragile they seemed. My familiars would be eating off of these, after all, and if their fangs—Fel's in particular—happened to bump against the plates just a little too hard, I was afraid they'd shatter.

"I was hoping for something a little thicker and sturdier, if you have it," I said.

"Hmm. In that case..." the shopkeep muttered, and then he pulled out a new set of plates. They were white as well, but these were a purer, glossier sort of white, and were noticeably thicker. "These just came in the other day, as it so happens! They're a product of the Ludwig Workshop, who you'll find are an up-and-coming force in their field!"

Oh, yeah, these might be just what I'm looking for! They had that nice, fancy porcelain aesthetic to them, and I had a feeling that anything I served on them would end up looking incredible. *I'll be getting these for sure!* Being the work of a less established workshop, they only cost seven gold coins a plate. The store had five of them in stock, and I decided to buy all of them.

I spent a little while after that browsing through the store's inventory, and ended up buying five more large plates colored a sort of deep beige, as well as five big brown bowls. In the end, my total bill came out to ninety-six gold. It would've been cheaper to buy them in Nijhoff, sure, but I was still excited to have found so many dishes that suited my tastes, and decided that the trip had been a success overall.

I checked out, stowed my new dishes away in my Item Box, and then left the store. The mustached shopkeep waved me off with an elated smile.

"Thanks for waiting, everyone," I said as I stepped outside.

«Took you friggin' long enough!»

«**Indeed! The wait was interminable!**»

«There can be no doubt about *that*, my liege! Sui was so bored, it's fallen asleep atop my head.»

«Zzz.»

“Yeah, sorry about that. I’m all done shopping, though, so we can head on home now.”

«Very good. And as promised, I shall expect to dine on entrails this evening.»

«Yeah, what he said! The super tasty, hella flavorful ones we had last time!»

«I can hardly wait, my liege!»

«Mnh...food? Fooood!» It seemed the subject of dinner had woken Sui up in an instant.

“Sorry, Sui, but it’s gonna be a little longer before we have dinner! Can you wait till we get back home?”

«Okay!» Sui agreed with a happy wobble.

All right, then! Time to head home and get ready to grill some offal!



My familiars stared out the window, their gazes fixed on the downpour outside. A light shower had begun by the time we got home, and had turned into a full-blown rainstorm before I knew it.

“Sorry, guys, but we’re definitely not grilling any offal in this weather,” I said.

Gon, who had been looking forward to our dinner more than anyone, hung his head with disappointment. “My entrails,” he whined in a display of grief that really didn’t suit his rugged, draconic image at all.

“Oh, but I could still make something with offal in it that *doesn’t* involve grilling,” I said as I gave Gon a pat on the shoulder.

Gon’s head shot right back up. “Could you, truly?!” he exclaimed.

“Y-Yeah,” I said, just a little put off by how quickly his mood had turned on a dime.

“Oh, well, you could have said so to start with! So I *will* get to sample an entrail dish after all! I can hardly wait!”

“Then our meal is not to be rescheduled? Good.”

«Yeah, seriously! Woohoo!»

«Sui’s excited too!»

My other three familiars were just as excited by the renewed prospect of eating offal as Gon was, apparently.

“So then, what are you waiting for? Hurry up and cook,” Fel said as he gave my back a push.

“Hey, paws off! Come on!” I protested.

“I would be most pleased if you could prepare our meal soon, my liege. I’m beside myself with anticipation to try your dish!” Gon said, his eyes downright sparkling with glee.

«Yeah, I’m pretty hyped about this one too,» Dora-chan chimed in.

«Sui too, Master!» Sui added, making the vote unanimous.

I sighed. “Okay, okay! I’ll get cooking, so you guys can just wait in the living room till I’m done,” I said, then went off to the kitchen. “All right, guess I’d better get to work!”

I’d decided to make offal bowls. They’re a simple dish consisting of offal sautéed in a salty-sweet miso sauce, then piled onto a bowl of rice. I’d found the recipe after getting an irresistible craving for offal once and searching for new ways to prepare it online. Sautéed offal pairs incredibly well with rice, needless to say, and it’s great with a beer on the side too. That was the most important part, in my mind, and I was definitely planning on having a can or two of cold beer with my meal tonight. I guess that’s true of pretty much any offal dish, really, but in my mind the salty-sweet miso sauce made it go with beer even better than other methods of cooking the stuff.

“This recipe doesn’t use many ingredients to begin with, so I barely need anything extra at all,” I muttered to myself. The only things I needed to stock up on were doubanjiang and some green onions, both of which I snapped up from my Online Supermarket. Then I got to cooking!

I started by taking out some dungeon beef entrails. The kids at the Rosendahl orphanage had already processed the entrails for me, so I could cook with them right away. I cut them up into bite-size pieces, then blanched them in hot water. Dungeon beef innards didn’t have any of that nasty offal funk to them, so I might’ve been able to skip that step, but I did it anyway since it’d help wash off any grease that might’ve been clinging to them. Next, I cut an onion into thin wedges and sliced the green onion thin as well. Then came the sauce, which was made from miso, soy sauce, sugar, sake, ground ginger, and doubanjiang.

With that, it was time to sauté the offal! I heated some sesame oil in a frying pan, and tossed the pieces of organ meat into it. A fair amount of the offal’s fat soon rendered out, and I blotted some of it off with paper towels to make sure

the dish didn't get too greasy. Once the offal was cooked through, I threw in the onions, and when they were soft I poured the sauce in as well. Just a little more time on the heat to get everything stirred together, and the offal was ready! I transferred it onto the bowls of rice with a spoon, taking care to leave behind the excess grease that was left over in the pan, and finished them off with a sprinkling of green onion.

"A full order of salty-sweet miso offal bowls, ready to serve! And *man*, do they ever smell good!" I said. No sooner had the thought of taste-testing them crossed my mind, though, than a chill ran down my spine. I looked over to the kitchen door and found my quartet of gluttons lurking there with their gazes fixed upon me. Apparently, they hadn't been able to resist the smells emanating from the kitchen. "Ahem! I'll have these right out for you!"

My familiars dug in with incredible vigor the instant I set the offal bowls down in front of them.

"I never would've believed that innards could taste *this* wonderful, my liege!" said Gon, elated at finally eating the dish he'd been so intrigued by. Judging from how quickly he was inhaling his helping, he'd really taken a liking to it.

"It lacks the smoky fragrance the last entrail dish we ate had, but this is appealing in its own right, and suits the rice well," said Fel.

«Yeah, this isn't bad! I'll have another!» Dora-chan agreed.

«Sui thinks its yummy, and Sui wants more too!» said Sui.

"I shall have another helping as well, my liege!" added Gon.

"Coming right up!" I said. After bringing out everyone's seconds, I sat down to have my own helping. "Gotta grab one of these to go with it, though!" I said as I opened my Item Box and brought out a can of beer I'd bought from my Online Supermarket. I'd chosen a super-dry beer made by A-company, known for the distinctive silver cans it came in. Needless to say, I'd made sure it would be ice cold!

I cracked open the can, and was finally ready to eat. "Here goes," I said, then took a big bite of sautéed offal and white rice. "Mmmh, now *that's* the stuff!"

The salty-sweet offal and rice were a match made in heaven. It was a perfect flavor pairing, plain and simple! I took my time savoring that first bite, washed it down with several big, loud gulps of beer, then gasped for breath. "Ahh, this is the *best!*"

The offal bowls were pretty strong in flavor, and an ice-cold, super-dry beer was the perfect drink to serve as a palate cleanser. That left me ready to savor

another bite, and put me into a cycle I couldn't break free of. Before I knew it, I was wolfing down my meal with just as much enthusiasm as my familiars.



After having dinner and bathing, all that was left for us to do that night was go to bed. Well, for my familiars, anyway—they were already slumbering away, but I still had a little business to take care of.

“Fel’s never going to get over his anti-bath bias, is he?” I muttered to myself as I sipped a cup of café au lait. “He always *claims* that he can keep himself clean without getting wet, sure, but I just don’t buy it.”

Gon, in contrast, had very quickly taken a liking to bathing. My house’s current bathroom was way too small for someone as big as him to bathe with the rest of us comfortably, though, so he had only joined us every once in a while up to this point. I felt a little bad about that, and he’d been really excited this evening when I had invited him to join us for the first time in three days or so... *I really need to get that room remodeled to be big enough for him to stretch his legs out a bit, and soon!*

“Guess I’ll pay a visit to that company that Marie told me about tomorrow,” I said. That was tomorrow’s business, though, and I still had to wrap up today’s before anything else. There was still one more thing keeping me up: dealing with a certain recurring chore. I cleared my throat. “Umm, hey! Is everyone listening?”

No sooner had I spoken than a thunder-like rumble of incoming footsteps rang out in my mind. A voice soon followed. <*It’s about time we heard from you!*>

That must be Ninrir, right? What does she mean, “about time”? I promised I’d do this once a month, and I’m not even late!

<*We’ve been eagerly anticipating your call!*> a second voice said in my mind. <*I’ve done plenty of research in the meantime, and I’m very prepared! Hee hee hee!*>

Have I ever told you that the way you laugh is kinda scary, Kisharle? And no matter how much research you do, you have to keep in mind that my Online Supermarket’s newest Tenant is just a drug store! You’re not gonna find any crazy top-shelf or foreign cosmetics there, so go easy on me, please.

<*All right, nice! If you had taken any longer, I woulda run out of beer! You had me sweating, seriously.*>

You sure love your beer, huh, Agni? And considering how much of it I sent last time, if you're already almost out, I think you're overindulging a little.

< Ice cream. And cake. >

And there's Ruka the ice cream lover! That means next is gonna be...

< So you're here! My resolve is firm, and I know my course! What about you, War God? >

< Oh, my resolve is no less than yours, I assure you! How could I pass up the chance to drink something like that?! >

Yup, there's Hephaestos and Vahagn. Kind of weird for them to sound so serious, though, and what's all this "resolve" talk about? You guys are freaking me out here!

"All right, I'll go ahead and take your requests now! We'll start with Ninrir."

.....

.....

...

"Phew! Finally finished!"

It had taken a while, but I'd gotten all the gods' requests sorted out. Everyone had been *really* exacting this time around. I couldn't exactly blame them, seeing as we'd dialed it back to one set of offerings a month, but they'd started doing so much research in advance and going into so much detail about what items and brands they wanted, I'd ended up having to write everything down in a notepad for fear of screwing up and getting them the wrong thing.

Kisharle in particular had put an astonishing amount of effort into her research. She knew everything there was to know about all the newest products, and could talk about them in such detail that I couldn't even follow what she was saying. It wasn't like I lived in Japan anymore, so how was I supposed to keep track of all those trends? I was starting to wonder just how much time she'd been dedicating to her cosmetics studies.

This time, though, the real surprise came from Hephaestos and Vahagn, the pantheon's resident booze hounds. They'd done their homework as well, only in their case it was all about whiskey. I never would have expected them to request the item they'd asked for this time, though. The two of them were really going to some extremes, that was for sure.

In any case, I told them that I'd get them their deliveries in the evening two days from now. That meant that after visiting the construction company tomorrow, I'd have all evening to get their boxes in order.

"Looks like I've got a pretty busy day tomorrow, huh? I'd better turn in," I

said with a yawn, then made my way to my bedroom to join my familiars in dreamland.

Chapter 7: Gon's Big Secret & An Unreasonable Oracle

"I *think* this is probably the place... Umm, hello!" I called out as I peeked in the store's window, then stepped inside.

I'd gone out to take a look at the construction company that Marie had told me about, as planned. This time, only Fel and Sui were accompanying me. When the dragons had learned where we were going, they'd both instantly lost interest in the outing and had offered to stay back and house-sit instead. It felt a little silly, considering I was getting the bathroom enlarged for Gon's sake, but it seemed he wasn't fussy about the particulars of the design as long as it had a tub he could fit into.

And so I found myself at the company's office...but there was one slight problem. "Where *is* everyone?" I muttered to myself. The place seemed completely abandoned. "Umm, excuse me!" I called out again, just for good measure.

"Yes, yes, I'll be right with you!" a voice replied from somewhere in the back. A moment later an amazingly tiny old woman emerged into the front room. She couldn't have been over a hundred and twenty centimeters tall, and her face was notably age-worn. My best guess was that she was an elderly dwarf.

This wasn't my first encounter with a female dwarf, but they took me aback every time. If you're picturing them as eternally cute and girlish, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you: that image is pure fantasy. The dwarves in this world aged just as noticeably as the other races, and their women were no exception.

"Hello," I said. "Miss Marie from the Lambert Trading Company told me you might be able to do a job for me..."

"Oh! Marie sent you, did she?" the woman said.

"Yes, that's right. She also gave me this," I said, then passed her the letter of introduction Marie had written for me. "My name is Mukohda, and I'm an associate of her husband, Lambert. I was hoping you might be able to help me with an extension to the bathing chamber at my house," I continued, then gave her a rough outline of the project I was hoping her company would handle for

me.

“Well, I can’t exactly turn down a friend of Lambert’s,” the woman said when I was finished. “I hate to say it, though, but we’re up to our ears in work at the moment! No rest for the wicked, eh? Hah hah hah!” she added with a hearty laugh.

The dwarven woman (whose name turned out to be Annika) explained that her husband (a dwarf—of course—named Bruno) was the head of their construction crew, and that he might just be able to free up enough time to take a look at my house three days from now.

“All right, then,” I said. “I’ll look forward to his visit in three days.”

“Thank you kindly,” said Annika. “I’ll give my husband all the details!”

Making those arrangements meant my business was finished for the moment, so I left Annika’s office behind. Then I headed back home and made lunch for everyone, after which we all dispersed to enjoy our afternoon. My familiars wandered out into the garden to sunbathe, while I stayed inside to handle all the orders the gods had given me the day before. *Considering how picky they were being this time, I’d better be extra sure not to make any mistakes!*



Before long, the next evening arrived. My familiars hit the sack early, which made me the last one awake once again.

We hadn’t had much of anything that needed doing today, so we’d spent our time just taking it easy. Well, my familiars had, anyway. I had ended up helping my slaves/employees out with their work, since I didn’t have anything better to do. The shampoos and conditioners I bought from my Online Supermarket had become incredibly popular with the upper crust in the capital—not to mention the Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power I made, which some of them were reportedly just about ready to commit murder to get their hands on—but I had to surreptitiously repackage all of that stuff before I could put it out on the market. I’d pulled everyone in to help me with that work at some point, and I’d spent the day helping them out in turn this time around.

By now, everyone seemed to have totally mastered the task. They were able to chat with each other freely as they went about their work without missing a beat. I’d handled all of it on my own at first, so I wasn’t exactly a beginner, but they’d gotten the monotonous process down to a science, and I was stunned by their ability to fill bottle after bottle with ease and precision.

There was one small problem, though, stemming from the products' popularity: we'd been getting more and more orders in from Lambert's shop lately. I had recently started to think that it might be time for me to bring in a few more workers to lighten the load on everyone. But that would mean having to build more houses for them to live in... *Actually, I should ask Bruno about that too when he comes over to take a look at my bathroom*, I thought as I sipped my coffee.

"All right! I think it's about time to get started now," I said. I was all set to send off my usual gifts to the gods. "Are you there, everyone?"

< *We most certainly are! I've been waiting with bated breath!* >

< *Why yes, of course we're here!* >

< *All right, finally!* >

< *...We've been waiting.* >

< *The time has finally arrived!* >

< *It certainly has, War God! It has indeed!* >

The telepathic replies flooded in the second I spoke up. So, business as usual, really. The gods were all ready and waiting for my deliveries. The only thing that struck me as slightly unusual was the booze lover duo, who seemed even more hyped up than usual this time around.

< *Oh, and I heard you went around donating to the churches in this town too,* > Agni added. < *Thanks for that!* >

"Oh, of course," I replied. "I mean, I live here, after all, so I plan to continue making local donations whenever it's convenient. I'll try to keep an eye out for opportunities when I head to other towns too!"

< *Well, I sure appreciate it! Some of my people are running pretty deep in the red, so they could definitely use the help,* > said Agni.

< *Mine too!* > Ninrir piped up. < *In fact, I think most of my followers are even worse off than Agni's! Your savings are looking pretty healthy these days, so if you end up somewhere near a church that could use a hand, you should stop by to help them out!* >

I got the sense that for all her less-than-divine qualities, Ninrir was pretty concerned about the impoverished lifestyles her followers were living.

"Understood," I said. "I don't think I can help *all* of them, of course, but I'll do what I can whenever they catch my attention."

< *Very good! I'll be counting on you!* > said Ninrir.

< *Mine too.* >

"Got it, Ruka. I'll keep an eye out for your churches as well."

< I am blessed with an abundance of followers, so my churches are hardly destitute! > Kisharle remarked. *< That being said, if you ever run into one of my faithful who happens to be in need of aid, I'd certainly appreciate it if you'd help them out. >*

“Understood. I’ll see what I can do.”

< My people are all craftsmen, so it’s not like any of ‘em have a hard time making enough money to buy their own bread, > said Hephaestos. *< That said, the War God’s folks are always strapped for cash! Help ‘em out if you can, would you? >*

< Many thanks, Blacksmithing God! > said Vahagn. *< As you’ve seen for yourself, the bulk of my followers hail from a war-torn land. Battle is their forte, but many of them struggle when faced with problems they can’t fight their way out of. >*

“Don’t worry, Vahagn. I’m being totally impartial with my donations, so your people will get exactly as much as the other churches,” I said, once again struck by how uncharacteristically serious his demeanor was. The gods all seemed to drop the chatter when the well-being of their followers came up. They couldn’t influence the mortal realm directly, so I figured I might as well do what I could in their stead. I *did* sort of owe them for their blessings and the various favors they’d done for me, after all.

That was enough serious talk for the moment, though. It was time to send the gods their gifts and brighten up the atmosphere a little. “All right, I’ll start with yours, Ninrir!”

