Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill

Beef Cutlets and the Bandit King's Treasure



Author: Ren Eguchi
Illustration: Masa

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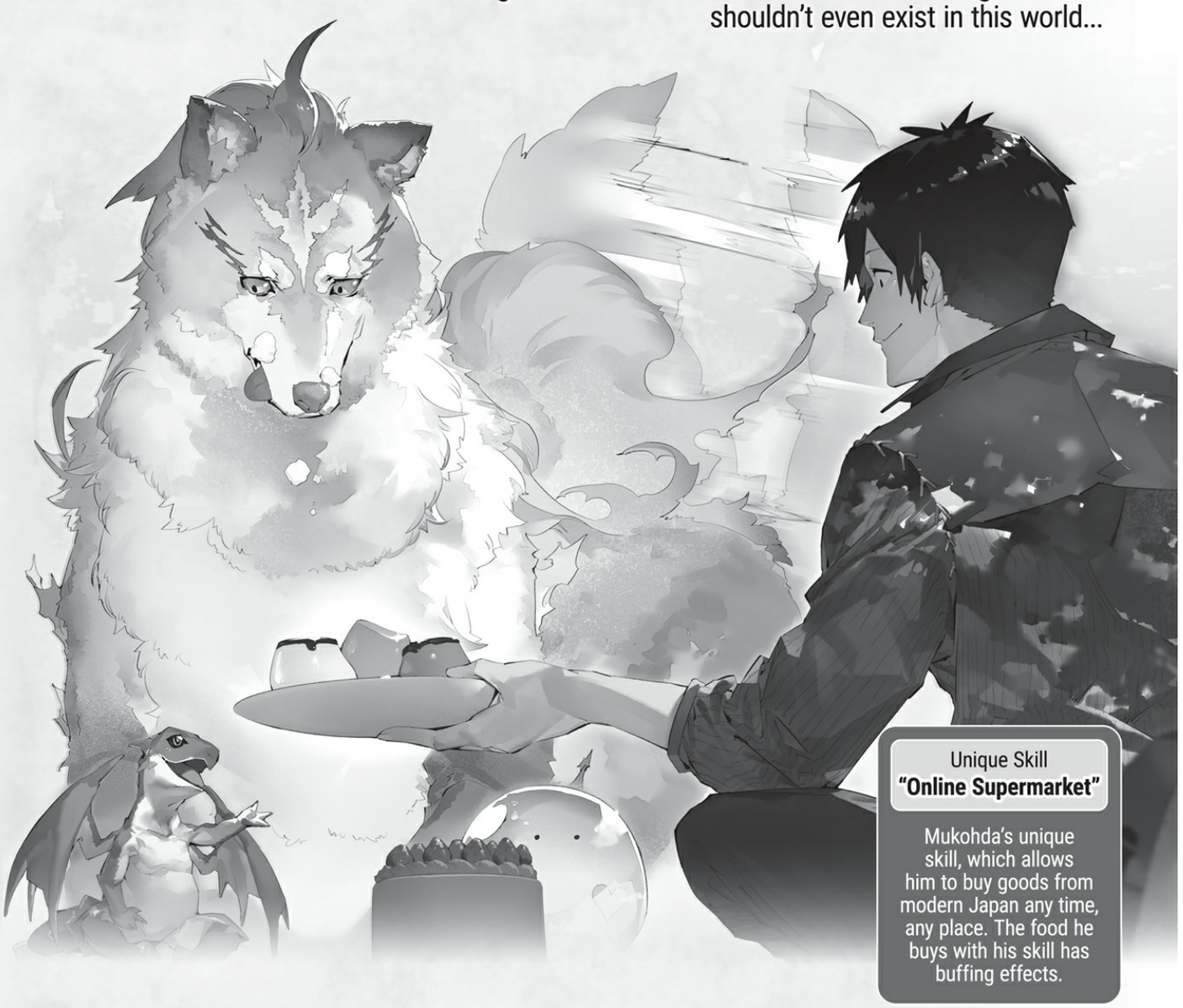

Mukohda
A book written by someone from not just the same world as me, but the same country as well... What else would I find in there?
Fel


Tabatha
"Big brother Mukohda feeds me lots of tasty food, so I love him!"
日記帳
Lotte

The Story Up Till Now

Accidentally caught in a "Hero Summoning" by a shady kingdom, Tsuyoshi Mukouda (Mukohda), a salaryman in modern Japan, was brought into another world of swords and magic. Somehow, Mukohda managed to leave the kingdom and go on a journey, but thanks to his unique skill, "Online Supermarket," which allows him to buy things from his world, he was beset by incredible beings like "Goddesses" and "Legendary Beasts" all giving him things like familiar contracts and blessings in order to get at his food and otherworld goods.