< Wonderful! Oh, no matter how many times we do this, it never stops being exciting! >

Ninrir’s request had been more or less the same as ever, consisting entirely of sweets—cakes, seasonal cake slices, and dorayaki. She was consistent, if nothing else. The seasonal offerings that were currently available included two varieties of cheesecake—one baked, one unbaked—as well as a mont blanc made with domestically grown chestnuts, among other things. She had also requested her usual whole strawberry shortcake and whole chocolate cake, as well as a few fruit tarts and an apple pie. Last but not least came her beloved dorayaki. She had asked for every variety they had—with smooth red bean paste filling, with chunky red bean paste filling, and with chestnut paste filling, all in massive quantities.

“This first box is yours! It’s ready whenever you are,” I said.

< Excellent! Many thanks! > Ninrir shouted. A moment later, the box I’d set

on the table and the preposterous pile of sweets it contained vanished into thin air. *< Woohoo! So much cake! So many dorayaki! >* she cried out, breaking into her offering the second it arrived like she always did.

< Oh, please, Ninrir, spare a thought for those of us who have to listen to you! It's my turn now, so if you must open your offerings right away, kindly do so in your own home! >

< Grr! I was going to take these home whether you told me to or not, Kisharle! Goodbye, and good riddance! >

“Goodbye and good riddance”? Seriously, Ninrir...?

< Really, that girl needs to learn to control herself one of these days, > Kisharle sighed. *< I apologize for holding things up! I believe my offering should be next? >*

“R-Right, yeah! I’ll have yours ready in just a sec.”

Kisharle had once again asked for products from the ST-III line of cosmetics, which she’d clearly taken quite the liking to. She wanted to restock on their lotion and facial cleanser, and also try out their facial sheet masks, which was a new request for her. My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when I saw what those sheet masks cost. A single pack containing six masks ran for a whole gold coin!

Aren’t those masks, like, one-time use? And if there’s six in a pack, that means that in Japanese terms, each one of them costs about sixteen hundred yen! Yeeeesh, that’s pricey! I couldn’t even imagine how anyone could bring themselves to use a product like that on the regular when every time you did, you’d be burning that much money. Kisharle had also asked for some bathing additives and body care products, so I picked out a fairly pricey variety pack of bath salts and body soaps, plus a bottle of skin oil for good measure.

“Okay, this should be all of it!” I said. “The ST-III sheet masks you wanted are all yours.”

Kisharle let out a high-pitched squeal as the box vanished away. *< Oh, I’ve been looking forward to this for so long! Thank you ever so much! Hee hee! I’ll have to try them out this very evening! >*

She’s going for those already, huh? I can’t believe she can bring herself to use them at all. I’d never be able to use something that expensive. It would feel like a waste.

< Oh, I assure you, there’s no such thing as wasteful spending when a woman’s beauty is on the line! >

Ugh! There she goes, reading my mind again! I took a second to collect

myself, then moved on to Agni. “All right, Agni, I have your offering ready next.”

< Nice! It's about time! >

Agni had asked for beer, of course. She'd started her order with her usual cases of S-company's premium beer, Y-bisu's beer, and S-company's black beer. She'd also asked for the same taste-testing packs from a variety of Japanese and international breweries that I'd gotten her last time. It seemed that she was on a big variety kick, and she'd asked me to get as diverse a range of beers as I could manage. I'd done just that, choosing a number of domestic beer sets as well as one that focused on German beer, one on Belgian beer, and one on Irish beer. I also threw in a Hawaiian set and an Australian set, just to shake things up a little.

“Here it is! Oof!” I huffed as I heaved the several boxes her offering filled up onto the table. They vanished a moment later, and soon after, I heard the sound of cardboard being torn open along with a whoop of delight from Agni herself.

< Ooh, nice! I've never even seen a lot of these before! You really know your stuff! Good work, and thanks! >

My attempt to go for variety above all else had paid off, apparently. I hadn't tried any of the foreign beers myself, of course, so I couldn't make any promises about whether or not they were actually worth drinking.

Okay, let's move right along! “You're up next, Ruka! Here's your offering.”

Ruka, as always, had asked for cake and ice cream. I was always impressed by how devoted she was to ice cream in particular. She'd asked for all the special seasonal cakes that were available at the moment, plus a broad selection of cake slices and pretty much every ice cream that was available to me, from the premium stuff to the consumer-grade tubs to the newest products on the market. The end result was an impressive quantity and variety of desserts. Not that that was anything new for her.

< Mnh. Thanks, > Ruka said as her box vanished.

Okay, that just leaves those two!

< All right! It's our turn now! >

< We've been waiting so, so long for this! >

< Well? Did you find it? >

< You would've told us if you couldn't get your hands on it, right?! >

“Y-Yeah, I did,” I said, prompting throaty gasps of glee from the two of them. “You guys really went all in this time, huh? I can't believe you actually asked for something this expensive.”

< Well, of course we did! We were researching whiskey, see, and we found someone drinking this stuff and making it look truly exquisite! >

< That's right! So we delved a little deeper and discovered what it was called! How could we not try it for ourselves after all that! >

< True, true indeed! Who could see a whiskey like that and not have to sample it? >

I'm pretty sure that's just you two, actually. They'd set their hearts on a twelve-year-old version of a domestic whiskey that came in a very distinctive bottle. They'd tried younger, less expensive versions of it on a number of occasions, but this finely aged variant was supposedly as high-class as whiskey could be. It also ran a high-class price tag, of course: five gold and seven silver for a single bottle!

I'd known that the stuff was expensive, but I hadn't imagined it would be *that* pricey before I went to check. Just a single bottle of it cost more than one god's entire monthly budget, which was why the two of them had pooled their resources to ask for it together. It was going to eat up the lion's share of both their budgets regardless, but at least they would have *some* left over, and they'd asked me to use it to buy as much relatively cheap booze as possible, prioritizing volume above all else. Otherwise, they were afraid that they might run out of booze before the month was over. As requested, I had used their remaining funds to buy up a reasonable number of cheap but perfectly decent bottles of alcohol, focusing on whiskeys as much as I could.

I set Hephaestos and Vahagn's shared box on the table, taking a lot more care with it than I usually would. "Okay, it's all yours," I said.

< Oh, yes! Thank you! >

< At long last! Many thanks indeed! >

And with that, their box disappeared too. I almost immediately heard the two of them tear into it, followed by a gasp of admiration that told me they'd just laid eyes upon their premium whiskey. It apparently came in a big, hefty box that made it very clear how much of a luxury item it was.

< We'll take our time savoring this whiskey to the fullest tonight, War God!
>

< Yes! We'll relish every drop of it! >

D-Don't tell me they're planning on drinking the whole bottle tonight? The most terrifying part was that I genuinely couldn't discount the possibility. *I-I mean, I guess that's their right if it's how they want to go about it. Not my problem, that's for darn sure.*

That meant there was just one more offering left to make: Demiurge's. Of course, in his case, it had only been a week since I'd sent his most recent package. I was keeping a very regular schedule for his offerings. I'd picked out his usual selection of sake, canned snack foods, and umeshu, which his attendants had apparently developed quite the fondness for recently. It wasn't the most groundbreaking assortment, but he always seemed grateful for anything I sent him, which made the task a lot easier in his case.

Also—and I admit, this might be a little weird to say about the God of all Creation—over the course of my weekly exchanges with Demiurge, I had come to realize that he was just a really nice, good-natured fellow all around. He was, in fact, the god I had the easiest time talking to, even if his oracles did lead me into trouble every once in a while.

All right, let's wrap this up! "Hello? Are you there, Demiurge?"



My offering to Demiurge was more or less the same as it always was. His box was mostly full of sake, with some snacks and umeshu for his attendants as well.

To start things off, I got him a set of five bottles of top-class sake from famous breweries selected from five prefectures of Japan: Kochi, Nagano, Yamagata, Yamaguchi, and Niigata. The bottles were a little on the larger side—almost two liters each—so it felt like maybe a *little* too much, but I decided to just hope he would take his time to savor them.

As for his snacks, I got him the usual selection of classy canned foods. This time around I also picked up a really nice-looking pack of dried fish that included a special sort of mackerel and a fish called a kinmedai. Dried fish like those are really good eaten over rice, but they also pair fantastically with a nice bottle of sake!

Umeshu-wise, I went for a gift set that was made from super high-class plums grown in Hokuriku, a north-western region of Japan. Demiurge seemed almost as fond of umeshu as his attendants were, and had been pouring himself a pre-dinner glass on the regular, so I also included a couple extra bottles, one made with a base of sweet potato shochu, and the other with a base of brandy.

"Here you go," I said as I plopped his cardboard box down on the table. It disappeared a moment later.

<Thank you, as always! Your consideration is greatly appreciated,>

Demiurge said.

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all,” I replied.

< You sent offerings to my associates today as well, didn’t you? They were raising such a clamor, I could hear it from all the way over here! >

“I did, yeah. I promised to send them each a box once a month.”

< I’m terribly sorry to make you go through the trouble. >

“It’s fine, really! They’re a little obnoxious sometimes, I’ll admit, but they all gave us their blessings, so I do sort of owe them.”

< Ho ho ho! The chance to get our hands on goods from another world is a rare one indeed, so it’s no surprise that even we gods would lose ourselves to excitement. That being said, we mustn’t allow ourselves to cause you undue trouble! If anyone ever crosses that line, you need only let me know. I’ll make the severity of their mistake abundantly clear to them, never you worry. >

The way you emphasized “abundantly” there was kinda scary, not gonna lie! On the other hand, Demiurge’s previous punishment did seem to have done its job. The rest of the gods had been a lot less willing to inconvenience me lately, and were less prone to sending down frivolous oracles willy-nilly like they used to as well. All that said, the mention of the blessings they’d given us reminded me of something I’d been meaning to ask Demiurge.

“By the way, there’s something I’ve been curious about,” I said. “I noticed that Gon doesn’t have any blessings. Isn’t that sort of weird? Since ancient dragons can go toe-to-toe with Fenrirs, I would’ve expected them to have a blessing or two as well.”

< Oh, I see why that would confuse you, > Demiurge said. *< The truth is that Fenrirs don’t possess blessings by virtue of their species alone! It is just that the Fenrir who became your familiar received a blessing from Ninrir at some point. I’m fairly certain that Agni and Ruka have done the same in the past. >*

“Oh, huh! I had no idea.”

< And that’s not all. Ancient dragons were my creation, you see. I brought them into this world just after I made it, and for a rather specific purpose! You might say it took a little trial and error, though. I spent so long fussing and fiddling with their particulars that I suppose I wound up having a little more fun than I rightfully should have! They turned out far more powerful than I originally intended them to be, I must admit, > Demiurge said, acting as if creating a species of unfathomably powerful dragons was just a little oopsie.

I didn’t even know where to start with that. Ancient dragons seriously came about because you went overboard on a pet project?!

< To make a long story short, I decided that bestowing a blessing upon any ancient dragons would simply make them far too powerful, so I chose to refrain from doing so, > Demiurge concluded.

If a literal god thought they'd be too powerful that way, I had to concur that it was probably the correct decision. Gon's stats were *already* broken beyond belief, after all. *Not that Fel's are all that different, I suppose.*

< Oh, your Fenrir familiar is very much an exception, > Demiurge said. *< In terms of their fundamental nature, ancient dragons should in theory be far stronger than his kind. Thanks to Ninrir's blessing, though, he as an individual has attained a level of power great enough to rival that of an ancient dragon. I would even go so far as to call him the most powerful Fenrir in history! He's quite something! >*

Gah! There's that mind reading again! I really wish you guys would cut that out, honestly.

< Oh, terribly sorry! The people of your old world do certainly value their privacy, don't they? >

We really do, yeah. All privacy issues aside, though, I was astonished to hear that Fel was the most powerful Fenrir *in history*. I'd known he was tough, of course, but I just couldn't reconcile the idea of him being the most powerful of his kind with the idea of him constantly moaning and groaning about meat this, meat that like the glutton he was. *And actually, getting back on track, didn't Demiurge just say something about creating ancient dragons at the same time he made this world? Does that mean that ancient dragons are the oldest life-forms in existence?*

< Yes, it does indeed! They can live for close to twenty thousand years, by the way. >

Man, again with the mind reading! “Twenty thousand years? Seriously?”

< Oh, very much so! The ancient dragon that serves as your familiar now is two generations separated from the very first of his kind. >

I guess this means that Gon's actually really young for his species, huh? I'd called him *Old Man Gon* because something about his demeanor just felt old man-ish, but it seemed that was a bit of a blunder on my part. *Well, it's too late now anyway. The name 'Old Man Gon' has definitely stuck.*

< Oh, that's hardly an issue! Ancient dragon or not, two thousand years' worth of experiences would make anyone come across as an elder, regardless of their life span! Ho ho ho! >

Again? Seriously?

< Oh! My apologies, but it's hardly an issue if I read your mind now, is it? Better to have it happen at a time like this than when you're imagining a lovely lady doing this or that with you, I should think! I'm sure a young man like yourself has plenty of other thoughts he'd much rather keep secret than these petty little tidbits. >

“Excuse me, Demiurge! You’re drifting dangerously deep into violation-of-privacy territory now!”

< Ho ho ho! That was all purely hypothetical, I assure you! >

Ho ho ho, my rear! Seriously, cut that out already! A-A-And for the record, I do not imagine women doing stuff like that to me at all! The point is that I value my privacy, so I really need you to stop reading my mind! I’m begging you, here!

< Oh, never you worry! I understand very well now. >

No, you obviously don’t! I sighed. At the very least, I could feel safe in the knowledge that “Old Man Gon” wasn’t a hilariously inapt name after all. “So, umm, there’s another thing about what you just said I was curious about. Can I ask one more question?”

< Of course! After everything you’ve done for me, you may ask me as many questions as you’d like. >

I think you might be overpromising a little, Demiurge! “You said something about making ancient dragons for a specific purpose, right? What purpose was that?”

< Well, to be totally honest, they were supposed to be a preventative measure and a sort of insurance. >

“Huh? What does that mean?”

< In short, I was hoping that having a race as powerful as them around would deter anyone in this world from doing anything truly foolish and beyond the pale. >

Okay, I guess that makes sense.

< Moreover, you’re aware that we gods are unable to directly interfere with the mortal world, yes? >

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before.”

< Needless to say, we gods were responsible for sowing the seeds that grew into the world you know now, as it were. Since then, though, our duty has been to sit back and observe. Nothing more. We can only watch, through all the good and bad that befalls the realms we create. And, though it may be tragic, many of those realms turn into places of unbearable disaster and tragedy. That is why we

need to have insurance, to allow us to take the appropriate measures should the world devolve in such a manner. >

“Huh? I’m not sure I follow...”

< You’ve seen your ancient dragon’s Status, yes? Do you recall seeing a skill called Ultimate Magic: Soul of the Ancient Dragon? >

“Soul of the Ancient Dragon... That does ring a bell, yeah.”

< That is a spell granted only to a single member of each generation of ancient dragons, passed down through the ages. It just so happens that your companion is its current bearer. Soul of the Ancient Dragon, as its title would imply, is the ultimate spell, powered by the caster’s very soul. It ends the world.

>

Oh...wait.

Excuse me?

You dropped that piece of info awfully casually, but hold on a second. What? Seriously, what?! Whaaaaaat?! It ends the world? Like, this one? It ends it?!

“It whaaaaaaaaat?!”

< Ho ho ho, no need to worry! Your familiar is more than satisfied with the world as it stands, and is enjoying his life greatly. He hasn’t the slightest intention of ending the world, I’m sure! Moreover, Soul of the Ancient Dragon cannot be cast without my express permission. >

Wait, no, that’s not reassuring! That means that if you do decide to give your permission, he could end the world whenever he feels like it!

< Well, yes, I suppose so. Let it not be forgotten that I am the God of All Creation! >

“Again, you’re being *really friggin’ casual* about all this!”

< Ho ho ho! Really, there’s no cause for concern! I still have ample hope for this world and its future! >

“That’s nice to hear and all, but there’s plenty of bad stuff in this world too! Have you *heard* what they say about the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov?” I asked. That nation was apparently a dictatorial theocracy with a staunch policy of human supremacy, and other nations that had designated the Church of Rubanov as their state religion supposedly weren’t much better. I’d had the misfortune of meeting a few representatives of the church just recently, and their attitudes had told me all that I needed to know about the place.

< Well, yes, it’s true. Every world has its fair share of fools. Still, you’ve no need to worry. After all, you’re perfectly well-equipped to handle a matter like that yourself! I’m expecting great things from you! >

“Huh? Wait, what does that mean? When did I end up being responsible for any of this? You’re being really unreasonable today, Demiurge! Please stop it!”

< It’s all right, trust me! There’s no need for you to handle it right away! Just pop over there and take care of them when you have a moment to spare. I’m sure you’ll be able to quiet those imbeciles down with ease. >

“No, seriously, stop trying to dump this on my head! If all it would take is me ‘popping over there’ to talk to them, then couldn’t you just send them an oracle or two and be done with it?!”

< Alas, their religion is founded upon fraud, and the swindlers in its upper ranks would never lend an ear to a god, not even one such as I! What this situation needs is a judicious application of force. You know, twist their arms a little! >

“Twist the arm of a religious dictatorship?!” Me and what army?!

< Why, isn’t it obvious? You have the mightiest Fenrir in the world and an ancient dragon at your beck and call! It’ll be child’s play! >

Again, you’re taking all of this way too lightly! Why me, anyway?! Isn’t this the sort of thing heroes are for? I’m just a victim from another world, for crying out loud!

< Well, that’s all there is to say about that! I’m counting on you, and you can look forward to something nice once you’ve won the day! Fare thee well! >

“Ah, hey! Wait a second! Demiurge?!”

< No hurry, mind you! Just handle it whenever you can spare a moment! >

With that, Demiurge’s voice vanished from my mind.

“Oh, for the—you’ve got to be kidding me! This is just too much, even for the gods! And hold on...what was that about ‘something nice’ waiting for me? What does that mean?”

Is my catastrophically unlucky love life finally going to get a boost? Am I going to meet my future bride?! No, no, don’t let him tempt you! You know perfectly well that getting your hopes up for something like that is just going to end in you taking another pathetic pratfall!

But, like...maybe I can get my hopes up just a little?

“What do you mean ‘something nice’?! Demiuuuuuurge!”

My anguished cry was met with no answer whatsoever, and I crawled into bed with a mess of worries and anxieties dominating my mind.

Chapter 8: Nothing Beats a Nice Bath

I had a really hard time deciding whether or not I should tell everyone about Demiurge's unfortunate and entirely unreasonable oracle. In the end, I resolved to put the matter on ice for the moment. He *had* told me that I could take care of it when I had time to spare, after all, so it clearly wasn't a top priority for him, and I *was* pretty busy at the moment. I figured that I'd deal with all of my current projects, *then* put some real thought into what to do about his request.

In short, I decided to procrastinate on it. I had plenty of stuff to get done in the meantime, though!

First up was the matter of my bathroom's expansion. Today was the day that someone from the construction company was supposed to come by and take a look at my home. Tabatha and Peter were on gate duty, so I explained the situation to them and told them that if a construction worker named Bruno showed up, they should bring him straight to me.

I had breakfast with my familiars, and was just settling in for a cup of after-meal coffee when I heard a knock on the door.

"Are you in, Mister Mukohda? Bruno is here to see you," Peter called from outside.

"Great! I'll be right there!" I shouted back.

When I opened the front door I found Tabatha, Peter, and three stocky, bearded dwarves standing outside. "Hi!" I said. "My name's Mukohda. Thanks for coming out here today."

"No worries," one of the dwarves said. "Name's Bruno, and thanks for the business. We're just here to scope things out today, but I brought a couple of my men to help with the assessment."

"That's fine! Come inside, please," I said, ushering Bruno and his fellow construction workers into my house.

"All right, then. We'll be headed back to our post," Tabatha told me.

"Got it," I replied.

"C'mon, Pete, let's move," she said to her partner.

"Sure," Peter said. With that, the two of them headed back toward the front gate.

Hmm? I thought, cocking my head as I watched them go. *Is it just me, or do those two seem...I dunno, kinda chummy?* I was pretty curious, but I didn't have the time to pry, given that Bruno and his men were waiting on me.

"Okay! I'll show you right to the bathroom," I said.

"Arright," Bruno grunted, then followed along after me. He let out a whistle of admiration as he stepped into my bathing chamber. "You've got a pretty big one already, don't you? And you still want it *bigger*?" he asked, sounding downright mystified.

I had to admit that he had a point. My house's current bathroom was already more than large enough...or at least, it would've been for an ordinary person. I, however, had some special circumstances, which I quickly explained to Bruno and his men. Then I decided I might as well let them see what I was dealing with in person and led them to my living room where all four of my familiars were currently lounging about.

Dwarves were supposedly known for their innate dauntlessness, but none of them could conceal their shock when they saw Fel and Gon. "You bathe with your familiars, huh? And you're looking to get your bathroom expanded just for them? Guess S-ranked adventurers really do live the good life," Bruno muttered. It seemed my reputation had preceded me.

I certainly couldn't deny that I had plenty of money, but the fact that my familiars had earned all of it for me sort of altered the equation, in my mind. Plus, I was only doing this in the first place because Gon liked baths so much! Well, that and because having the bathroom be larger would make life easier on the rare occasion I coaxed Fel into joining us. He didn't *like* baths, but I still managed to drag him into one every once in a while.

After that, we got into the nitty gritty of discussing the renovation. To start with, we had to talk about the actual bath itself. Baths in this world were really expensive, after all. They were made with an elaborate process that involved grinding up magic stones and using them to create a sort of ceramic material, which made them a truly pricey luxury item. Some of them were lavishly decorated in flashy colors and with intricate paintings as well, making them even pricier still. In the worst-case scenario, the bath itself might end up being even more expensive than the renovations!

For all of those reasons, plus the fact that personal taste was such an important consideration, apparently choosing the bath was usually left up to the property owner. That seemed reasonable enough to me, so I decided to go that route as well, and resolved to visit the Illario Trading Company the next day. I'd

bought my first bathtub from them after Lambert pointed me in their direction.

We went on to discuss the details of the construction. In particular, Bruno asked whether I wanted them to remove an exterior wall and build out, or take down one of the interior walls and use space currently occupied by a neighboring room. Building out would mean that I wouldn't have to alter the rest of my house's layout at all, and we wouldn't lose any space, but expanding the outer walls like that would take a lot longer and would add an unsightly bulge to my house's otherwise clean and regular perimeter. Not exactly great for its aesthetics. Taking down an interior wall, on the other hand, would naturally mean having less room, but would also speed up the construction time considerably.

In short, I was faced with a choice between space and speed. In the end, I chose to prioritize the latter and asked them to take down an interior wall. According to Bruno, four days would be plenty of time to finish up the renovation if they did it like that, and honestly, I'd never really used the room next to the bathroom much anyway.

We finished up our discussion, and scheduled the construction to begin the day after tomorrow. I still had one more objective, though. "There's one more thing I was hoping to talk to you about, Bruno," I said, then explained that I was considering bringing a few more slaves/employees into my staff, and was wondering if his company would be able to take on the task of building a house for them.

I already had a plot of land in mind for the new structure, and led Bruno out behind my estate's main building. Three other buildings already stood back there, and the space behind them was occupied by a copse. I'd recently realized that if I could just clear all the trees off that patch of land, it would leave a surprisingly spacious empty lot for me to build on—enough for another three or four new structures, which I figured would be a solid number if I wanted to keep future-proofing in mind.

"You'll have to ask someone else to clear out the trees," Bruno said. "We're builders, not woodcutters. If you can get the land clear, though, we could put up three or four houses in that space for sure."

That had me optimistic for a moment, but he went on to explain that his company was really busy and wouldn't be able to get to a project like that any time soon. Unlike my bathroom enlargement, building new houses from scratch would take a good chunk of time and energy, and all the more so considering the sort of houses I was looking for.

Alban happened to be out working his field at the time, so I took the chance to ask him for permission to show Bruno around his place, hoping that the dwarf would be able to make a similar sort of building.

Bruno was astonished when he saw what was inside. “First time I’ve ever seen a slave living in a house with a bath, that’s for sure,” he said, sounding almost aghast. Then he explained that installing baths in the new homes would involve looping them into our water circulation system, which of course would mean a longer, more expensive construction process.

He told me that the jobs his company was currently contracted to handle would take around two months to finish up. In other words, the construction of the new houses on my estate wouldn’t be starting until after that point. In the meantime, he asked me to arrange for the trees to be cut down and the lot to be cleared.

Felling trees and clearing the land, huh? I wonder if my familiars could do something about that with their magic? I’ll have to give it some more thought.

At that point, my consultation with Bruno was pretty much finished. I had one last thing to tell him, though—or rather, to give him. I knew very well how fond of booze most dwarves were, so I gave him and each of his coworkers a bottle of whiskey to take home with them, as a gift...or, well, a bribe, really. That, it turned out, ended up getting me a lot more than I’d bargained for.

The moment he saw the bottles of whiskey, a crazed look flashed across Bruno’s eyes. “*That!*” he barked. “That stuff’s from the Phantom Liquor Store!”

Oh? I guess he knows about it already. Careful, Bruno! Didn’t anyone tell you you’re not supposed to talk about it in public?” I scolded.

Bruno gasped and clapped a hand to his mouth. Then he turned to the two dwarves who’d come with him. “I’ll be with you in a minute! You two wait out by the gates.” Once they’d left, he walked right up to me. “Lean in!” he loudly whispered after making sure nobody was left in the vicinity.

“Why? What’s the deal, Bruno?” I asked, doing as he’d told me to and whispering as well.

“I’d heard rumors that the owner of *that* store was an S-ranked adventurer, but I’ll be damned—it’s you, isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah,” I admitted. “Who’d you hear about all this from, though?”

“Hm? My kid brother. He told me he’d gotten his hands on a stock of booze fit for the gods. Sent me a bottle and a letter that told me all about it.”

The store Bruno was talking about was a sort of hobby I had indulged in over the course of my travels. When I had time to spare in a town I was passing

through, I would secretly set up a traveling liquor store. I'd made a bunch of rules to keep the thing low-key, and since the places and times I opened for business were more or less random, it had taken on an almost mythical status among the dwarves who knew about it. I guess they had started spreading rumors and calling it the "Phantom Liquor Store."

Why dwarves in particular? Simply put, because they were my only customers. I hadn't made a specific policy of only selling to dwarves, to be clear! It's just that no other race could possibly compete with them when it came to how stubbornly persistent they were about booze. Anyway, it sounded like Bruno just happened to know the right people to have heard the rumors about my shop.

"So? Are you opening up shop in Karelina?" he asked, his gaze full of hope.

I'd really rather not have a bearded, grizzled old man stare at me like that, honestly. And more to the point... "I'm pretty busy right now, unfortunately," I said.

You'd think I had just told the man that the world was going to end tomorrow. His head drooped and an expression of utter despair came across his face.

Wait, is it really that upsetting? Now I'm starting to feel a little guilty! "Uhh, but I can get you a few more bottles of the same sort of alcohol I just gave you," I added.

Bruno's head shot right back up again. "Really?!"

"Y-Yeah, sure. No problem."

"Woohoo!" the dwarf yelped with excitement. "Consider your bathroom fast-tracked, pal! We'll have that sucker done in two days flat, just you wait!"

"Huh? Wait, I thought it was supposed to take *four* days! I'd rather you do a good job than a quick job, so you don't have to rush if it'd mean—"

"Don't be ridiculous! Dwarves don't do rush jobs! We can work fast, but *never* sloppy!"

"I guess I'll take your word for it," I sighed. "Seriously, though, are you sure about this?"

"Of course! And, well, not to renegotiate on the spot or anything...but think you could spare a few more bottles of booze if we pull it off?"

"That would be easy enough, sure."

"All right! It's a deal! I'm taking that as a promise, so don't you forget it!" Bruno shouted, and then he headed out, almost skipping as he went. That earned him some seriously dubious glances from his two companions when he picked

them up at the gate.

Man. Dwarves really do prioritize alcohol above all else, huh? Guess I should just be glad that I ended up getting my bathroom fast-tracked, even if it wasn't on purpose. When he'd told me that it would take four days to finish the job, I had immediately concluded that I would need to bring out the travel bathtub I kept in my Item Box, but if it was only going to take two, I figured I could do without until he was finished. *Dwarves and their booze, I'm telling you.*



The clunking and clanging of hammers filled my house from end to end. The expansion of my bath was well underway. This was already the second day of construction.

My familiars were less than thrilled with the noise. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui had all fled out into the garden as soon as the construction workers got started, and were now napping away on the lawn, enjoying the midday sun. I, on the other hand, had taken up station in the living room, standing by in case Bruno needed my input on any of the details. A pair of earplugs I'd bought from my Online Supermarket had proven remarkably handy, sparing me from the worst of the cacophony.

Bruno, it seemed, hadn't been exaggerating about the pace he and his men could work at in a pinch. The project was moving along smoothly, and he claimed they were on schedule to finish up within the day. I'd bought a really nice bath from the Illario Trading Company, and it had been handed off to Bruno this morning as well, though it was currently sitting in a corner of the changing room—or rather, taking up the majority of the changing room. The bath would be the last piece to get installed, but since it was a magic tool, all they'd really have to do was verify that it produced hot water and double-check the drainage system.

The bath I'd picked out from the Illario Trading Company this time happened to match my house's old one quite well, which was a pretty big part of why I had decided to go with it. My current tub was apparently a pretty expensive model. It was round, and had been crafted from porcelain with ivory lining its exterior and beautiful, colorful flowers painted across its upper section. I hadn't expected to find anything like it at a reasonable price, and I'd had no clue how large their selection would be to begin with.

I had at *least* wanted something whitish so their colors would match, though

of course my biggest priority was making sure it was large enough for Gon to comfortably lounge in it. In the worst case, I had been prepared to disregard the color and design and pick something totally mismatched with my old tub, if it had come down to it. Luckily, they'd had one available that would pair beautifully with the other. It was an ever so slightly yellowish cream sort of color, with red and pink flowers painted on it, and it was as large as bathtubs could come.

I couldn't have asked for better, and bought the tub on the spot. It had cost me 540 gold coins, and my understanding was that the shop had actually cut me quite a good deal. When I had asked the salesperson why, they'd explained that nobody wanted a tub that enormous, and it had been sitting in their inventory for ages as a result. They had been over the moon to finally be rid of it, in fact, and since I was perfectly satisfied with getting the size and design I'd wanted, it seemed like a win-win situation all around to me.

That took care of the finding-a-tub part of the equation. If I had to pick out something less than ideal about how it had all turned out, I guess it'd be that the tub's design was maybe a little cutesy for something that would be for Gon's personal use. It matched mine, though, so he'd have to live with it even if he wasn't a fan. Now I just had to wait for them to finish the construction work...though considering how excited I was, waiting felt like it could end up being the hardest part.



Bruno arrived in the living room right around dusk. "Thanks for waiting," he said. "We just finished wrapping up."

I wasted no time heading in to check out my new bathroom. "Oooh, wow, it's *huge!*" I said as I gaped at the chamber. This will probably sound obvious considering it was the whole point of the project, but the bathroom had doubled in size, and Gon's new tub was set up right next to my old one.

"No issues with the drainage either," Bruno commented. "What do you think?"

"It's perfect," I replied. *Leave it to a dwarf, I suppose. I get the sense nobody can compete with them when it comes to this sort of handiwork.*

"It'd better be," Bruno said. "With booze like that on the line, you got nothing less than our best work."

I had, in fact, handed over some of their whiskey the evening before, after

they'd finished their first day of work. Needless to say, I wasn't planning on skimping today either. "Here's the rest of the alcohol I promised! There's a little more here than I gave you yesterday, so try and share it with the others," I said as I passed him a box filled with twenty of the same sort of whiskey bottles I'd previously handed over to him.

"Well, don't mind if I do! Thanks for that!" Bruno said as he accepted the box. He and his fellow workers were all smiles as they stared at the whiskey.

Man, they really love their booze, huh? About ten or so workers had shown up to help with the renovation, the majority of whom were dwarves. There was a human and a beastman mixed in, but I'd come to understand that both of them were irredeemable boozehounds as well. That was why I had ended up giving them a stock of whiskey yesterday as well. I figured that they'd probably need plenty of the stuff, or it'd barely last them at all.

I'd given them ten bottles the day before, and as expected, it seemed they'd used them to throw a party in Bruno's office after they'd finished their work for the night. They were planning on doing it all over again tonight, of course, and Bruno invited me to come along, but I politely declined. I enjoyed a drink every now and again, but I was still more or less a lightweight, and I had a feeling that trying to keep up with dwarves and the sort of people who associated with them would probably kill me. Plus, I already had plans for the night: I'd be enjoying my shiny new bathroom with my familiars!

Before Bruno left, we worked out the details regarding the new housing I wanted to commission. We ended up deciding that I would handle the logging and clearing job myself, then go pay Bruno's office a visit to get the construction work scheduled. Bruno's workers, incidentally, spent that whole conversation off to the side, kicking up a huge racket. Apparently, the party was already well on its way to starting. Finally, we finished our discussion and Bruno and his men went on their way, booze in hand and smiles on their faces.

It was at that point that I realized we'd forgotten something *very* important, and had to run after him. "Bruno, wait! I never paid for the remodeling work!" I shouted.

"Oh!" Bruno grunted. "Well, if that didn't ever slip my mind! That was close. My old lady would've had my hide if I'd left without squaring our bill!" he continued, sounding a little relieved.

In total, the price of the construction work came out to 270 gold pieces. Bruno told me that he didn't mind dealing in large coinage, so I ended up paying with two platinum coins and seven large gold ones.

"Been a long time since I saw a platinum coin," Bruno said. "Guess you S-rankers must really be rakin' it in, huh?" he teased, though considering the payday he'd just received for two days' worth of work, I didn't think he had any right to talk.

With that, we'd finally finished our business for the moment and Bruno and his men went on their way. No sooner had they left than my familiars filed their way back into my house.

"Is it finally finished, then?" asked Fel, who had plodded in first.

"Yup," I said. "They made the bathroom even bigger and better than it was before! You'll be able to take your time and really soak in the tub now, Gon."

"I look forward to it!" Gon replied as he strolled in as well, with Dora-chan and Sui on his back. He sounded genuinely pleased to hear the news.

«I've gotten used to taking baths every day, so I really missed it last night,» Dora-chan said. «I'm taking one tonight no matter what happens!»

«Sui wants to take a bath too!» the slime chimed in.

Dora-chan wasn't wrong. We'd really made a habit of bathing daily ever since we got back to Karelina, and when we'd skipped taking one yesterday, I had really felt it.

"Okay, then, why wait? Let's hit the bath right now!" I said.

"Halt!" Fel shouted. **"Now is hardly the time to speak of bathing!"**

"What now, Fel?" I sighed.

"Our food comes first!"

"Oh, yes! That's right," Gon said.

«Yeah, true enough. Food always takes priority!» Dora-chan added.

«Foood!» Sui squealed.

Oh, right. I'd actually forgotten for a moment; no matter what happened, my gluttons would always put their stomachs before all else. And so I hustled off into the kitchen to whip up a quick meal.



After we finished eating, Gon, Dora-chan, Sui and I headed straight for the bathroom. Our dinner had ended up being miso-flavored gigant minotaur bowls that I'd made some time in advance and kept in my Item Box, by the way. I'd piled our bowls high with rice, laid down a layer of lettuce, and then piled the miso minotaur meat on top of that, finishing it all off with a sprinkle of sesame seeds. I know praising your own cooking's kind of a bad look, but they turned

out *really* well! Gon had even liked them so much he asked me to make it again sometime.