At the behest of Demiurge, the God of All Creation, Mukohda's party ventured into a long-abandoned cavern. At the end of a heavily trapped corridor they found their prize: the lost treasure of the legendary bandit king! That's when Mukohda noticed a certain tablet hidden among the riches and lucre—a tablet with writing on it that shouldn't even exist in this world...



Unique Skill
"Online Supermarket"

Mukohda's unique skill, which allows him to buy goods from modern Japan any time, any place. The food he buys with his skill has buffing effects.

Character Introduction

Mukohda's Party



Dora-chan

Familiar

A rare pixie dragon. He's small, but fully grown. Of course, he became Mukohda's familiar because he's after the man's cooking.



Sui

Familiar

A newly born slime. It grew attached to Mukohda, who fed it, and became his familiar. Cute.



Fel

Familiar

A legendary magic beast, the Fenrir. He formed a contract and became Mukohda's familiar in order to get at his food. Hates vegetables.



Mukohda

Human

A salaryman summoned from modern Japan. Has the unique skill, "Online Supermarket." Good at cooking. A coward.

The Divine Realm



Rusalka

God

The Goddess of Water. Gave Mukohda's familiar, Sui, her blessing so that she could receive offerings from Mukohda. Loves otherworld food.



Kisharle

God

The Goddess of Earth. Gave Mukohda her blessing so she could receive his offerings. She's entranced by the effect of otherworld beauty products.



Agni

God

The Goddess of Fire. Gave Mukohda her blessing so that she could get offerings from him. Likes otherworld alcohol, especially beer.



Ninrir

God

The Goddess of Wind. Gave Mukohda her blessing in order to extort offerings from him. She's weak to otherworld sweets, especially dorayaki.

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8 × Chapters

1 × Gossip

1 × Extra

Chapter 1: The Mysterious Tablet

I gaped at the stone tablet I'd almost stowed away in my Item Box.

"Why would it be in Japanese?"

The tablet had some sort of complex magical circle inscribed upon it and what looked like hieroglyphic characters written all over the place. At the very center of the circle, though, a few words were written in very conspicuous Japanese.

"'Teleportation Stone'?"

The instant I muttered those words—in Japanese, of course—the front of the tablet swung open with a dull, hollow clunk.

"What's this?" I wondered as I peeked inside. The tablet contained an old, worn-out book. When I pulled it out and opened the cover, I found that the text within was written in Japanese as well. Quickly, I skimmed the first page.

If you've managed to get your hands on this book, then I imagine you're probably Japanese. This tablet's exactly what it says on the cover: a special stone made to enable magical teleportation. Made by me, incidentally, at the cost of plenty of blood, sweat, and tears!

I didn't like the thought of it getting misused or abused, but on the other hand it's sort of a keepsake and I didn't want to break it, so I decided to hide it away somewhere safe. I figured I'd entrust it to my fellow countrymen, if any ever stumbled across it.

I'm sure you've got all sorts of questions, so I've noted down everything that seems important in this book, including how to use the thing. Hope it comes in handy!

"Guess that means that whoever made this was Japanese too? And *that*

means he must've been brought over here by a Hero Summoning ritual, just like me," I mumbled to myself. I mean, okay, *I* was accidentally caught up in the ritual rather than deliberately included, but it's still technically true that I ended up in this world as the result of a Hero Summoning.

Thinking back on it, the pig-king of Reijseger did call it the "*ancient* ritual of Hero Summoning," if I was remembering correctly.

"So we weren't the first people to get summoned to this world, then." It wasn't just the four of us—other Japanese people had ended up here before we did. My curiosity was piqued, and I was about to dig into the book when Fel's voice boomed through my mind.

《**Hey! The three of us have finished. Are you done yet?**》

I jumped halfway out of my skin, then quickly stashed the tablet and the book away in my Item Box. I couldn't quite explain why, but I had a feeling that I shouldn't let Fel find out about them just yet. I'd take my time to read through the book at my leisure when I got the chance.

"A-Almost done, I think!" I stammered. "Gimme just a minute!" I hurriedly swept the rest of the magic items and treasures scattered around me into my Item Box as well, then jogged over to meet up with Fel and the others.

"Okay, done!"

《**Here.**》 Fel passed me the magic bag he'd been using to store the treasure he gathered.

"What're those two looking at?" I asked, glancing at Dora-chan and Sui. For some reason they seemed really interested in the floor.

《**Take a look and see for yourself. We found something rather entertaining beneath the mountain of treasure—something you do not often see outside of dungeons, in this day and age.**》

"Something entertaining...? Whoa, the heck is this thing?"

I went over to take a look at whatever their attention was focused on, and found some sort of magical circle. It was clearly quite old and fairly faded, but the design was still perfectly legible.

“What does it do?” I asked.

《**It would appear to be a teleportation circle.**》

Fel went on to explain that while magic of that variety is almost unheard of in this day and age, a few hundred years ago some particularly skilled mages could create short-range teleportation circles. Not very many of them, of course—apparently, teleportation magic is incredibly complex, and the skill and understanding required to create a circle was exceptional even back then.

Fel theorized that the so-called bandit king must have abducted one of those skilled individuals and forced them to draw the circle. I mentioned the teleportation devices I remembered hearing about the Adventurer’s guild using, but Fel just scoffed and asked if those could transport people, or even large objects.

He had a point. I couldn’t remember the details, but I had a feeling that someone had told me something about them only being able to send letters using those things. Maybe that was the most modern teleportation magic was capable of?

According to Fel, the larger the object or creature being teleported and the farther the distance they’d be traveling, the more complex and indecipherable the magic circle would have to be. Glancing at the circle on the floor, I thought that explanation checked out. It was ridiculously complicated, and I couldn’t even begin to make heads or tails of it.

《**Just think about it. Carrying this quantity of treasure using the path we took would be next to impossible.**》

Again, Fel had a point. There were three magic bags among the treasure we’d plundered, but unless all three of them had truly massive carrying capacities—which seemed pretty unlikely—there was no way they could’ve hauled the whole mountain of loot up here in one trip.

We only managed to make it up thanks to my familiars—or, well, thanks to Fel, really—and even that felt pretty dicey from my perspective. The path was perilous enough that I probably would’ve died if I tried to climb it on my own. Nobody would subject themselves to a life-or-death scramble like that more than once.

Then there was the fact that the cave was absolutely lousy with traps. Even if you were the one who set them up in the first place, having to dodge past all of them on top of dealing with scaling the cliff? *Nope, no way, no how.*

《**Therefore, we shall be making use of it.**》

"You want to use the circle? Does that mean you know where it'll take us?"

《**I do not.**》

I appreciate the honesty, I guess, but you could at least try to sugarcoat it! "And you're not freaked out by the idea of using a teleportation circle that could take us literally anywhere?"

《**'Literally anywhere'? Hardly. This circle will almost certainly not take us far. At most, we will emerge somewhere around the foot of the mountain.**》

"Okay, sure, it sounds fine when you put it that way, but this mountain has an awful lot of foot and I'd still like to know which part we'll end up in." After all, the foot of the mountain was black baboon territory. I really didn't like the sound of teleporting right into a pack of those horrible things.

《**Enough of your incessant whining! If you refuse to teleport, then we shall have to return by the same path we entered. Would that suit you? Which path we take makes no difference to me.**》

I took a moment to consider my options. He was right—going back the way we came was the only option if we weren't going to teleport. There certainly weren't any other routes that I'd noticed, anyway. And going back the way we came meant climbing *down* that sheer cliff face... Just the thought was enough to give me goosebumps.

Nope nope nope, absolutely not! Maybe Fel's right? Using the circle might actually be our best option.

"Okay, fine," I conceded. "We'll take the teleportation circle out of here. You know we might run into black baboons if it drops us at the foot of the mountain, though, right?"

《**Hmph! You have me, Dora, and Sui by your side. The likes of those monkeys could hardly pose less of a threat. You agree, do you not? Dora?**

Sui?》

《Damn straight!》

《Oooh, are we gonna fight again? Sui'll beat all the bad guys. It'll be fine!》

Guess everyone's totally up for another fight. Everyone except me, anyway... "That barrier you put up is still active, right, Fel?"

《**Your cowardice never fails to astonish. Rest assured, the barrier remains.**》

Better a living coward than a dead hero! And even if that weren't my philosophy, there's danger around every corner in this world. Too much caution is just enough caution, in my book.

《**I will infuse the circle with my magic. Stand within it, everyone.**》 Fel paused for a moment as we all piled into the teleportation circle. 《**Now then, let us be off!**》

Fel poured magic power into the circle, which began to glow. For a moment I was overwhelmed by the disconcerting sensation that I was floating in the air, but an instant later the circle's light dimmed and we found ourselves in the middle of a forest...

"So, umm," I stammered, "bad luck, huh? Actually, make that terrible luck."

《**Indeed. It would seem we have emerged within their nesting grounds.**》

《Ha ha ha, oh man, there's even more than there were last time!》

《Wooow! There's sooo many!》

Yep, we appeared in the middle of a massive pack of black baboons.

It only took a glance to tell that Dora-chan was right. It was an even bigger group than the one that had assaulted us on our way into the woods. From their perspective, of course, we were a bunch of unknown creatures who'd just appeared out of thin air in the middle of their home. They screeched and howled as they descended upon us en masse, determined to drive us away.

"Aaaaugh! Wh-What're we gonna do?!"