Anyway, we took a quick after-meal break once we'd finished eating, then made for the tub! I invited Fel, but as always, he snubbed the offer with a scowl and said that we should go without him. That left the remaining four of us to appreciate the new chamber on our own.

“What do you think? Huge, isn’t it?” I said as we stepped inside.

«Hot damn, no kidding! This place is ginormous!» Dora-chan said as he fluttered around the chamber.

«It’s sooo big!» added Sui, who was bouncing along after the pixie dragon.

“I believe I shall fit in here with room to spare,” Gon said. He sounded delighted with the extra space.

I’d gotten the water running in both of the bathtubs before we’d had dinner, and they were both nice and full now. “Okay!” I said. “First things first, we’ll have to give you a good scrubbing, Gon. Would you mind hosing him down, Sui?”

«Okaaay!» Sui said, then it started sucking up water from the bath and spraying it onto Gon, using a tentacle in lieu of a showerhead.

“Here, take this, Dora-chan,” I said, handing him a scrub brush I’d bought before we headed over to the bathroom. “Try using it to clean out all the hard-to-reach nooks and crannies in his scales!”

«Yeah, sure, I guess.»

“Oh, and feel free to wash yourself too while you’re at it!”

«You gotta be kidding me! I can’t wash myself with *this* thing, it’d hurt like hell! I’ve got a sensitive hide!»

“Pff,” I snorted. “Right, of course you do. In that case, here, have one of your usual sponges.”

«That’s more like it. Sheesh.»

“One moment!” Gon piped up. “You’re making it seem as if I’m *not* sensitive! That’s not true at all! I’m just not a small, frail race like Dora! I am an ancient dragon, immune to all but the mightiest of blows!”

«Who’re you calling frail?!»

“It’s true, is it not?”

«Fraaail!»

«Oh, for the—now look, you’ve got Sui saying it too!»

“Okay, okay,” I said, cutting in. “You’re strong and we all know it, Dora-chan. Let’s not get in a fight now, all right?”

I'd kept scrubbing away at Gon's scales with my usual deck brush all throughout their little exchange. Polishing an ancient dragon's hide while wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around my waist never stopped feeling thoroughly surreal, and the way that Gon kept chiming in with comments like, "Oh, yes, harder there," and "Go back, you missed a spot," meant that I really had my work cut out for me. *Scrubbing down a demanding dragon is hard labor!*

Scrub scrub, scrub scrub!

Scrub scrub, scrub scrub!

"Phew! I think that should do it. Hose him down, Sui!"

«Okaaay!» Sui said before once again turning its shower on Gon and washing away all the suds. Then the four of us finally settled into our tubs.

"Aaaaaahhhhhhhh," I sighed like a crotchety old man as I sunk in up to my shoulders. All the manual labor I'd just done to get Gon nice and clean made it feel all the nicer. I'd thrown in some yuzu-scented bath salts that made the water a little effervescent beforehand, and it felt like it was soaking right into me, soothing my exhausted body.

«Baths really do feel awesome,» Dora-chan said.

«They dooo,» Sui echoed. The two of them were floating along on the surface of the water, like usual.

"What do you think, Gon?" I asked, but received only silence in response.
"Uhh, hello? Old Man Gon?"

I turned to look and found Gon in his tub, fast asleep. He'd been so comfortable, the water had lulled him right off to dreamland.

"Ahh." I sighed again. "Yeah, that settles it. Nothing beats a nice bath."

«You can say that again.»

«Right?»

Chapter 9: How to Use Your Magic Sword

We'd just finished breakfast, and I was lounging in my living room and enjoying a cup of coffee. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui were with me, sipping away at the bowls of soda I'd poured for them.

"Hey, guys? There's something I was hoping you'd all help me with today," I said. "Think you'd be up for it?"

"Hmph. I was feeling the urge to go out on the hunt, but I suppose I shall lend my aid," Fel said.

"I've nothing to do today, so certainly," Gon agreed.

«I was thinking 'bout going out for a hunt too, but if you're too busy to come, I wouldn't get to eat anything decent out there, so eh. Might as well stick around and help out,» Dora-chan said.

«Sui doesn't mind either! Sui'll help out!» Sui added.

"What, then, shall we do?"

"Well, y'know all those trees out back?" I began, then explained how I was planning on bringing in some more personnel, needed to build houses for them to live in, and had to clear away the copse to make that happen. "It'll be a while before the actual construction can start, but I figured it would be a good idea to take care of the trees while we have time," I concluded.

If I told myself I'd get it done later, I had a feeling I'd end up putting it off again and again until it was too late. That said, while there were only ten or so trees in the copse, a few of their trunks were very thick. Cutting them down the normal way would be pretty challenging.

"So then, all you wish is for us to cut down the trees?" Fel asked. **"With magic, such a task would be child's play."**

«I know, right?» Dora-chan chimed in.

"Indeed!" Gon said. "It would take but a moment!"

«Sui can pew-pew to cut the trees down too!»

It sounded like with everyone on board, this wouldn't take long after all. *That said, "pew-pewing" the trees would mean you're melting them, not cutting them, Sui. I guess it doesn't really matter, though, considering we might get the land cleared nice and quickly if this all works out!*



My familiars and I made our way out behind my estate's main building. Before we could get to work, Tony's and Alban's families ended up gathering around to see what was going on, followed shortly by the former adventurer crew.

"Sorry about all the fuss," I said. "See, the thing is..." I gave my slaves/employees the same explanation that I'd given my familiars beforehand. "I've been getting the feeling that you guys have too much on your plates with all the repackaging work, don't you? And I heard that Lambert's company asked whether we can provide them with even more inventory, right, Kosti?" I asked.

Kosti, who was in charge of communicating and negotiating with Lambert's company, looked like he felt a little put on the spot. "Actually, they've brought it up a few times now," he awkwardly admitted.

Yeah, thought so. The soap and shampoo were clearly hit items, and the hair growth formula's profits put even them to shame. "Like I said, it'll be a while before the construction starts, but it *is* on the agenda. Until then, I hope you'll all be able to keep giving it your best."

"Of course!" all of them agreed in unison.

"Also, to be clear, there's no need to promise them more than you'll be able to comfortably deliver, Kosti," I said. "Knowing Lambert's people, I don't think they'll try to force you into going beyond your means, but if you need me to step in and give them a warning, you can come to me about it any time."

"I will," Kosti said with a slightly relieved smile.

"All right! We'll be getting to work, then," I said.

"Umm," Theresa timidly spoke up, then hesitated.

"What is it?" I asked.

"What are you planning to do with the trees once you've cut them down?" Theresa asked.

"Hmm...good question, actually. I can't just leave them there, so I'll have to dispose of them somehow..."

Now that she mentioned it, I hadn't actually thought about how we'd deal with the felled trees at all. *I guess I could shove them in my Item Box, take them to a clearing outside of town, and burn them?*

"Umm," Theresa began once more, "if you're not planning on using them for anything, could I?"

"You want to use the trees for something?"

“Yes,” she said with a nod, then went on to explain herself. It seemed she was hoping to use the excess lumber to fuel her brick oven. She’d been using the sticks and twigs Tony had pruned from the trees in my garden up until now, but that just hadn’t been enough to do the job properly, so she’d had to buy extra firewood with her own funds.

“Oh, I see! I never realized! Sorry about that. I guess you *would* need firewood for that sort of oven, huh?” I said. She’d given me bread that she’d baked in her brick oven plenty of times, so in retrospect, it felt like I’d failed as the head of the household for not realizing she’d have that sort of need. “Of course you can use all of the wood from the trees as firewood! Should I just chop them into logs and pile them up, or would it be easier if I processed them down into smaller pieces?”

“Oh, no need for that! If you would just pile them up somewhere, we can handle the rest. Can’t we, Alban?” Theresa said, looking over at her husband. Alban agreed with a firm nod.

“Got it. I’ll do that, then,” I said.

With that, everyone went on their way, returning to their respective jobs. Well, almost everyone.

“So, why’re you two still here?” I asked the former adventurer twins Luke and Irvine, who’d stayed behind while everyone else left.

“We’ve got today off, and we’re bored,” Luke said.

“Ayup yup,” Irvine agreed. “Fel and the others are gonna be cutting the trees down, right? We figured that’d be a sight to see, so we were gonna watch.”

“This isn’t a show, you two,” I sighed. “I mean, I guess it’s fine if you want to watch, but try not to get in the way.”

“Get in the way? *Us?* You *wound* me, good sir!”

“Why, we would *never!*”

I decided to ignore the twins’ antics and get to work. “Okay, guys,” I said, addressing my familiars. “I’d like each of you to pick a tree and bring it down.”

“Very well. I shall lay claim to this one,” Fel said, turning to face an especially thick tree a little to my right.

“And I’ll fell this one,” Gon declared, choosing an equally thick one to my left.

«Crap! Those two took the best ones,» Dora-chan grumbled. «Guess I’ll just have to handle this one, then,» he said, choosing a tree that was smaller than Fel’s or Gon’s, but was still quite girthy.

«Sui picks this one!» Sui said, hopping over to a tree roughly the same size

as Dora-chan's.

"Okay, everyone! Let's bring those trees down... Wait, no! Time out! Don't start cutting yet!" I frantically shouted. Barely a second before they were about to begin, I'd remembered something incredibly important.

"What are you shouting about?" Fel asked.

"Just come over here and listen for a second, okay?" I said. My familiars grumbled as they gathered up before me once more. "So, guys? You can all cut your trees down super easily in one shot, right?"

"But of course."

"That goes without saying, yes."

«Seriously, you have to ask?»

«Sui can cut them down too!»

Yeah, sorta figured, and that's exactly the problem. "Well, the thing is, you can't hit the trees so hard that you destroy the wall behind them, okay? I-I mean, if you break *our* wall, it's not that big of a deal, but if you damage the house behind our estate, there's seriously going to be hell to pay!"

"Oh, I see now. If we were to attack with our full strength, we would surely slice the tree and the house behind it in twain," Fel said.

"Very true," Gon agreed. "In short, we'll have to hold back, lest we damage the surroundings. I'll confess, I've never been fond of reining in my strength."

«Ahh, yeah, I get why you stopped us now,» Dora-chan said. «It's pretty hard to figure out just how much you've gotta hold back for stuff like that, for sure.»

«So Sui can't pew-pew the trees after all?» whined Sui.

Oh, boy. I was quickly coming to the conclusion that I wouldn't be able to let my familiars handle this task after all. They were so powerful it was kind of a problem, and I just couldn't trust them to control their own strength. If I let them have a go at the copse, they'd probably take the house behind mine out along with it.

"Pfff ha ha ha ha ha, too strong, eh? Now *that's* one hell of a problem to have!"

"Ah ha ha ha, can you *imagine* if they blew up the next house over? Bet we'd get some complaints over *that* one!"

The twins, it seemed, found the whole situation hilarious. *Put a sock in it, you two!*

"Okay, you four are off the job," I told my familiars. "No taking a shot at the trees after all! Got it?"

“Hm? Then you would leave them standing?” Fel asked.

“No, we’re still cutting them down, but you guys would do way too much damage, so somebody else will have to handle it.”

Fel opened his mouth, seemingly to protest.

“Nope! Out of the question,” I said, cutting him off before he had the chance. I just couldn’t let myself put our neighbor’s house at risk like that. With Fel and the others out of the picture, though, I needed a new team of woodcutters. Fortunately, I had just the duo in mind. “Oh, Luke? Irvine? Come over here for a second,” I said, turning back to the twins.

“Wh-What?” Luke asked.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Irvine muttered.

“Let’s see... I’m sure I put it somewhere close to all the other stuff from Brixt,” I muttered as I sorted through my Item Box. “Ah ha! Found it!”

I pulled out a greataxe, which I had found among the remains left behind by an unfortunate party of adventurers who hadn’t done so well in the Brixt dungeon. I held it out to the twins...who just stared blankly at me.

“Umm, guys? This is pretty heavy, so just take it, already!” I said. The twins shrugged at each other, and one of them finally grabbed the axe.

“Okay, you know what comes next, right? Use that to chop down these trees,” I said.

“I knew it,” the twins groaned in unison.

“Guess I got lucky! I’d have been in trouble if the two of you hadn’t stuck around to watch,” I said with a chuckle.

“All right, fine! We’ll do it,” Luke said.

“But you’d better pay us back for this!” Irvine added.

Those two would try to find a way to profit off of this. “If you do the job well, I’ll think about it,” I said.

“Hell yeah! Let’s do this, Irvine!”

“You got it, Luke!”

The two of them set about their task, suddenly brimming with motivation. “Those guys, I swear,” I muttered to myself as they laid into the first tree with the greataxe. The loud, satisfying sound of metal hitting wood soon rang out across my estate.

“Times like these make me remember that those two used to be adventurers. They’ve still got their old stamina, that’s for sure,” I muttered to myself. *Of course, unlike them, I’m a currently active adventurer, but there’s no way I could handle this myself. I’d have a hard time just swinging the axe, let alone*

cutting down a tree with it.

“Hey,” Fel said. **“I am only here because you claimed to need my help. If that is no longer the case, then there is no need for me to remain. Correct?”**

“Oh, right, sorry,” I said. “You guys are just too powerful to do this job without causing trouble, so you can go if you want.”

“Hmph! I tire of this. I shall retire to the lawn for a nap,” Fel grumbled.

“I’ll join you,” Gon said.

«Same,» Dora-chan chimed in.

«Sui’ll nap too!» Sui squealed.

“I’ll make it up to you next time,” I said as my familiars wandered off to sunbathe in the garden out front.

All right! I can’t just leave all the work to the twins, so I’d better get to it as well! I had given them my only axe, though, which left me at a bit of a loss. The only other bladed instruments I had on hand were a sword I’d picked up from the same deceased group of adventurers and the mithril sword and spear that Sui had made for me.

Cutting a tree down with a spear sounded tough, so the swords felt like the *better* option, even if they weren’t exactly perfect. That said, I was uncomfortable with using a dead man’s sword to chop lumber, and that one didn’t look very sharp to begin with. Sui’s mithril sword was certainly sharp enough to handle the task, and then some, but I felt apprehensive about using it as well. I would have felt pretty dumb if I chipped my mithril sword cutting down a tree, after all.

Hmm. What can I use, then? I spent a long moment considering my options. *Wait... Of course! I do have bladed weapons other than the dead man’s sword and Sui’s mithril weapons after all! They’re probably even sharper than the mithril weapons too!* I’d never had an opportunity to use them before now—or rather, I’d totally forgotten they were even an option.

“Umm, let’s see here... I think I had four of them, right? Ah, yup, there they are!” I said, taking out the weapons in question, which were none other than my magic swords. “First up’s the one I got from the behemoth in the Dolan dungeon! I think it was called Caladbolg? Then there’s the three from Gon’s treasure hoard, Hrunting, Gram, and Eckesachs!”

I picked up each of the swords in turn and compared how they felt in my hand.

“I think Caladbolg’s a bit too heavy for me. Hrunting is a little lighter, but it seems more like a stabbing sword than a chopping sword, huh? Gram... Hmm,

Gram might work, actually! The blade's a little long, but that aside, it seems just about right. And Eckesachs... Man, it sure is flashy, huh? Just look at all those jewels! I guess it'd do the job, though..."

As I swung the magic swords around, I heard a pair of spluttering gasps from the twins.

"M-M-M-M-Mukohdaaa?!" Luke shrieked.

"Wh-Wh-What the *hell* are those swords?!" Irvine babbled. The way they were gaping at me made them look even dumber than usual.

"Oh, these? Just some magic swords I came across while dungeon diving," I said. "This one's from Dolan, and Gon collected the other three in Brixt."

"H-Hey, Irvine?" Luke whispered. "I think my hearing's going. It sorta sounded like he just said those were *magic swords!* I mean, I could tell they weren't your ordinary blades at a glance, but magic swords? Seriously...?"

"Sorry, Luke, but I heard it too," Irvine whispered back. "But magic swords are the sort of artifacts that the monarchy is super strict about controlling and keeping under lock and key! It'd be totally unthinkable for some random guy to be walking around with one!"

The twins were doing their best to escape from reality, and I couldn't be having that. "All right, come back to me, guys," I said. "They're very real, trust me. What was I supposed to do, though? Not like the Adventurer's guild could ever buy swords like these, right?"

"Ha ha ha ha ha! Our master sure is one of a kind, huh, Irvine?"

"Ha ha ha ha ha! Couldn't have put it better myself, Luke!"

Could you two maybe quit with the uncomfortable laughter? I decided to just ignore them again and move right along. "I think Gram's probably my best bet. I'll give it a try," I muttered to myself, then returned the rest of them to my Item Box.

"Okay, here goes!" I said, then swung the blade at the nearest tree.

Schwick!

Gram slid through the tree's thick trunk like a hot knife through butter, entering on one side and emerging from the other in a single slice.

"Hoooooooooly hellfire!"

"What in the name of the gods are you *doing*!?"

I was too busy admiring Gram's impressive cutting ability to pay any attention to the idiot twins' horrified screeching. *Wow! That worked great!*

"Boy, this thing sure can cut! Looks like bringing these trees down won't be a problem after all!" I said.

“He cut down a tree...with a m-magic sword... Is this some sort of nightmare...?” Luke muttered.

“A magic sword... This can’t be happening. Somebody tell me this isn’t happening...” Irvine groaned.

“There’s something wrong with that man,” both of them moaned in unison.
Could you two put a sock in it for just one second, please and thank you?



In the end, we finished our tree-cutting and land-clearing work without incident. The magic sword had completely blown my expectations away. It was seriously *so* handy! And did you know that if you chop through a tree with a magic sword, it doesn’t fall over? The trunk just stands there, still upright, and then you can shove the whole thing into an Item Box, no problem. In the time it took Luke and Irvine to chop down a single tree, I felled the whole rest of the copse! They’d started grumbling about how I didn’t *really* need their help after I pulled Gram out, but I told them that I guessed that meant they didn’t *really* need their reward, and that got them working again in short order.