《**Mow them down and carry on our way, of course. The same as last time. Get on.**》 I scrambled onto Fel's back and he immediately made good on his

word, scattering the black baboons in front of him with his Rending Claws.
《**Dora, Sui, guard the rear!**》

《On it! We've got it covered!》

《Sui's gonna beat lots and lots of them!》

"Gaaahhhhhh!"

Fel dashed off through the forest at a suicidal speed, and all I could do was cling to his back for dear life.

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《**The brainless monkeys have stopped pursuing us. Perhaps we have left their territory?**》

《Yeah, looks like.》

《Aww, over already?》

"We finally got away from them?" I heaved a sigh of relief and loosened my grip on Fel's fur. Sui, meanwhile, was grumbling.

《Sui wanted to beat up more of them!》

"*More* of them? You already took out more of those things than I could count!" Sui's Acid Bullets had left a trail of black baboon corpses in our wake.

《Hee hee hee, really? Sui can do even better than that, though!》

"Yeah, I bet you can, but I think that's enough for today. If some other monster decides to attack us, you can beat that up instead. Counting on you, okay?"

《Yeah, okay!》

Seriously, how did Sui end up this bloodthirsty? It's gotta be those *two's influence, right?* I was becoming increasingly convinced that having two creatures that stood at the absolute pinnacle of the food chain as its only role models had led to Sui internalizing some really unfortunate life lessons. *Is this any way to raise a newborn slime?*

Now, granted, Sui ended up being a strong and reliable party member as a result. When it comes to allies who can protect me, I say the more the merrier,

but I still wished I could've raised it in a slightly more wholesome environment. I shot Fel and Dora-chan a deeply conflicted glance.

《**Hmm? What?**》

《Got a problem?》

I thought better of it. "Nah, it's nothing." Complaining to them about it wouldn't have done any good, at that point. Even if I tried, they'd just ask me how Sui being strong could possibly be a bad thing and brush me off. *I should probably just be happy I managed to teach it to be kind, obedient, and not do horrible things to innocent civilians.*

"Anyway, we wound up with a real haul this time, huh? Gold, jewels, magic items, the whole shebang."

《**We did indeed. That treasure will serve to finance our meals, I trust? I should think you can afford something extravagant now, as a matter of fact. I shall look forward to it.**》

《You said it! I wanna stuff myself on pudding till I can't take another bite!》

《Caaake!》

"I get it, I get it." My familiars really did prioritize their appetites above all else.

《**The traps in that cavern were numerous to the point of tedium, but I must admit, there were some among them I had never seen before. It made for a good experience, in the end—though of course I expected no less, seeing as the gods themselves guided us to it.**》

《I know, right? Didn't get to fight any monsters since it wasn't a dungeon or anything, but that many traps still made for a pretty good time!》

《It was so much fun!》

Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui all chattered happily about the cave as if it'd been a fun little outing, in spite of the fact that any normal person would've died a dozen times over in there. I never, ever intended to go anywhere near the place again, or anywhere like it for that matter. Oh, and speaking of the gods and their guidance, Demiurge led us there for the treasure, not the fun! That's what

Fel should've been thanking him for.

*I mean, he...*did *guide us there for the treasure, right? It wasn't because he thought going through a full course of lethal booby traps would make for a good experience, right? I believe in you, Demiurge!*

《**Hey, you. I grow hungry.**》

《Yeah, same, I'm famished!》

《Sui's hungry too!》

"Guess we didn't have time to eat lunch today, now that you mention it. Let's get back to the road, then stop for food."

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Night was already falling by the time we made it back to the road. We set up camp just off to the side in a convenient patch of vacant land, and I got to cooking right away. Dora-chan had requested something warm for dinner, so I decided to make hot pot again.

That didn't actually narrow my choices down much, though, considering you can make just about anything into a hot pot if you try hard enough. As I was deliberating my options, though, Fel chimed in to declare that it had been too long since the last time we'd had turtle meat, which simplified my options a lot.

In the end, I made soft-shelled turtle hot pot with the big bite turtle meat I picked up in Aveling's dungeon. All four of us savored it down to the last drop, which was easy to do after I used the leftover soup and some already cooked rice to make rice gruel.

"It really has been a while since we had turtle hot pot, huh? That was great."

《**Indeed. Red meat, of course, remains superior, but turtle is tolerable on occasion.**》

《Yeah, the turtle meat was good, but what really did it for me was the rice gruel at the end! That stuff was great.》

《It was all sooo tasty!》

"You guys totally full, or do you have room for more?"

《**Hmm? What else is there?**》

“You were talking about wanting pudding and cake and stuff earlier, right?”

《Pudding?!》 yelped Dora-chan. 《You bet I have room! Fork it over!》

《Masteeer, Sui wants caaake!》

“Ha ha ha, okay, okay! You want something too, Fel?”