I brought the trees back out in an open space elsewhere on my estate, pruned off their branches, and then chopped them into logs of what felt like a reasonable length. I had a lot of trees to process, but thanks to my magic sword, the work went at a super rapid pace. Well, *my* work, that is. The idiot twins were left moaning and groaning after they had dealt with the single tree they’d managed to cut down.

The trunks would be used for firewood, but I had to figure out some way to dispose of all the leafy branches as well—or so I’d thought, until the twins, who hailed from a rural village, told me that if we just let the wood dry and the leaves fall off naturally, we could use the branches for firewood too. As such, I decided to simply pile it all up in one place and let it sit for the moment.

That only left the stumps to deal with, and they weren’t going to be nearly as easy to handle without bringing some serious muscle to bear. It was time to call my familiars back into action.

Once they were back on the scene, Dora-chan promptly used his earth magic to soften the soil, which allowed Fel and Gon to just straight up yank the stumps out of the ground, roots and all. Sui also handled a couple of them by duplicating itself and then melting them away.

After seeing how much easier Dora-chan’s magic made the task, I decided to

try pulling up a stump myself. Even with the dirt softened, it was quite a struggle, but I *did* manage to dispose of a single stump in the end. I let my familiars handle the rest in the blink of an eye, though.

Theresa eventually came around to check up on our work, and told me that the stumps would be usable for firewood as well, once the dirt was cleaned off of them. I was starting to appreciate her dedication to not wasting resources, and figured I had a lot that I could learn from her. Finally, Dora-chan used his earth magic once more to fill in the holes the stumps had left behind. With that, we were finished!

I gave Luke and Irvine a bottle of wine and beer each to serve as their reward. But then I turned around to find my familiars giving me a “what about us?” sort of look, and ended up having to treat them all to cakes from Fumiya as well. And so we successfully cleared out the copse without any major incidents at all! That just left the matter of my magic stove to take care of, but considering how unstable the situation in Ronkainen supposedly was, I was in no hurry to make the trip over there, and figured I could take some time to lounge about at home.

And that’s exactly what I did, for around two weeks or so! My familiars demanded to go hunting a few times, as usual, and I did humor them and take them on a few day trips, but that aside, I simply enjoyed the peace and quiet.

I was sitting in my home, sipping a cup of coffee and thinking about stopping by the shopping district for the first time in quite a while when a series of heavy, almost panicked knocks rang out from my front door. “Mukohda! Are you there?” Peter’s voice called from outside.

I hurried over to the entryway and opened the door. “What’s wrong, Peter?” I asked.

“A... A group of men from the Church of Rubanov are here for you!” Peter shouted.

“The Church of Rubanov?!” I repeated incredulously. I’d gotten into something of a scuffle with them back in Brixt, but that had been entirely their fault, and Karelina didn’t even have a branch of their church to begin with, unless I’d been missing something. I’d heard that their only church in Leonhardt was in the capital. Surely they hadn’t traveled all the way from there to Karelina to see me?

“B-Barthel’s holding them off at the gates on his own,” Peter said. “He told me to go get you, Tabatha, Luke, and Irvine right away!”

If Barthel had told Peter to summon the former adventurer squad, it could

only mean one thing: the Rubanovs had brought bodyguards with them, just like they had back in Brixt. “Got it. I’ll be right there!” I said.

Peter ran off to find the other members of his squad, while I turned toward the living room. “Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, Sui! We’ve got an emergency on our hands!” I shouted.

It wasn’t long before everyone had gathered up. “**What is it?**” Fel asked.

“Do you guys remember those rude jerks who tried to shake us down after we got out of the dungeon in Brixt?” I asked.

“Yes, I do indeed. They would be those fools who referred to us as ‘filthy beasts,’ would they not?” Fel said.

“Ah, I remember them as well,” said Gon. “The ones who ran about the place shrieking and flailing like a crew of goblins.”

«Yeah, the worst-dressed dickheads in Brixt!» Dora-chan chimed in.

«Sui hated those people!» Sui added.

Clearly, the church’s representatives had left just as bad of an impression on my familiars as they had on me. “That’s them, all right, and it looks like they haven’t learned their lesson. They’ve showed up here this time, so I was hoping you’d help scare them off.”

“Hmph! Driving the likes of them away shall be the simplest of tasks. I will make sure the lesson is painful enough that they will not soon forget the mistake they have made this day,” Fel said as he bared his fangs.

Normally, this was the part where I’d tell him not to get violent, but this time, I was willing to make a partial exception. “If it comes to that, then do what you have to,” I said.

“**Oh?**” Fel queried with a raised eyebrow.

Barthel had been left alone with the Rubanovs at the gate, and if they hurt him before we arrived, not even I would feel inclined to show them mercy. I just hoped it wouldn’t come to that as the five of us rushed over there to confront them.



“*Insolence!* Do you know who I am, you *cur*?!”

“Can’t say I do, but I know it doesn’t matter. No matter *who* you are, you ain’t settin’ one foot past this gate on my watch! Unless you’re planning on barging in without the master of the house’s permission? Who’s bein’ insolent now, eh?!”

I heard a pair of voices engaged in a pitched argument coming from the front gate. One of them was distinctively deep, and I recognized it as Barthel's.

"How *dare* you, you filthy dwarf! I've had enough of this! Kill the dwarf, and bring the gate down if you have to! I want inside!"

The gateway came into view just in time. I saw a huge man reach for his sword as he pulled back a leg to try and kick the gate down.

"*Stooooop!*" I shouted at the top of my lungs as I sprinted onto the scene, panting and wheezing. "Are you okay, Barthel?!"

"Oh, you made it! Thanks fer that," Barthel said. He'd always struck me as a fearless sort, but I could tell how relieved he was to see us. Peter, Tabatha, Luke, and Irvine arrived moments later. Needless to say, they were all armed to the teeth.

"Sorry to make you deal with this on your own, Barthel. Everything's all right now, though," I said as I glared through the gate at our unwelcome visitors. They were wearing the same sort of gaudy clothing as the members of the Church of Rubanov I'd encountered in Brixt, and came across as a band of nouveau riche punks and their loyal cronies, most of whom looked like big, brawny, muscle-headed goons.

These guys really know how to look like the tacky thugs they are. "Barthel, Tabatha, Peter, stand by in the back. As for you two," I said, then leaned in to whisper instructions to Luke and Irvine, telling them to get in contact with the Adventurer's guild and the Earl's knights on the double. The former adventurers all nodded in acknowledgment, and while Barthel, Tabatha, and Peter stood back and glared at the Rubanovs, Luke and Irvine made a surreptitious exit.

«Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, Sui? Counting on you guys,» I transmitted telepathically.

«**Very well. Should it come to it, I shall tear them to pieces.**»

«**Pieces that I'll burn to ash with my dragon breath!**»

«**Not before I stick 'em with Ice magic!**»

«**Sui'll pew-pew them and melt them away!**»

The sheer enthusiasm of my familiars' replies ironically set me more on edge than ever. «Uh, yeah, great, but don't do any of that stuff until I tell you to, okay? And we don't actually want to *kill* them. That'd just cause more problems for us down the road. So, like, keep it in moderation, okay? Only brutalize them a *little* bit!»

With my familiars' bloodlust hopefully reined in, I turned my gaze back to my gaudily clad visitors. "I couldn't help but overhear you talking about

murdering one of my workers, and frankly, it made a pretty bad first impression,” I said. “Do you have business with me?”

“Hmph! What does it matter if some boor of a dwarf is put down? Let us inside, and then we shall discuss the purpose of our visit!” said the most tackily dressed member of the whole brigade, a heavyset and incredibly pompous man wearing a glimmering golden cloak.

I’m sorry, did he really just say that? He thinks he can talk about murdering Barthel in front of me and still expect me to let him in? “Uh, no,” I curtly replied.

“Wh-What?!” the man shrieked.

“Are... Are you *actually* surprised? Who would let a bunch of strangers—scratch that, a bunch of barbarians who talk about committing murder like it’s nothing—into their house without a care? I mean, if you just think about it for a moment, it obviously makes sense not to,” I said, making very little effort to hide the fact that I was talking down to him.

The heavyset man started to tremble. “Wh... Wh-Wh-Wh-What,” he stammered as his face turned an increasingly vivid shade of red.

I honestly thought that everything I had said was perfectly reasonable, though I *did* notice Barthel, Tabatha, and Peter all trying really hard to hold in their laughter behind me. *Seriously, guys, I can hear you from here.*

“How *dare* you speak so rudely to the bishop! Hold your tongue and obey his command this very instant, lest you live to regret it!” screamed one of the man’s slightly less gaudily dressed flunkies.

I heaved an internal sigh. *Is everyone in the Church of Rubanov a complete and total idiot?* This exchange was playing out so similarly to my last encounter with them, it was uncanny. It really seemed like they thought that name-dropping their church would let them get away with literally anything. There might have been some truth to that in the nations surrounding the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov, but this was the Kingdom of Leonhardt, and that attitude wouldn’t fly here.

“I don’t know any bishops, myself, but I’m assuming you’re from the Church of Rubanov?” I asked.

“Indeed we are!” another of the flunkies declared. “We are the holy servants of the sacred Church of Rubanov, most venerable of—”

“Right, okay, I get the picture,” I said, cutting him off. “The thing is, nobody in this estate actually belongs to your church. I don’t even believe your god exists to begin with, so, well, you know,” I said with a shrug.

That certainly got a reaction out of them. Suddenly, every one of their faces

turned just as red as their leader's.

“Y-Y-You *fiend*!” the heavyset man bellowed, so enraged a vein had started bulging in his forehead. “I thought to grant you the honor of bequeathing our church with a donation, but no longer! Men! Kill them all, and put down those miserable beasts of theirs while you're at it!”

“Oh, so you *were* after my money. Kinda figured. You people are seriously hopeless,” I muttered.

The heavyset man must've heard me. He let out a high-pitched screech and started stomping his foot. “Kill them! Kill them all, *now!*” he shouted with shrill, impotent rage.

Meanwhile, his bodyguards drew their swords. “This is your own fault, y'know,” one of them said with a smirk. “Should've just shut up and followed orders!”

«Okay, guys, you're up! Just remember not to go *too* hard on them! Keep the violence in check!» I transmitted to my familiars, who strode forward to take up positions in front of me.

“Hmph. I see a pack of worthless peons have decided to die by my fangs,” Fel growled.

“So, you have drawn your blades in my presence,” Gon said. “That means you are effectively declaring yourselves my foes. I hope you're prepared for what comes next.”

Both of them were speaking out loud, and both of their words were laced with pure, unmistakable animosity.

“E-Eeek!”

“We're doomed!”

“I-I don't wanna diiiie!”

“S-Spare me! Please!”

The big, musclebound henchmen threw away their swords and collapsed on their backsides in the blink of an eye. The heavyset man and his flashy followers, on the other hand, were so overwhelmed by Fel's and Gon's murderous auras that they couldn't speak at all, and simply fainted on the spot, though not before a few of them voided their bladders, disgustingly enough.

“Done already? Your will to fight simply vanishes at the first hint of bloodlust? Pathetic,” Fel scoffed.

“All the more so after how long they spent boasting,” Gon added. The Rubanovs had been as pompous as I could possibly imagine, and my familiars seemed downright disgusted with how things had turned out.

«Oh, what, it's over already? Sui and I didn't even get to do anything!» Dora-chan grumbled.

«So Sui doesn't get to pew-pew anyone after all?» Sui whined.

It was around then that the twins returned with several individuals from the Adventurer's guild and a group of local knights in tow.

“So, err...what exactly happened here?” one of the now bewildered knights asked. I took that as the perfect chance to explain the situation to him, his fellows, and the newly arrived adventurers.

“Sounds like these people are just a buncha frauds in priest's clothing,” one of the people from the Adventurer's guild said after I finished my explanation.

Harsh, but true.

“Believe it or not, this is actually pretty typical of how they usually act. They've been causing trouble in the capital as well. That said, I'm pretty certain that their headquarters in the capital has been sent an official notice that they are not to interfere with Mister Mukohda's business under any circumstances,” said one of the knights, a well-built man who looked like he was in his mid-forties. I soon learned that he was the captain of Earl Langridge's Third Knightly Order. “Of course, extortion's a crime regardless,” he continued. “Scrape these men off the ground and throw them in the dungeon!”

“Yes, sir!” the knights replied, then set about tying up the fallen bodyguards. The gaudily clad priests were still unconscious, so the knights simply dragged them away.

The captain turned back to me. “We're under strict orders to report on any incident involving you without delay, so I'll be going now. I have to send word to His Excellency at once!”

Oh, huh. That's the first I've heard of the earl putting out an order like that. I'd be thrilled if news of what had happened here would spread from the earl to the king, and result in the Church of Rubanov being driven out of the country, just like they had been in the Kingdom of Erman.

“I'll be sending word of this to the guild branch in the capital, as well,” said one of the Adventurer's guild employees.

Oof, they've made an enemy of the guild now too? They might even end up having trouble in their own home country, at this rate!

“I must be off. Please don't hesitate to contact us if any further developments occur,” the captain said.

“S-rankers like you are one of the guild's most invaluable resources. If anything happens, just say the word and we'll be there to help,” an Adventurer's

guild employee added. With that, everyone began to disperse.

It seemed that the latest Rubanov incident was a wrap...mostly. I, as it happened, was still pissed. More than pissed, even. I was *furious*. The fact that they had acted like a bunch of irrational, entitled children, tried to shove their way into my home, and attempted to extort me—for the *second time*, no less—was bad enough on its own, but threatening Barthel’s life without batting an eyelash had pushed me over the edge.

If I hadn’t shown up at just the right moment, I had no doubt that their bodyguards would’ve gone through with it, and that led me to wonder just how many people had been cut down on the Church of Rubanov’s orders. Neither the man who’d given the order nor the goons who’d been ready to carry it out had shown so much as a hint of hesitation, after all.

I now understood all too clearly that the Church of Rubanov had to be stopped. *Maybe now’s the right time to carry out the mission that Demiurge gave me*, I thought. Up until now, my viewpoint had been that the Church was not our problem, and I hadn’t been in any hurry to bother with the task. Now, though, they’d kicked the proverbial hornet’s nest. I was suddenly very attracted to the idea of getting back at that cult of scammers, and getting them *good*.

That does it. I’m getting everyone together tonight to work out a plan!



Later that night, after we’d finished dinner and were enjoying our after-meal drinks, I decided to make my proposal. “So, about what happened today,” I opened.

«What happened today? You mean with that pack of jackasses that showed up earlier?» Dora-chan asked as he sipped his soda. He wasn’t exactly hiding his contempt for the Rubanovs, though then again, they really *were* a bunch of low-class troublemakers.

“Yeah, that. The thing is,” I said, then explained to the four of them how Demiurge had given me a mission related to the Church.

At the time, I’d thought the order he’d given me was beyond the pale, even considering that it *was* coming directly from a literal god. Now, though, I was starting to suspect that Demiurge had already known that this incident was coming. In any case, I gave my familiars a rundown of the situation, and their reactions were, well, quite something.

“Hah hah hah hah! Well now, what an entertaining plan *this* is!”

“Gra ha ha ha ha! And to think, it comes endorsed by the gods themselves!”

Fel, Gon, I get that you think it's funny, but could you try not to bare your fangs while you laugh like that? You're freaking me out. I could see a fiery enthusiasm for the task blazing in their eyes, which wasn't exactly reassuring either. *They sure got motivated for this one in an awful hurry, and that's never a good sign.*

«Heh heh heh. That means we get to beat the living hell outta those morons, right? Oooh, this is gonna be *good!*»

«Yaaay! Sui gets to beat up all the bad people that Sui hates!»

And looks like those two are just as hyped up for this as Fel and Gon are.

“In fact, why not take the opportunity to crush the whole nation underfoot?” Fel suggested.

“Agreed,” Gon said. “They seem insistent upon calling us beasts, so why should we not prove them right? Rampaging like a beast could be fun.”

«Oh, I like the sound of that! Maybe I'll finally have a chance to show off all the magic I can cast when I go all out!»

«Will Sui get to pew-pew lots of baddies? Hurray!»

Wait, when did this start being about destroying the whole country?! It's really hard to take this as a joke when you guys are the ones saying it! I'm not a fan of the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov either, but I don't want to be responsible for bringing an entire nation to ruin, okay?!

“Whoa, wait a minute! We don't have to bring the whole country down! That's not the goal here!” I frantically shouted. I wouldn't have put it past them to go through with their threats otherwise.



“Why not?” Fel asked with a grumpy frown. Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all looked just as dissatisfied.

“Because that’s not what Demiurge told us to do! He said we should just pop over and twist their arm a little. He didn’t mention anything about tearing down the entire nation! And besides, I have beef with the Church, but the ordinary people who live there haven’t done anything wrong, so I don’t wanna do anything that could harm them.”

“Hmph! Soft as ever,” Fel grumbled.

“Too soft for his own good, yes,” Gon agreed. “But I suppose that’s just how my liege is.”

Ugh! Okay, maybe I am being a little soft here, but I still just don’t want to drag innocent civilians into this mess.

«All right, mister softy,» Dora-chan said. «What’s your plan? How do you think we should do this?»

«Aww, so Sui won’t get to pew-pew anyone?»

Excuse me for being a softy, and Sui, no! Not having to kill anyone is not “aww” worthy! Please, stop being so bloodthirsty!

“Well, I do have an idea, in a manner of speaking,” I said, then began explaining my thought process to my familiars.

The way I saw it, the Church of Rubanov itself was the root of this whole problem. That problem could presumably be traced back even further to the head of the Church: its pope. I figured that we could just head over to the Church’s main temple, where the pope lived, and wreck the place. I did understand that doing so might not be sufficient on its own, though, and I had enough questions about how a totally baseless and nonsensical faith like the Church of Rubanov had managed to rise to such prominence in the first place to know that it wouldn’t be that easy.

What else, then, could we do? My best idea was to find a way to make sure the Church would no longer be able to convert any new adherents, and if I was going to accomplish that goal, I figured the easiest way would be to call upon a certain acquaintance who occupied a very high position. Who better to decry a false god, after all, than a real one? If I could wipe their main temple off the map, *then* ask him to step in and help out, I figured it could be exceptionally effective.

My familiars all seemed a little unhappy with my plan, but they still accepted it in the end. I was pretty sure I had successfully explained that if they actually demonstrated that they had the power to wipe a whole country off the map,

leaving not so much as a trace behind, we'd never be able to live in peace again. I really didn't think I could take people constantly walking on eggshells whenever I was around, or looking at us like we were a bunch of terrifying monsters.

In any event, our general plan was set in stone, and my familiars stood up, ready to head out for the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov on the double.

“Very well, then. Let us be off!”

“Indeed! We shall depart at once!”

«Hell yeah! We'll smash that church into the ground!»

«Sui'll smash it up good!»

“Nooope nope nope! We're *not* leaving right this instant!” I shouted. “We're gonna have to do a ton of preparations before we go! Especially since my magic stove's broken. I won't be able to cook on the road, so I'll have to make enough food to last us before we leave.” I thought it was only natural to prepare thoroughly before embarking on an international journey, and regardless, I knew for a fact that my pack of gluttons would get incredibly loud and obnoxious if I didn't have enough food in stock to satisfy them.

“I can easily make the journey within a single day, my liege,” Gon said.
“However, I *would* have to return to my full size to do so.”

“Nope, that's out of the question. You remember how mad the guildmaster got last time, don't you?” I said with a shake of my head. I didn't feel like going through another sermon that long any time soon.

“Perhaps not at my full size, then, but if I were to fly at *half* size, it would still take a mere two days to cover that distance,” Gon countered.

“And what do you think we're gonna eat over those two days? I won't be able to cook on the go, so I need time to prepare, and that means we're not leaving right away.”

Fel let out an irritated grunt. **“When will you be prepared to leave, then?”**

“Let me think... Five days or so from now would be plenty, probably...”

“Five days?! That is far too long! Surely you can make your preparations tomorrow, with time to spare? We shall depart the day after!”

“Wait, wait, no! You can't just decide that unilaterally, Fel!”

“Hah! Ask the others, and you will see how unilateral this decision is. Correct?” Fel asked, turning to my other three familiars.

“I am in favor,” Gon said.

«Yeah, sounds good to me,» Dora-chan added.

«Sui likes that idea too!» Sui chimed in, sealing the deal.

With everyone's votes counted in his favor, Fel turned back to me. "**There you have it,**" he said with an obnoxiously self-satisfied smirk.

Grrr! "Okay, fine, I get it! We'll leave the day after tomorrow! I don't have a magic stove right now, though, so when we eat on the road this time I'm not gonna be able to take each and every request you guys have for me. I'm warning you in advance!" I said in a last-ditch attempt to dissuade them.

"Hmm. So without that tool of yours, you will be unable to cook to your usual standard?" Fel muttered. **"In that case, is there somewhere in this town where you can buy—"**

"Nope. Not one as big and effective as my old one, anyway. Apparently, we'll have to go to a place called Ronkainen to get a new one."

"Then why not just visit this town of Ronkainen?" Gon chimed in. "I could take us there with ease."

"Well, that's nice and all, but the thing is that Ronkainen's right on the border with the Quine Republic, and a bunch of smaller nations too. Things are supposed to be a little dangerous around those parts, lately."

"You would be dissuaded by 'a little danger'? Have you forgotten that we will be there? Such a thing is of no concern to you."

"I mean, you're not *totally* wrong about that, but I dunno..."

«Holy crap, you're a wuss. Get over it already, please.»

Wow, Dora-chan! Mean!

«It'll be okay, Master! Sui'll protect you!» Sui said, raising two little tentacles overhead as if it were pumping its fists.

"It is decided, then. We shall bring down the Church of Rubanov, then make our way to the town of Ronkainen. What matters most on any trip, after all, is the food that we eat upon reaching our destination!"

"Well said! Losing out on fine dining is a problem of the utmost importance."

«Yeah, I can get behind that one. Good food's priority number one!»

«Yummy food's important!»

Said like a chorus of true gluttons. I had to wonder if there was anywhere they *wouldn't* go for a good meal. "Okay, I get the picture! We'll go to Ronkainen too."

"Heh heh heh! We are to travel to the border with the minor nations, then? How very convenient."

Wh-Whoa, uh, Fel? What's with the evil smirk you have going on over there? I'm starting to worry you're plotting something nasty again... "Convenient for what?" I asked.

“Pay it no mind,” Fel said.

Scratch that: he’s definitely plotting something! Felll!



With our plans decided upon, I spent the next day completely absorbed in my preparations for the upcoming trip. I cooked meal after meal to eat on the road, informed my slaves/employees that I’d be leaving town again, and gave them everything I thought they might need in my absence. Judging by their reactions, I got the sense they were used to me setting out on journeys at the drop of a hat. It hadn’t been that long since I’d bought them, so it was a little surprising that they’d acclimated so quickly, but on the other hand, I *had* spent an awfully large chunk of that time out of town. *I’m sure this place will be perfectly safe in their hands, in any case.*

I also took the time to head to the Adventurer’s guild and inform them that I’d be going on another trip. I’d be riding Gon, after all, and I didn’t want to know what would happen if I pulled that stunt without informing them in advance again. That being said, I wasn’t *quite* so naively honest that I had actually told them that I was heading out to bring down the Church of Rubanov’s main temple, so I just told them I’d be handling a few things in the vicinity of Ronkainen, plus a few other places, and kept the details as vague as possible. I didn’t *technically* lie, for the record! I did say “a few other places,” after all!

Finally, later that evening, I decided to send my weekly offering to Demiurge a little early. It probably goes without saying by now, but the package I sent was mostly centered around sake. I got him a sampling set made up of sakes that had won first place in a few competitions, and also threw in a couple bottles of umeshu and an assortment of luxury canned snacks. When I presented them to Demiurge, I took the chance to explain my plan to him, and he gave me the go-ahead with great enthusiasm.

That, I figured, had more or less signed the Church of Rubanov’s death warrant. I felt a little sorry for the followers who genuinely believed in the Church’s teachings, but there wasn’t much to be done about that, really. I’d be almost impressed with anyone who could maintain their belief after what was about to go down, and if anyone *was* that stubbornly faithful, I figured nothing I could possibly do would change their minds, so I wasn’t planning on trying. *I’ll just carry out my plan and play it by ear from there. Not that that’s any different from how we usually travel, I guess.*

By the time the next day arrived, my hurried preparations were complete and we were ready to depart.

“Okay, shall we?” I said.

“Indeed,” Fel said.

“Gra ha ha! I can hardly wait,” Gon said.

«I know, right?» Dora-chan agreed.

«Let’s grind them up!» Sui squealed.

Well, everyone’s certainly looking forward to this. Seeing my familiars’ attitudes, I felt more like we were going on a picnic than heading out to crush a major religion. I sighed, then turned to face my slaves/employees, who’d come out to see me off. “Okay, everyone! Take care of the place while we’re gone!” I said, and with that, we set out on our journey to the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov.

Gossip: What Became of Elrand

An abnormal silence hung over the office of Dolan's guildmaster. The only sounds to be heard were the turning of pages and the scratching of a quill on paper—until, that is, the quiet creak of a chair rang out.

"Where do you think you're going, Elrand?" said Moira, the elven woman who'd been dispatched from the capital to keep an eye on the guild's resident idiot-in-chief.

"J-Just the restroom," Elrand replied.

"Is that so?" Moira asked. "I seem to recall you using the restroom not even half an hour ago. It's quite remarkable that an elder such as me would have an easier time controlling her bladder than you do, wouldn't you say? Perhaps you should get that looked at."

"O-On second thought, I think I can hold it after all," Elrand said, faltering under Moira's barbed commentary and sinking back into his seat.

"What do you mean, you can hold it?" Moira snapped. "If you don't have to go, then sit still and do your work. You should know that I am *not* a patient woman. Try not to let it slip your mind."

A long, painful silence passed. "I'll do that," Elrand finally said, his voice feeble and resigned, then took up his quill once more.

Just then, a knock rang out on Elrand's door. "It's Ugohl! Can I come in?"

"Certainly," Moira said.

The door opened with a clack, and Ugohl, the sub-guildmaster, walked inside. "Good day to you, Moira," he said. "I hope our guildmaster hasn't been causing trouble for you?"

Moira sighed. "Well, I can certainly understand the toils you've been through," she replied. "Never before have I met an idiot who'd try to go to the bathroom twice an hour, despite knowing full well that I'm watching him like a hawk."

A vein began to bulge in Ugohl's forehead. "Care to explain yourself, guildmoron?" he snapped.

"Huh? No, that is, well, umm," Elrand floundered. A stream of cold sweat began to pour down his brow as Ugohl's stare bored into him.

“No need to hound him too harshly. This *is* only my first day,” Moira said, throwing Elrand a lifeline from a totally unexpected direction. He heaved a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived.

“Truth be told, the explanation I was given when I was assigned this task was so beyond the pale, I couldn’t believe *anyone* would be capable of such stupidity, much less one of my own kind. Or rather, I didn’t *want* to believe it,” Moira continued. There were still clear traces of her former beauty in her now wrinkle-creased face, and her piercing gaze hadn’t lost one bit of its sharpness. She was looking at Elrand like a predator staring down its terrified prey. “After today, however, I understand very well what sort of person my charge is. Simply put, he is a stain on the elven race. To serve as a guildmaster and *not* carry out one’s duties in full is entirely inexcusable.”

Elrand shrank away from the harsh bite of Moira’s verbal abuse. She held no small amount of pride for her work with the Adventurer’s guild, and Elrand’s attitude had piqued her fury in remarkably short order.

“I may be retired,” Moira said, “but it seems I still have quite a bit of work left to do after all. Of course, the fact that I’m retired means that it will be no problem for me to dedicate my undivided attention to this assignment, no matter how prolonged it turns out to be.”

“S-Spare mee,” Elrand whimpered, his eyes clouded with the purest of despair.

“I’m deeply sorry for the trouble, Lady Moira, but also just as deeply appreciative of your support,” Ugohl said, his voice full of sincere gratitude.

“Never you worry,” Moira said. “I’ll see to it this fool of a man is whipped into shape, no matter what it takes.”

“Fantastic! Please do!”

While Moira and Ugohl celebrated Elrand’s upcoming reeducation, Elrand himself slumped in his chair with his eyes glazed over and his expression so grim, one might think his world had come to an end. From that day forward, the Dolan branch’s formerly rambunctious troublemaker of a guildmaster would be sighted plodding about in a dazed, nearly lifeless state of exhaustion on an increasingly frequent basis.

Extra: This is How I Like My Breakfasts!

“All right, time to get to work!”

One afternoon, I found myself with a block of free time and no plans in particular. Alban had recently given me a massive harvest of turnips, so I had decided to head to my kitchen and experiment to see how many ways I could come up with to use as many of them as I could possibly manage.

I had quickly decided to pickle them. Pickled turnips would make for a nice, light accompaniment for the breakfasts I made for myself when I couldn’t stomach the foods my familiars demanded as soon as they woke up. I just couldn’t handle a massive pile of meat every single morning like they could. Pickles were the first thing that came to mind for using up turnips, and once I’d had the idea, I just couldn’t get my mind off it. After all, the Japanese-style breakfasts I was fond of almost always included some sort of pickle as a side dish!

Now that I had a plan, I unloaded the pile of turnips from my Item Box, setting them down on the counter with a thud. “Man, I seriously have a ton of these,” I commented as I stared at the pile. I’d paired them with meat to convince my familiars to eat a fair number of them a while back, but I still had more than I knew what to do with left over, and I’d still have plenty after I made my pickles. I just wasn’t a heavy enough eater to make a dent in the stockpile.

“Yup. I’m gonna have to make another meat and veggie dish to get rid of the rest of these for sure,” I said with a sigh. It wasn’t like they’d go bad or anything, seeing as my Item Box kept them perpetually fresh, but I had to be incredibly careful about using veggies in our meals or my carnivores would complain at me, and that meant if I didn’t take steps to deal with them, I’d just amass more and more turnips until the situation was completely impossible to resolve. Alban really went all out with his field, after all.

I liked veggies just fine, to be clear, and the ones that Alban grew were delicious, so I was more than happy to receive them. The problem was the volume. He just gave me *so many*, every time. I had previously tried to subtly imply that I really didn’t need as many as he was giving me, but he had just laughed it off, telling me that he and the others had more than enough left over,

and that the stuff he gave me was only about a fifth of his total harvest. Apparently, he was just happy to know that his employer was eating his fill of the vegetables that he had poured his heart into growing. I couldn't exactly press the issue after *that*, so I had given up on getting him to reduce my allocation in short order.

I guess veggies are good for you, and it's not like I can't ever convince Fel and the others to eat them, so there's no reason for me not to accept them. My familiars always griped about dishes with conspicuous vegetables in them, but as long as I paired them with enough meat, they'd clean their plates anyway every time. *Whoops! I'm getting majorly sidetracked. Time to make those pickles!*

My plan was to make a variety of pickled turnips flavored with salted, preserved kombu. The salted kombu was the only extra ingredient I needed, and after I bought it from my Online Supermarket, I was ready to cook!

I started by washing the turnips carefully, chopping them in half lengthwise, and then slicing them into thin half-rounds. The turnips that Alban grew had really soft skin, so I didn't need to bother peeling them. I used the turnip leaves too, of course, chopping them up into pieces that were three centimeters long or so. Then I threw them all into a plastic bag along with the salted kombu, some sugar, and some vinegar, and gave the now full bag a thorough massage! After that, I just stashed it away in my magic fridge to sit overnight.

“Okay! Those should be ready just in time for breakfast tomorrow!”



The next morning, I made teriyaki cockatrice bowls for my familiars. They all gorged themselves, of course, and asked for seconds as well. I just couldn't fathom how they could stand something that heavily seasoned so early in the morning. I didn't mind or anything, to be clear. My familiars obviously loved it, and we went through this every day, so I didn't make much of it other than idly noting how inexhaustible their appetites constantly were.

While they inhaled their teriyaki bowls, I enjoyed my own lighter, plainer breakfast. I'd made myself a couple rice balls, one filled with plums and seasoned bonito flakes and the other with braised kombu, with the pickled turnips I'd made the night before on the side and a cup of roasted green tea, which I'd been pretty hooked on lately. The fragrance of the tea complemented the flavor profile of a Japanese breakfast perfectly.

It would've been perfect if I'd had a bowl of miso soup on the side as well,

but sadly, I was fresh out. I had *thought* that I had one more meal's worth left over, but it turned out I'd miscalculated, and I hadn't wanted to bother making a fresh batch. The rice balls, pickles, and tea were plenty for me even without soup.

I took a bite out of the braised kombu rice ball, then grabbed a few slices of pickled turnip. They were, unsurprisingly, delicious. It goes without saying that braised kombu and rice are a match made in heaven, and the vinegary bite of the pickles was just the thing to cleanse my palate afterward. I kept going in that manner, taking a bite of a rice ball, grabbing some pickled turnip, and then washing it all down with a slurp of green tea.

This is just plain delicious, honestly. Who would ever need more than this for breakfast? I savored every bite, enjoying my meal to the fullest, when suddenly I got the distinct feeling I was being stared at.

“Huh? What is it, Fel?”

“Will that truly be sufficient?”

“Will what be sufficient for what?”

“I mean, will such a meager breakfast truly be sufficient for the day’s work? You recall we have plans to go hunting?”

“I mean, maybe this is meager by *your* standards, but not mine,” I said. I’d made the rice balls a little on the larger side, so this was easily enough food to get me through the morning.

“I have my concerns as well, my liege. How could so little food sustain you throughout the day?”

“You too, Gon?”

«I mean, you *never* eat much in the morning, but this was even less than usual! Got the runs, or something?»

“Now you’re on my case, Dora-chan?! Come on, guys!” He sort of had a point in that I’d usually have soup and a rolled omelet as well, but it wasn’t like I had eaten *that* much less than usual!

«Master, are you okay? Does your tummy hurt? Do you need Sui’s medicine?» Sui asked. The slime extended a tentacle, and I could see a drop of liquid trickle out of its end.

“Nooope! I’m totally healthy, no worries! No need to make any medicine today, Sui!” I quickly clarified.

«Oh, yay!» Sui said.

Sheesh. I’m glad they’re worried about me, I guess, but I just wish they’d pick something less weird to get concerned about. “I mean, look, guys, I’m a

human, right? We just don't eat like you do! My stomach can't handle too much meat first thing in the morning. That's why I stick to lighter food for breakfast. Sure, I was having a couple fewer side dishes than usual today, but it was still plenty of food for me."

My familiars all gave me a very skeptical look.

"Come on, guys, I'm being serious! I'm not like you four! I can't eat meat and fried stuff morning after morning after morning. It's just too much for me! This is how I *like* my breakfasts!"

If I tried to eat like my familiars, I'd start out every day with a raging case of heartburn!



Afterword

Hello! Ren Eguchi speaking. Thank you very much for purchasing *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill Volume 13: Saucy Meatballs and the Ways of Adventuring!*

We've reached volume thirteen in what feels like the blink of an eye, and I'm truly grateful to have been able to continue writing this series for as long as I have. It's all thanks to my readers that I've been able to keep it up this long, and I truly can't thank you all enough.

This volume includes a certain dragon lover forcing his way into Mukohda's home, Mukohda's familiars dragging him to a truly absurd hunting ground, and a variety of other exciting events! I hope everyone enjoys seeing how they all unfold.