《**But of course.**》

That made three enthusiastic yeses. I opened up Fumiya’s menu. “Today turned out really well thanks to you guys, so I’ll get a couple big cakes for Fel and Sui, plus a ton of pudding for you, Dora-chan.”

That definitely put them in a good mood. Fel was keeping a straight face, as always, but his tail was wagging up a storm. Dora-chan pumped a tiny fist and shouted 《All right!》 while Sui squealed with glee and started bouncing all over the place.

“Okay, gimme just a minute.” First up was Fel. I knew that strawberry shortcake was his favorite, so I bought him a whole one of those. I bought Dora-chan, the pudding lover, two pudding sundaes—one strawberry flavored, one banana—plus five of his usual custard puddings. Sui, meanwhile, loved chocolate, so I got it a whole chocolate sponge cake that was full of chocolate cream and had a bunch of fruit piled on top.

“Okay, dessert is served!” I declared as I passed them their sweets.

《**Good, good. This cake really is delicious**,》 said Fel as he dug into his dessert. His mouth was totally covered with whipped cream.

Dora-chan plunged into his pudding with equal enthusiasm. 《Yeah, pudding hits the spot every time!》 he declared, in a tone that would’ve fit a middle-aged man better than a tiny dragon.

《Chocolate cake’s sooo yummy!》 added Sui, who was in just as good a mood as the others.

I decided that I might as well splurge a bit and added something for myself into the Online Supermarket order: a pack of Blue Mountain Coffee that came in those little individual serving drip bags. I sipped away at my drink as I

watched my familiars devour their treats.

Later on in the evening, we all retired to a box-like house I made with my Earth magic. It was looking to be a chilly night, and Dora-chan and Sui were both cuddled up next to Fel on his personal futon. All three of them were fast asleep. Fel's fur really did look fluffy, warm, and inviting, but I couldn't let myself be tempted—I had something more important to do.

I crawled onto my own futon, carefully covering myself up with its blanket to make sure the light of the LED lantern I switched on wouldn't wake the others up. Then I pulled one of the items from the bandit king's treasure horde out of my item box: the book that I'd found hidden within the Teleportation Stone. A book written by someone from not just the same world as me, but the same country as well.

I was incredibly curious about its contents. The part that I'd already read mentioned that it would teach me how to use the Teleportation Stone, but what else would I find in there? I gulped with equal parts nervousness and excitement as I flipped open the decrepit tome once more, reading by the dim light of my lantern.

Chapter 2: The Sage's Autobiography

As I pored over the book, I quickly learned that it was an autobiography written by a Japanese man named Kazuki Matsumoto. He'd been brought to this world by the same sort of Hero Summoning ritual that I'd been caught up in.

It happened in 2014, by Earth standards. Kazuki, a college student, had been on his way to his part-time job when a country called the Kingdom of Astafyev summoned him. The similarities didn't end there—just like me, he wasn't the only one summoned, though only two other people got pulled along in his case.

The way he described the circumstances of his summoning made it pretty clear that his initial impression of the Kingdom of Astafyev wasn't exactly great, to say the least. The first people he saw were the king, who was dressed in a gaudy, extravagant outfit that just screamed 'nouveau riche,' the queen, who looked as harsh and severe as royalty could get, and several well-dressed old men who were all plainly looking down on him. And then there was the group of armor-clad soldiers who were surrounding the three of them. They were probably the biggest problem.

Kazuki, a light novel fanatic, understood what was going on in an instant. In his own words, his feelings at the time could be best described as:

"ヽ(゜∀゜)/ *Summoned to another world!!! Hell!!! Yes!!!* ヽ(゜∀゜)ノ"

But then the royals started talking and almost instantly ruined it. According to them, Astafyev had been under constant, brutal attack by its neighboring country. Their economy was devastated, their people were suffering from a widespread famine, the kingdom itself was on the verge of collapse, and so on and so forth.

Their self-pitying spiel ended with them begging the "heroes" they'd summoned to fight on their behalf and save them, but Kazuki was less than

convinced. On the contrary, he was struck by how none of them seemed anywhere near as grim or concerned as you would expect the rulers of a country “on the verge of collapse” to be.

And what was up with those stupidly fancy outfits? he wrote. *Like, seriously, your people are starving and you’re literally wearing half your kingdom’s treasury? Unreal! Were they really that stupid? I was all hyped for some otherworldly adventures, but I’ve read enough light novels to see exactly how this was going to go. How those jerks were gonna use us ‘heroes’ for all we were worth and then toss us to the dogs when we were spent. Oldest twist in the book. Hard pass.*

Once again, I was struck by how his circumstances were almost identical to mine. The only real difference was that his kingdom was under attack by a neighboring country instead of demons. I had to agree with him—you’d think a king who *actually* cared about his people would pawn his fancy clothes to help feed them.

I’m not gonna say a king should go around in rags or anything, but there’s a time and a place for extravagance. Not having a sense for when and where that is means showing the whole world just how arrogant you are. Considering my own experience, I had absolutely no doubt that the Kingdom of Astafyev was a pretty garbage country. Some things never change.

Anyway, Kazuki had no interest in getting used and abused by the nobles and decided to put his extensive light novel knowledge into action. His first move was to check his own status privately before the Astafyev officials had the chance.

His job, shockingly enough, was listed as “Sage.” His skills included Fire magic, Water magic, Wind magic, Earth magic, Ice magic, Lightning magic, Healing magic, Sacred magic, and Holy magic. In other words, he had an aptitude with every form of magic it was physically possible for him to have. He also had a unique skill called “Magical Profundity,” which heightened his comprehension abilities when it came to anything and everything related to magic.

A normal person would have to spend years upon years in intensive study to learn how to use advanced magic, create magic items, or inscribe magic circles,

preferably under the tutelage of a skilled master. Thanks to his skill, however, Kazuki could figure it all out in an afternoon's worth of casual reading. His MP was preposterously high from the outset, as well.

In short, though Kazuki was a Sage rather than a Hero, his skills and MP reserves made it obvious that he was extremely capable in the magic department. He knew for a fact that if the royals found out about his stats, he'd be exploited in the same way a Hero would. His first instinct was to figure out a way to hide his real status screen and display a fake one in its place, and surprisingly enough he pulled it off instantly and effortlessly.

He set his job as "Student from Another World," hid all his skills, and put his MP at 88, slightly lower than his 96 HP. The other two people who had been summoned with him turned out to both be Heroes, and everyone was too busy raising a fuss over them to notice what he was up to. When they finally got around to checking Kazuki's stats, the royals' attitudes immediately shifted. They looked at him with the same sort of expression they'd make when looking at human waste.

The other two were bewildered by the way everyone was suddenly telling them how important and special they were, but they didn't seem to mind all the attention. Kazuki didn't feel totally comfortable with leaving them to their fate, but when he balanced his own life against the lives of two total strangers, the decision was an obvious one.

He addressed the king, explaining that since his status made it clear he'd be of no use in a fight, he'd like to live his life in peace and quiet as an ordinary townsperson. The king agreed without protest. Kazuki had been keeping his guard up, half-suspicious that they'd try to murder him on the spot to silence him, but it all turned out surprisingly well.

He would later learn that the fact that Astafyev was capable of hero-summoning had already leaked to the neighboring countries, to some extent. He guessed that the king's surprisingly cooperative attitude could be attributed to that fact. If it got out that they were killing their Heroes mere moments after they were summoned, it certainly wouldn't do good things for the kingdom's reputation.

That said, they weren't about to turn Kazuki free to go where he pleased. According to the king, "The fact remains that you arrived in this world as a consequence of our actions. Thus, we will send you to a remote region of our kingdom that has yet to be besmirched by the horrors of war. There, you may live your life in peace and comfort."

Along with a squad of the kingdom's soldiers, that is. In short: he'd be under constant watch.

Kazuki left the capital in a carriage driven by his military escort, riding farther and farther out into the countryside. Five days after their departure, the long, desolate road that had grown so narrow the carriage could barely fit on it plunged into a forest. They rode a ways into the woods before the soldiers came to a sudden stop and told Kazuki that he was free to go wherever he wanted...assuming he managed to survive the trip. Then they booted him out of the carriage, turned around, and left.

They didn't try to kill him, but the woods were teeming with monsters. Abandoning him there was effectively the same as telling him to go get eaten. Unbeknownst to them, however, Kazuki couldn't have asked for a more perfect opportunity. After all, they had no clue that he was a Sage with an especially powerful unique skill.

Thanks to Magical Profundity, Kazuki had managed to teach himself the basics of magic over the course of the five-day carriage ride. The monsters that tried to make a meal out of him served as the perfect test subjects, and he trained his magical abilities further by mowing them down as he traveled. Leaving the forest posed no difficulty whatsoever.

He proceeded to make his way out of Astafyev, earning the money he needed to travel by taking on odd jobs here and there and doing his best not to draw too much attention. Eventually, he reached the next country over, the Kingdom of Slezak, where he registered himself as an adventurer under the name "Kazu."

Becoming an adventurer meant that Kazuki—or rather, Kazu—was now free and unfettered. He wandered the world, traveling wherever his whims took him. His journey led him to find all sorts of magical techniques and tomes, and his understanding of magic deepened to the point where he could produce his

own magic items and inscribe his own magical circles.

About a third of the way through the book, I was interrupted by the irresistible urge to yawn and decided to take a break. I rubbed my eyes and ordered a can of black coffee from my Online Supermarket to stave off my sleepiness. I pulled the tab nice and slowly to make sure the noise wouldn't wake my familiars, then took a sip.