Furthermore, in January 2023, the anime adaptation of *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill* is finally scheduled to air! The anime will be produced by the prolific and popular Studio MAPPA, and I can hardly contain my excitement. I hope you'll all watch it when the broadcast begins! In addition, volume nine of the manga adaptation and volume seven of the spin-off comic, *Sui's Great Adventure*, will be published at the same time as this volume. I hope you give them a look as well!

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, everyone involved in the production of the anime, my editor "I," and all the other good people at Overlap: I can't thank you enough for all your help and support!

I hope you'll continue enjoying the laid-back, heartwarming adventures of *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill* in all the formats it's available in, and I hope to see you again in volume fourteen!

Bonus Short Stories

Otherworldly Lotus Root

The guild had dispatched us to the small nations on the border of Leonhardt for a quest, and we'd decided to stop in the fourth-largest city in the region on our way home. It was called Radouane, and it was known for being an agricultural trade hub.

The city was bustling, and felt exotic to me in a totally different way than the towns in Leonhardt did. Part of me wanted to make like a tourist and really soak in the atmosphere, but it went without saying that I was traveling with Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui—a quartet of incorrigible gluttons—which meant that, as always, our time in the city devolved into a tour through the local food stalls.

I managed to carve out a little time for some shopping toward the end of our stay, and that was when I noticed a stall selling something so unexpected, it instantly grabbed my full attention. They were piled up in a small mountain in front of the stall, and the man who was selling them looked quite glum, probably on account of the fact that nobody was interested in his wares.

I struck up a conversation with the gloomy merchant, who explained that he'd come to the city from his hometown, which was about two days away, to try and sell a crop that the villagers there had painstakingly grown. Normally, they cultivated beans—and he *had* actually brought some beans that day as well, which had already almost sold out—but those could grow just about anywhere, and didn't fetch a very impressive price. The village's *other* specialty crop, on the other hand, couldn't be found anywhere else, and the merchant had been hopeful that it would fetch a high price thanks to its rarity.

"I *thought* these things would net me the cash to live a little for once," he explained, but it seemed his expectations had been betrayed. From my perspective, however, his misfortune had been a stroke of incredible luck. They were a solid size larger than the ones I was used to, but I knew the vegetables that he was selling at a glance.

"These are just lotus roots!"

The village where the merchant was from called them yotus roots, it seemed, but after hearing him describe how they had an oddly holey internal structure, a

crunchy texture, and a tendency to change color if you left them exposed to the air after you cut them, there was no doubt left in my mind that they were just like the lotus roots I was used to. I *had* to have them, and seeing as he was having such a hard time clearing out his inventory, I decided to go ahead and buy up his entire stock.

When I told the merchant that I wanted all of them, he didn't believe me at first. It was only after I actually brought out the money to pay for my purchase that he realized I was serious. He'd been convinced that he'd have to haul his whole stock of yotus roots all the way back to his village, and was ecstatic to know that he'd be spared the hassle after all, not to mention pleased as punch to get the extra spending money he'd been hoping for. He was so pleased, in fact, that he threw all of his leftover beans into the deal as a bonus. I hadn't been planning on buying those, and didn't even really want them, but I figured I'd be able to find *something* to do with them eventually and took them anyway.

So, yeah—that's how I got my hands on a treasure trove of otherworldly lotus roots! I had some time to kick back and relax when I got home as well, and decided to satisfy my craving and cook something with lotus root in it for dinner right away. *The only question is, what'll I make?*



"Man, that conversation took a lot longer than I expected it to," I said to myself as I headed back to my place.

Theresa had told me that she was going to be baking bread that day, so I'd gone over to her place to pick up a few loaves. She had her own personal recipe for a *really* good rustic sourdough loaf, and I was never one to turn down any extras she was able to throw my way. At one point, I had even asked her to start making a few specifically for me whenever she baked.

So, basically, when Theresa let me know she was about to get baking, I headed out to snag a loaf or two on the double. When I got there, we ended up talking about the tastiest ways to eat her bread, and before I knew it, our quick chat had turned into a deep discussion. I was a big fan of toasting her bread and eating it with a runny fried egg and some salt and pepper on top, by the way! Theresa made her bread using whole wheat flour, which gave it an incredible fragrance when you toasted it, and that plus a perfectly fried egg with a runny yolk made for a simple but unbeatably delicious combination.

Anyway, by the time I realized how long we'd been chatting and said my

goodbyes, it was late enough that I barely had any time left to make dinner at all. I was still set on making something with lotus root in it, though, and when I considered dishes that I could use them in that wouldn't take long to cook, a stir-fry was the first thing that came to mind. Thankfully, I knew just the right kind of stir-fry to throw some meat and lotus root into, and since it was a recipe that paired well with rice, I figured I'd make it into rice bowls.

Yeah, this sounds good! For tonight's dinner...

“...I'll whip up some salty-sweet beef and lotus root bowls!”

I checked through my stocks, and found that I had almost everything that I'd need for the dish on hand already.

“Oh, I guess I'll need some sesame seeds and green onions for a garnish! I'll have to buy those,” I muttered, then snapped up both ingredients from my Online Supermarket. “Okay! That should be everything I need!”

Now it's time to whip these suckers up!

For starters, I thinly sliced the green onions and set them aside. Next up were the otherworldly lotus roots I'd gotten from the town in the border nations. I tried peeling one of them, then paused to consider how I'd make use of it.

“Normally, I slice my lotus roots in half, but this thing's huge! It might be better to cut it into quarters,” I mused. In the end, I decided to quarter the otherworldly lotus roots, then slice them into very thin wedges, roughly three millimeters thick. I'd normally blanch the lotus root as well, but since the sauce that I was making would be pretty strongly flavored, I decided it wouldn't be worth the effort.

I decided to use dungeon beef for this particular recipe, slicing it just as thinly as I had sliced the lotus root. Once that was done, I heated some sesame oil in a frying pan and threw the otherworldly lotus root and meat in to stir-fry. When the meat was cooked through, I added some sake, soy sauce, mirin, sugar, and grated garlic (the stuff that comes in tubes works just fine), then continued to stir-fry everything for a while longer until the seasonings were well distributed and the whole dish had taking on an appetizing sheen.

“Okay, that should do it! Now I just have to fill the bowls with freshly cooked rice, pile this stuff on top, and sprinkle it with some sesame seeds and green onions to finish it off...and with that, we've got one salty-sweet beef and lotus root bowl, ready to serve!”

I quickly brought the rice bowls out into the living room, where my quartet of gluttons were eagerly waiting.

«**What is for dinner tonight?**» Fel asked.

“Salty-sweet beef and lotus root bowls. Trust me, they’re gonna be good!” I replied as I set my familiars’ bowls down before them, each filled with a giant mountain of food. The four of them dug right in.

«**Hmm. This is serviceable indeed,**» Fel said.

«It truly is!» Gon agreed. «The strongly flavored sauce pairs excellently with the rice!»

«You said it!» Dora-chan said.

«It’s really yummy!» Sui added.

“I know, right? This is one of those dishes that you just can’t have *without* a bowl of rice,” I said as I wolfed down my own helping.

«Oh, and these holey things—what are they, some sorta vegetable?» asked Dora-chan. «Whatever they are, I’m pretty into them! Talk about a nice crunch!»

“I had a feeling you’d pick those out, Dora-chan! They’re vegetables, yeah. They’re called lotus roots, and their texture’s seriously to die for!” I said. “That reminds me of another great recipe. You take lotus root and stir-fry it with some spicy burdock root! It’s seriously tasty! I’ll have to make it for us soon.”

I was already fantasizing about my lotus root and burdock stir-fry, but not everyone shared my enthusiasm for the idea.

«**You would eat these plants stir-fried on their own? I shall not partake in such a meal.**»

«I’m less than enthused about a meatless dish, myself.»

«Yeah, I mean, the *texture*’s great and all, but having this stuff on its own wouldn’t really cut it.»

«Sui thinks it’d be better with meat too.»

“Ugh... Okay, fine! I’ll save all the lotus root and burdock for myself, then!” *Those four don’t know what they’ll be missing! Stupid carnivores...*

«**More importantly, I require seconds.**»

«I as well!»

«Same!»

«Sui too!»

“Okay, okay, coming right up!”

Cuteness Makes the World Go Round

“I guess if my main Online Supermarket is doing a Christmas promotion, it only makes sense that *they’d* have one too,” I said to myself as I glanced at

Fumiya's page in my skill's menu. The whole screen was full of ads for festive cakes, and at the top they had "Merry Christmas! Fumiya's Christmas Fair has arrived!" written in big, brightly colored letters.

«Oooh, cake, cake! Sui wants some!»

"S-Sui?! I thought you were napping!"

«Sui just woke up!» the slime said with an excited bounce.

I'd known perfectly well that Sui would get incredibly worked up and pester me to buy a bunch of cakes if it saw all of the Christmas promotions my Online Supermarket was running, and I'd gone out of my way to move from the living room to the kitchen before I opened Fumiya's menu specifically to keep that from happening, but it seemed my effort had been in vain. *How on earth did it know? Does Sui have some sort of sweets radar built into it, or something?*

«Wooow, look at all those tasty cakes! This one looks so good! Oh, and that one too! And that one!» Sui said, wibbling with excitement as it pointed out each of the cakes on my menu in sequence.

"We can get some of these for dessert, but only three of them, same as always," I said.

«Aww! Can't we have more? Just this once?»

"I dunno," I said. *Too much sugar's really not good for you!*

«Pleeease, Master?» Sui pleaded as it prodded my arm with a little tentacle. «Pleeeeease?»

Sui sure does love its sweets, huh? I really wanted to give in and tell the slime it could have all the cakes it wanted, but I knew I had to resist the urge. No matter how cute Sui was, giving it carte blanche to buy all the cakes it could eat could only end poorly. *But, I mean...it is Christmas, so I could let it have a little more than usual, just this once.*

"Okay, okay, you can have *five* this time. But just for today, all right?" I said.

«Really?! Hurray! Thanks, Master!» Sui yelped with glee as it bounced into my arms and snuggled up against my chest.

I'd made a habit of spoiling Sui, and I was very aware of it. Could you blame me, though? Just one look at the slime caused all my stress to melt away! It was just so dang *cute!* *A little spoiling never hurt anyone*, I told myself as Sui and I browsed Fumiya's cake listings together.



«Sui wants this one, Master!» Sui said as it prodded at a lavishly decorated

whole cake studded with an incredible number of fairly sizable strawberries. I read the cake's description, and learned that there were even *more* strawberries and whipped cream sandwiched between the cake's layers.

Hmm. It is sorta traditional to go all out with a big, special cake on Christmas, and this definitely fits the bill for that. Guess I shouldn't be surprised that Sui would pick out the fanciest cake of the bunch at a glance either. But, well...

"I dunno about counting that whole thing as just *one* piece," I said.

«Awww, why?» asked Sui.

"I mean, just look at that thing—it's huge! We usually count in terms of single cake slices, and this is way bigger than those tend to be," I explained as I pointed at one of the smaller pieces of cake we usually got. There was just no comparison between them and the one Sui had picked out, size-wise.

«Mngh, but Sui really wants to try it! It looks so yummy! Please, Master? Pleeeease?» Sui begged as it tugged pleadingly at my sleeve with a tentacle.

«Sui'll be super good! Sui'll be even better than usual, Sui promises!» it added, now rubbing its tentacles together like it was praying toward me.

Yyyyyep. Can't take this. I'm out. "Okay, but since it's so big, we'll count it as *two* pieces instead of one. Fair?"

«Yaaay! Thank you, Master!» Sui squealed with a happy little bounce.

The slime was just so cute, I couldn't help but fawn over it. I was spoiling Sui again, and I knew it. I was *very* aware of how soft I was being, but I just couldn't bring myself to stop. How could I say no to my favorite little slime?!

Anyway, the next cake that Sui picked out was another whole one. This time, it had set its sights on a strawberry tart, once again covered in big, red berries. The tart itself was almond-based, and covered in a layer of custard cream with the strawberries on top. To be honest, it looked absolutely scrumptious.

Finally, Sui picked out a chocolate cake—one of the slime's favorite desserts—as its final option. This one had been made using a very particular sort of chocolate, and was decorated with plenty of raspberries and blueberries, giving it an extravagant appearance. It was a chocolate sponge layer cake, with fillings of chocolate cream or berry sauce slathered between each layer, and according to its description, "An explosion of delectable, refreshing fruit cuts through a base of deep and indulgent bittersweet chocolate, making this cake a luxury the likes of which you won't find anywhere else!" It sounded maybe a little too refined for Sui's palate, but Sui had looked so excited when it picked the cake out, I couldn't bring myself to say no.

In the end, the whole cakes had all looked so extravagant that they just kept pulling Sui in again and again. I finalized the purchase, and Sui cooed and jiggled with glee as I opened the cardboard box and pulled the cakes out of it. It clearly wanted to get its hands on them—metaphorically speaking—as soon as possible, and it took a lot of coaxing to remind it that they were for *after* dinner.

Later that evening, after a somewhat lavish Christmas dinner...

«Hey, wasn’t dinner nicer than usual tonight?» Sui said.

«**Hmm? Was it, now?**» Fel asked.

«Now that you mention it, I suppose we *did* have more meat than usual,» Gon noted. «Of course, when it comes to good food, I’m inclined to eat first and ask questions later.»

«Hee hee hee! Sui knows why it was so nice, and Sui knows that dessert’s going to be even nicer! Master, dessert, dessert!»

“Okay, okay!” I said, and then I brought out the three whole cakes Sui had chosen that afternoon.

«See? Aren’t they amazing?!» Sui asked, right before it started scarfing down its dessert without wasting a moment.

Next up... “So, umm, I got these for you three,” I said as I produced my other familiars’ desserts. I had picked theirs out myself, for time-saving purposes. All three of them were getting a set of eight shortcake slices, each a different flavor, which were arranged in their boxes in the shape of a whole cake. They really should’ve each gotten six pieces, if I were trying to match their desserts up with Sui’s, and that plus the sheer luxury of having so many different flavors to try made me feel like they were getting a pretty good deal all around.

I presented the cake assortments to my remaining three familiars, who gave them a glance, and then turned to look at Sui’s cakes.

«**Hey.**»

«You should try to hide your biases with a little more care, my liege...»

«Yeah, this is just plain old favoritism. Seriously.»

The three of them glared at me, and I gulped.

“C-Cut me some slack, okay?! Cuteness makes the world go round!”

Mukohda’s Cooking Class: Eggs for Days

Yet *again*, Aija and Theresa had asked me to teach them another egg dish. It seemed that although their families were fond of the omelets and stir-fries I’d taught them how to make previously, sooner or later the requests the two of them

got always went back to the same thing: fried eggs. It was a very popular item on their families' menus, and they usually ended up making that one dish at least two or three times a week.

When Aija and Theresa had tried to ask their families what the deal was with this fixation on fried eggs in particular, they'd been told that "Frying them's the best way to bring out their flavor," and "They just taste best fried, for some reason!" In the end, the two women had found themselves in agreement. Keeping it simple and frying the eggs sunny-side up really was the best way to bring out their eggness in its purest form.

None of that had dulled their innovative spirits, though, and so they'd asked me to teach them another dish that would bring out an egg's inherent deliciousness in the same way frying them did. I could appreciate their dedication to finding quality in simplicity, but boy, was that request ever a tall order!

I got to thinking about what sort of dish I could teach them this time. At first I thought that boiling the eggs would be another way of keeping their flavor profiles nice and simple, but then I remembered that they'd been eating their eggs boiled for as long as I'd known them. They even gave boiled eggs to their kids as snacks sometimes, so that was right out. Thinking along those lines did lead me to one idea, though...

"Oh, I know. Why don't I teach them how to *poach* eggs?"

There was nothing quite like the runny yolk of a perfectly poached egg. They were delicious on their own, even better with a bit of salt and pepper, and better still when you served them on top of bacon or ham, letting the yolk spill out over the meat, and then putting it all on a piece of toast.

Yeah, I think poached eggs are the way to go! Aija and Theresa had asked for something that would draw out an egg's inherent appeal, which poached eggs would do quite nicely, and above all else, it would be a simple recipe to teach them. *That settles it. My next cooking class will be centered around poaching eggs!*



"Okay, is everyone ready to get cooking?"

"Yes, sir!" said Aija and Theresa, both excited as could be to learn a recipe that might finally give fried eggs some competition.

"I'll be teaching you how to make a dish called poached eggs today!" I said.

“Well, I guess it’s more of a technique than a dish, really. It’s super simple, but that’s what makes it so great at bringing out the core appeal of an egg’s flavor!”

“I can hardly wait!” Aija exclaimed.

“Our families love egg dishes, and they’re all really looking forward to trying a new one too,” Theresa said.

Yeah, I figured, considering the number of eggs you all go through! I took Online Supermarket orders from them every once in a while, and eggs were always at the absolute top of their lists.

“Oh, right! I think I’ve mentioned this before, but don’t eat any eggs that you didn’t get from me, no matter what! They could make you super sick!” I said. It was a matter of freshness, mostly, and salmonella seemed like it would be a real risk in this world too.

“Oh, yes, we’re well aware,” Aija said with an emphatic nod.

“Plus, the eggs you give us are the cream of the crop!” Theresa added. “The eggs they sell around these parts can’t compete with them at all. Plus, they’re outrageously expensive, and you can never be sure when they were laid! We’d never even consider trying our luck with the stuff the local merchants flog.”

Jeez, Theresa... I know you’re right about all that, but the people selling those eggs are just trying to make a living! You don’t have to come down on them that hard.

“Okay, then, let’s get started! You two have brought your pots to a boil already, right?” I said.

“Yes! Just like you told us to.”

“Great! Okay, then first, start by cracking an egg into a little bowl. After that...”

The next step was to add some vinegar to the boiling water. Then I turned down the burner to reduce the water to a simmer, and used some chopsticks to stir it into a vortex. A ladle works fine for that step too, if you don’t have cooking chopsticks on hand. Once the water’s swirling around nicely, you just gently slip the egg into the very center of the whirlpool, and let it cook for about two minutes.