I couldn't get over how similar his summoning was to mine, practically down to the last detail. The Kingdom of Astafyev wasn't around anymore, at least as far as I knew, but Kazuki was brought over here in 2014... *How does that make any sense?*

I glanced back down at the decrepit tome in my hands. *Maybe I could find out when this was written if I appraise it?* It seemed worth a shot, at least, so I gave it an appraisal.

【Kazu the Sage's Autobiography】

The autobiography of a Sage named Kazu. Written approximately six hundred years ago in an otherworldly tongue.

"*Wha*-mph!" I came really close to shouting out loud but slapped a hand over my mouth at the last second. Fearing the worst, I slowly turned around and peeked out from the covers, but thankfully Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were all still snoring away, fast asleep. I sighed with relief, then pulled the covers over my head once more.

Six hundred years ago, though? Seriously...?

Kazuki had written that he was summoned in the year 2014. I'd been summoned in 2016, myself, which meant that over the course of those two years in our world, six hundred had passed in this one. Could it be that time moved at a completely different speed in each world?

Hmm... Nope, don't really get it at all. But, I mean, they're totally different worlds to begin with, right? Of course it wouldn't make complete sense. And

even if I could make sense of it, there's nothing I can do about it, so might as well stop worrying and read the next section.

I took another sip of coffee, then turned back to the book.

As Kazu traveled from place to place, he eventually caught word of the land of the demonfolk, a race renowned for their proficiency with the magical arts. That proficiency caught his attention. As a Sage and a bearer of the Magical Profundity skill, he was interested in anything and everything related to magic and decided to make his way to their country.

I assumed he meant the region I'd heard referred to as the demonfolk territories. To my understanding those lands were so politically fractured that they didn't really have any "countries" to speak of at all, but it seemed that in Kazuki's day and age they were still holding themselves together, albeit just barely.

He headed for their territory immediately, taking on a job as a merchant's escort to establish a pretext to make the trip, and soon arrived in a demonfolk country called Andras. When he finally saw his first demonfolk, he was astonished. The merchant he was traveling with had been to their territory before, and had told him that they could hardly look less human, but were still decent folks if you took the time to get to know them. That should've prepared Kazuki for their appearance, but in the end, he still couldn't suppress his surprise.

Some of them were blue-skinned, some had batlike wings sprouting from their backs, and some looked just like the dark elves he'd read about in fantasy novels. Even the ones that could be described as beastmen were more deserving of the title than any beastman he'd met up until that point—they really did look like feral beasts that just happened to walk upon two legs.

They were all exactly as intelligent and capable of reason as Kazuki and his fellow humans, of course, but some of them even bore a striking resemblance to orcs and goblins. I could really appreciate how much of a shock it must've been for him.

A shock, yes—but in Kazuki's case, not necessarily a bad one. The denizens of

the demonfolk territories were as fantasy as fantasy could get, and they made him even more exuberant than ever about learning their ways. Thanks in part to the merchant's backing, he was able to stay in that first village for quite some time, growing as close to the demonfolk as he could possibly manage.

The locals weren't sure about him at first, and most of them kept their distance. As time passed by, however, they came to realize that he genuinely didn't mean to cause any trouble. Soon after, they gradually began to open up to him.

Their village might have been tiny, but its denizens still had plenty to teach him. That village was the first place where he witnessed Barrier magic, as well as spells that could charm, confuse, or otherwise beguile the mind of their target. To his utter astonishment, some of the villagers had even mastered flight magic.

That last spell was the domain of the dark elves, the demonfolk with bat wings, and the ones with blue skin, he quickly gathered. They warned him that it was impossible to use for those not born with the aptitude for it, but he paid those warnings no mind. He was, after all, a Sage. He thought—no, he *knew* that he could pull it off, and begged them to teach the spell to him.

They weren't especially happy about the idea and grumbled about how none of them were skilled enough to be worth learning from. According to them, powerful magic-users tended to flock to the larger cities, and he'd have better luck asking one of them to teach him. A spell's effects, after all, were determined by how much magic power the caster could put into them.

Putting more magic into a barrier spell would create a stronger, sturdier wall. Putting more magic into spells that alter the mind would make them last longer and enhance their effects, while doing the same for flight magic would allow the user to stay in the air for longer. Kazuki could appreciate why they'd belittle their own skills, if the effects of their spells were severely limited compared to the big-city mages.

But all that said, Kazuki had an overflowing abundance of MP and Magical Profundity backing him up. Once he learned the basic technique, everything else was child's play for him. He didn't stop there either, and also learned a

form of Body Reinforcement from some of the bipedal beastmen.