“Oh, look! It’s all firmed up!” Aija said as she peeked into the pan.

“And it’s staying together! I was expecting it to split apart,” Theresa noted.

“Crazy, right?” I said. “The trick’s to put a bit of vinegar into the water and stir it up into a whirlpool, like I just did. Now that it’s cooked, you just have to lift it up with a mesh scoop and let the water drip away...”

And just like that, the poached egg was done! The only thing left to do was to

put it on a plate and sprinkle a little salt and pepper over it, and it was ready to eat.

“Give it a try, you two,” I said. Aija and Theresa split the egg in half, then popped their portions into their mouths.

“It’s delicious!” Aija declared.

“It really is! And the yolk’s texture is superb!” Theresa said.

I know, right? Poached eggs were as simple as it got, but something about a runny egg yolk was delicious in a way words couldn’t quite do justice. Aija and Theresa practically licked the plates clean and still seemed to want seconds, so I poached a few more eggs to show them another trick with.

“Eating them with salt and pepper like before is great and all, but poached eggs *really* shine when you have them on a piece of toast,” I said, then demonstrated the technique with some toast I’d lightly browned in an oven. I made a piece for each of them, and one for myself as well while I was at it. “It’s even better if you put a piece of ham on the toast, and put the egg on top of that, by the way!”

“Oh, that *does* sound lovely!”

“I’ll have to give it a try!”

After we finished our toast, Aija took a moment to ask me a question. “Umm, about the seasoning you put into the water—‘vinegar,’ I believe? I couldn’t taste it at all, so I was wondering if it was really necessary.”

“Oh, right! The vinegar’s not actually meant to flavor the egg,” I said. “It’s there to help the egg white firm up quicker. Between that and the way you stir the water up, you can give the egg a really nice shape!”

“I see,” Aija and Theresa said, sounding very impressed.

“I believe this is the first time we’ve used this ‘vinegar’ seasoning, isn’t it?” Theresa asked. “How does it taste?”

Oh, right! I guess I’ve never given them vinegar before, have I? I’d never seen any signs of people eating vinegary foods in this world, so I had sort of assumed that most people didn’t use it and had never gone out of my way to supply them with any. “Wanna give it a taste?” I offered. Theresa and Aija both nodded, so I poured a little vinegar into a couple shallow dishes and offered it to the two of them. They took a tentative sip, and...

“That *flavor!*” they yelped with a grimace.

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, that’s vinegar for you. Packs a punch, doesn’t it?”

“How in the world do you cook with a seasoning that’s *this* strong?!” Theresa asked me, clearly bewildered. Aija nodded in vigorous agreement.

"I mean, you can use it in all sorts of ways," I said. "It's good in meat dishes, and with fish too. I've always thought that vinegar goes best with vegetables, though. Also, vinegary dishes are great when the weather is hot! Something about it makes them really refreshing, for some reason."

"Really?" Aija and Theresa said as they stared at the bottle of vinegar.

"Oh, are you curious now? In that case, how about I teach you a recipe that uses vinegar sometime?"

"Yes, please do!" Aija said.

"We'd love to learn!" Theresa added. Clearly, I'd caught their interest.

"Okay, can do! Oh, but maybe not today. You told everyone you'd be learning a new egg dish, right? Don't you have to go home and share it with your families now?" *Considering how much everyone loves eggs, I bet they're chomping at the bit to try it.*

"Oh!"

"That's right! They're all looking forward to it so much, I'm sure they're already complaining about how late we are!"

"Thank you very much for the lesson!" Aija and Theresa said, and then they hurried along on their way.

"Guess I'll be teaching them something with vinegar in it next time, then," I said after they left. "Of course, I bet it's only a matter of time before they ask me for even more ways to make eggs too. But until they do, I guess I don't have to think too much about that."

Some time later, I learned that something of a rift had developed between my egg-loving employees. They'd grouped up into two factions—team fried eggs, and team poached eggs—and were now embroiled in a fraught debate over which method captured an egg's truest essence the best.

Cooking From the Back of the Box: Soft and Succulent Honey Castella Cake

"Okay, Sui, go ahead and pick!"

«Okaaay!» Sui said, happily waving two little tentacles in the air from its perch in my arms.

The two of us were in the kitchen, and it was coming up on three in the afternoon—snack time. We'd been buying ice cream, pudding, and Fumiya's cakes off my Online Supermarket a lot lately, but Sui had told me that it wanted

to help me make something sometime soon, so we had decided to cook our own snack together today.

The question, of course, was what we would make. Whatever I decided on, I was going to be making it with Sui, so I wanted to keep it as simple as I possibly could, and that meant it was the perfect time to fall back on an old standby of mine: the pancake mix I'd used to make all sorts of quick and easy desserts in the past! The recipes that were provided on the backs of the boxes of mix I bought were always there to lend me a helping hand where baking was concerned, and I had stocked up on enough packages of the stuff over time that I had a wide variety of box-back recipes to choose from. All I had to do was show Sui the recipes I had on hand and ask which one it wanted to make!

That brings us back to the kitchen, where I had lined up ten boxes of the same pancake mix on the countertop. I had decided to do things a little differently this time—the boxes were laid out face-up so that Sui wouldn't be able to see what recipes were printed on them. I figured it would be more exciting to pick something out at random, and let the recipe we were going to make be a surprise.

“Okay, Sui, which is it gonna be?” I asked.

Sui stretched out a little tentacle. «It's sooo hard to pick,» the slime said as it pondered its options with the utmost seriousness.

“I read the recipes earlier, by the way, and they all looked really good!”

«Really? Okay, okay, umm... Sui picks this one!» Sui finally said, extending a tentacle to pick up a box right in the middle of the spread.

“Okay, let's see what we've got,” I said as Sui passed it to me. “Today's afternoon snack is gonna be...‘soft and succulent honey castella cake,’ looks like!”

«‘Soft and succulent honey castella cake’?»

“Yup! Castella's a sort of sponge cake. It's really soft and sweet! The flavor's pretty simple, all around, but it's still really tasty, and I'm pretty sure you'll like it.”

«Really? Hurray! Castella, castella, let's make castella!»

“I think that settles it! We'll be having honey castella for our snack today!”

«Yaaay!»



I read the back of the box thoroughly, and found that we wouldn't need all

that many extra ingredients at all. The recipe called for pancake mix, eggs, white sugar, honey, vegetable oil, and raw sugar—just six ingredients in total. The only thing I didn't already have on hand was the raw sugar, so I grabbed a package of it from my Online Supermarket and got right to work!

“Okay, the first step is to prepare the pans!” I said. I already had a bunch of loaf pans meant for making pound cake, so I decided to just use those, and pulled ten of them out of my Item Box. “You’re supposed to line the pans with parchment paper and sprinkle them with raw sugar, like this,” I said as I demonstrated the lining process. “See, Sui? And you add the sugar like this,” I continued, scattering a scoop of sugar across the pan’s bottom.

«Okaaay!» Sui said happily, scooping up a tentacleful of sugar and trying to sprinkle it around like I had. It ended up being a little clumpy in places, though, so I lent a hand and helped Sui get it all sorted out. «Master, I finished!»

“Yup! That looks great. Next...”

I took a bowl and cracked the eggs into it. Then I added the white sugar, and placed it over a pot of simmering water to gently heat the mixture as I whisked it toward the soft peak stage.

“See that, Sui? I need you to whisk the eggs, just like this.”

«Okaaay! Sui’s really, really good at whisking!» Sui said as it took up the whisk and started skillfully whipping it about in the bowl.

“All right, that’s enough!” I said when the egg mixture looked nice and thick, just like in the picture that was printed on the box alongside the recipe. “Now we add the honey, and mix it up again!”

The honey I had on hand was some really high-class stuff. I had picked it up in a town we’d passed through while we were dealing with a quest some time before. It was fairly expensive, but it had a refined mouthfeel and a perfectly mild sweetness that made it well worth the price.

After we stirred in the honey, it was finally time to add the pancake mix. “You can’t use the whisk for this step, though. Here, use this instead,” I said as I handed Sui a rubber spatula, taking the whisk in exchange. “Try to fold the mix in nice and gently, like you’re cutting the spatula through the batter.”

«Like this, Master?»

“Yeah, that’s perfect! You’re doing great, Sui!”

Once the pancake mix was incorporated, it was time to add the vegetable oil.

“All right, this time you’ll want to mix it by sort of scooping the batter up onto itself, like this!”

«Is this right?»

“Yeah, you’ve got the hang of it!”

With the oil fully folded in, the time had come to transfer the batter into our prepared pans.

“Okay, Sui, you just have to pour it right into the pans! Think you can handle that?”

«Yeah!»

“Don’t just glop it all in at once, though! Take it nice and slow.”

Sui lifted the bowl with its tentacles and carefully started pouring the batter. It spilled a little in the process, but that just made watching it go about its work even more charming, somehow.

“All right, that was perfect!”

«Hee hee hee!»

After that, I dropped the pans onto the countertop a few times to pop any large air bubbles that might’ve still been in the batter, then slid them into the oven to bake.

«How long until they’re done, Master?» Sui asked as it stared fixedly at the oven’s door.

“Sorry, Sui. This part’s gonna take a while to finish! Also, it’ll apparently taste better if we give them some time to cool down afterward, so it’ll be even longer before they’re ready to eat.”

«Oh. Okaaay...»

“You can go hang out with the others while you wait, if you want.”

«No, that’s okay! Sui’ll wait right here,» Sui said, and then did just that, waiting in front of the oven with an air of palpable anticipation.

Ding!

“Okay, they should be done baking now! Let’s give them a test, though, just to make sure they’re cooked through.”

«Okay!»

I pulled the pans out of the oven, then stuck a bamboo skewer into the centers of the cakes to test them.

“See how there isn’t any batter stuck to the stick? That means they’re finished baking!”

«Hurray!»

“Now we just lift them out of the pans! We’ll have to be patient for a while longer until they cool down all the way, though.”

«All right! Sui can wait.»

Before long, the castella cakes had cooled to room temperature.

“I think that should do it! Go ahead and peel the parchment paper off the cakes now, Sui.”

Sui slowly and carefully peeled the paper away, revealing the cakes inside.

«Oh, woow, they smell so good!»

“Heh heh, I know, right? Wanna give them a taste test?”

«Yeah!»

It was time for Sui and I to indulge in a cook’s special privilege: sneaking a bite before everyone else. I sliced off the end of one of the castella cakes, and split it with Sui.

“Yup, that’s good, all right!” I said as I took a bite. It was moist and soft, and the subtle sweetness of the honey came through perfectly. It had turned out so well that I never would’ve guessed it was made from pancake mix if I hadn’t baked it myself!

Just then, I noticed that Sui was shaking.

“Hey, you okay, Sui?”

«Soooooo good!»

“Ha ha ha! Yeah, it turned out pretty well, didn’t it?”

«Yeah! It’s really, really yummy! Hey, Master, do you think Uncle Fel, Old Man Gon, and Dora-chan will say they’re good too?»

“Oh, I’m sure they will! You worked so hard making them, there’s no way they wouldn’t.”

«Sui really hopes so!»

In the end, everyone loved the honey castella cakes that Sui had helped me make. Gon took a particular liking to them, and went out of his way to ask us to make them again sometime—a request that Sui was all too happy to accept.

Leaves and All

Ever since he had started his garden, Alban had been giving me massive quantities of truly top-quality vegetables on a regular basis. Today was no exception—he’d gotten up bright and early for a harvest, and had brought back an entire bushel of turnips to present to me.

Come to think of it, I bought some turnip seeds from my Online Supermarket to give to him about a month ago, didn’t I?

Alban had told me, in his words, “I’ve been wanting to try raising something

that doesn't grow around these parts, so if you have anything on hand, I'd love to give it a shot!" That was when I remembered that I had seen turnip seeds in my skill's menu at some point, and got to thinking about how nice it would be to have some pickled turnips one of these days. I never would have guessed that growing them would be this easy, though!

"Didn't think he'd grow so many of them either," I commented to myself as I gazed at my turnip haul. It seemed his harvest had been even more ample than usual, judging by how many he'd given me. He'd usually bring me five bagfuls of veggies at the most, but this time around I had received *eight* bags, all packed to their limits with turnips. *Past* their limits, actually—they were literally overflowing.

"Yeah, I'm never gonna finish these if I'm the only one eating them. I'll have to find a way to work them into my familiars' meals," I mused aloud. Unfortunately, said familiars were *not* veggie fans...or, really, Fel in particular had a deeply-ingrained prejudice against them. Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui liked meat *better*, but that wouldn't stop them from eating whatever I served them, while Fel would always scowl at me if he could pick out so much as a single vegetable in his food. It was even worse when the meal was at all veggie-heavy. I *never* heard the end of it on those nights.

You can't get by if you only eat meat, meat, and more meat, though! You've gotta get some veggies in your diet every once in a while! I'd been making a point of working both meat and vegetables into our meals on a regular basis for precisely that reason.

"We've been eating nothing but steak, cutlets, and karaage lately, so it feels like the right time for a veggie-centric meal anyway," I said. Tonight, I was going to make something using all those nice, fresh turnips!

What's a good recipe that uses turnips, though...? Oh, I know! And this'll let me use the whole turnip, leaves and all! Sui helped me grind some meat up the other day, so I've got more than enough of that in stock, and it's a quick and tasty meal that I can serve over rice, just how I like it! Yeah, that sounds like a plan, which means...

"Today, we'll be having saucy pork and turnip bowls for lunch!"



"All right, let's whip up some rice bowls... Oh, wait, I forgot! I'm out of oyster sauce!" It had completely slipped my mind that I needed to restock, but

thankfully, my skill let me do so on the spot. “Okay, now I’m ready! Time to make some pork and turnip bowls!”

First, I cut the turnips into centimeter-thick wedges and sliced their leaves into roughly three-centimeter-wide chunks. The fact that this recipe used every bit of the turnips, even their leaves, was one of my favorite things about it. That meant you got all the nutritional value you could out of the vegetables, and the green leaves added a splash of color to the dish as well.

Next, I poured sesame oil into a frying pan, heated it up, and sautéed some grated ginger. I was trying to keep my cooking time on the lower end, so I just used the stuff that came in tubes. Freshly grating your ginger definitely gives it a boost in terms of its aroma, but I had never encountered a recipe where it felt like there was something outright *wrong* with using the tube stuff. Going one way or the other was just a matter of personal preference.

Anyway, once the ginger was starting to get really fragrant, I added the ground dungeon pork. The turnips went in next, once the pork was browned and starting to come apart. After a little stir-frying, I added some granulated dashi stock, sake, mirin, soy sauce, sugar, and water. Then I let the whole mixture simmer until the turnips were cooked through. The chopped turnip leaves went in after that, simmering for just a little longer. Once they were done, I temporarily shut off the heat, drizzled a slurry of potato starch and water over the mixture, and turned the burner back on for just long enough to let the sauce thicken up! At that point, all I had to do was throw some piping-hot, freshly cooked rice into a bowl, and pour the saucy pork and turnip mixture on top of it.

“That should do it! These saucy dungeon pork and turnip bowls are ready to serve!” *The green of the turnip leaves really does brighten up the whole dish! Boy, does this look good! Better not waste any time...* “Okay, guys! Lunch is ready!”

My familiars had been napping the afternoon away, but the moment I said the word “lunch,” they were up in a flash.

«Well? What is our lunch today?» Fel asked.

“I made us some saucy dungeon pork and turnip bowls,” I said as I brought the extra-large dishes my familiars used out of my Item Box, where I had briefly stashed them. Each one was piled high with rice, pork, and turnips.

«Oh? This looks delicious indeed!» Gon said.

«Yeah,» Dora-chan agreed. «Smells pretty good too!»

«It must be super yummy!» Sui added.

“Right? It’s got a nice, thick sauce, and it goes great with rice!” I said.

As the four of us chatted away, a certain someone was standing there silently, a frown on his face: Fel the veggie-loather. He gave the dish a long, looong appraising look, and then turned to face me.

«**Are there vegetables in this?**» he asked.

“Well, it’s got ‘turnips’ in its name,” I replied. “I used every bit of them too! Even the leaves! Zero food waste!”

Fel gave me an *incredibly* petulant stink-eye.

“What? Oh, come on, I added a ton of extra dungeon pork to make up for the vegetables! Just give it a try, okay?”

«This dish is remarkable, my liege! It is truly delightful!»

«Yeah, this stuff hits the spot!»

«It’s great, Master!»

“Glad to hear it! *See*, Fel? Gon, Dora-chan, *and* Sui all say it’s good!”

Fel gave me one last scowl, but finally took a reluctant bite of his lunch. Then another, much faster than the first, followed rapidly by several more.

“So? Good, isn’t it?” I asked after Fel had polished off the whole bowl and was licking his lips.

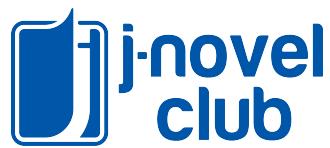
«**W-Well, I shall concede that it was edible,**» Fel said.

“Hmm. Just edible, huh? I guess that means you won’t be wanting seconds,” I said. Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui were all well into their second helpings, by the way.

«**My opinion of the dish and my appetite are two wholly separate matters. I will, of course, be having seconds.**»

“Wholly separate matters” my rear! Sheesh, Fel, would it kill you to be honest for once in your life? Man, though...they’re really tearing through this stuff in an instant.

Watching my familiars as they made a huge dent in my turnip stockpile, just as I’d hoped they would, brought a sly smile to my face. Of course, for all my gloating, I still had more than enough turnips left to spare. I’d have to come up with a few more ways to get my familiars to eat them, and I was already hard at work thinking about what recipes I could sneak them into next.



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by Ren Eguchi

Translated by Tristan K. Hill
Edited by Adam Fogle

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