Their appearances varied wildly—some looking like wolves, others like tigers or lions—but they all had one trait in common: they were incredibly strong and breathtakingly nimble. The strength wasn't much of a surprise, considering it was a trait that most beastmen shared, but their speed was something else.

Kazuki learned that they used their magic to enhance their own physical abilities, and immediately went to beg them to teach him how to do it. If only it were that easy. They were a bunch of meatheads, in his words, and according to the rather bitter notes he left on the process, not a single one of them was even half-decent at teaching.

The fundamental theory behind the technique was to channel your own magical power throughout your body, using it to aid your muscles in their movements...or something to that effect, anyway. The only way to actually understand it was to practice until you got used to it, from the sound of things. The beastmen of the demonfolk territories all learned to use it at a very early age—none of them had experience teaching the basic theory.

In spite of all those obstacles, though, Kazuki made like the Sage he was and learned how to use the technique almost instantly. He went on to learn magic from the orc-like tribe as well (who turned out to actually be called "orcs," appropriately enough). The orcs specialized in a form of magic called Body Hardening, a slightly different form of Body Reinforcement, as well as something called Enchantment magic.

Body Hardening involves covering your whole body in a thin layer of concentrated magical power, thus hardening yourself against damage. It makes both magical and physical attacks bounce right off you, essentially. Enchantment operated under a similar principle, but involved extending that barrier of magical power around a weapon or tool, enhancing both its stability and ability to deal damage.

The orc who taught him how to use Enchantment magic stroked the ax he used both at work and in battle as he explained, "A real master with a knack for Fire magic could bathe their weapon in flames, if they wanted to. I can do a bit of Fire magic myself, but I run outta MP in seconds when I use it on my ax. Best

I can do's make it stronger and sharper," he concluded with a self-deprecating chuckle.

Kazuki found the orc's abilities a lot more impressive than the orc himself did, though. "What are you talking about?! Enchanting your weapon to be stronger and sharper is incredible! Doubly so if it doesn't take very much MP to cast—you could make a *stick* into a lethal weapon if you got good enough at that spell!"

The way he wrote out the conversation word for word made his excitement quite evident. I could understand where he was coming from too. He was highly specialized in magic to the exclusion of all else, so knowing he could use a tiny sum of MP to enable himself to fight effectively with a weapon if worse came to worst was probably really reassuring. From the sound of things, worse did indeed come to worst on a few occasions—he noted that "The magic I learned from the orcs really was a lifesaver..." which certainly suggested it'd gotten him out of some harrowing situations.

The goblin-like demonfolk (who once again were apparently just called "goblins") had plenty to teach him as well. Specifically, he learned how to brew all sorts of potions from them. They were notably deft-handed as a race, and were responsible for the creation of most of the potions in the demonfolk territories.

Kazuki had already learned to make potions, but it didn't escape his notice that those the goblins made were substantially more effective than his. He could tell that he had a lot to gain from learning their methods.

As time passed by and Kazuki lived in the village, learning all sorts of things from its inhabitants, he gradually learned more about the demonfolk territories on the whole. The territories were home to three countries, in total: Andras, the country he was staying in, as well as two others named Kimaris and Raum. Occasional minor conflicts and skirmishes aside, the three nations enjoyed generally decent relations with one another.

Furthermore, he learned that those three small countries in that relatively tiny strip of land were the only regions on the continent that the demonfolk could call home. Their overall population was dangerously small.

“Huh, really?”

I muttered to myself in surprise. According to Kazuki’s book, the entirety of the demonfolk territories were squeezed into a single peninsula. He later went on to walk around that entire peninsula’s coastline and made it from one end to the other in just about a month, even though he was moving at a fairly leisurely pace. That tidbit made it easy to imagine just how small their territory must have been.

Not even my summoners, the (now defunct) Kingdom of Reijseger, had very much information about the demonfolk territories, and they’d shared a border with the region. I never would’ve imagined I’d learn so much about it from a book I happened to randomly stumble across, of all things...

As I read on, I learned about how and why the demonfolk had ended up living in that region, as well. A piece of folklore that had been handed down from generation to generation among their people told the story.

According to that tale, a long, long time ago, a boat set sail from the demonfolk’s homeland. They were sailing for an island that was home to a nation of giants, but partway there their ship was caught up in a terrible storm. The damage was extensive, and they were left drifting in the open sea with no way to steer their vessel.

The ship’s crew knew that nobody would be coming to save them. They decided that rather than waiting for their inevitable demise aboard the boat, they would make a last-ditch effort to fly for land. That effort paid off, and the peninsula they arrived at would later become the demonfolk territories. Nobody could say for sure how many demonfolk made it to land back then, but according to the legends, most of the demonfolk living in the area in Kazuki’s time were their descendants.

“Phew...”

I paused for a moment to take a deep breath and look up from the book. It was way more than I’d bargained for—I really didn’t go into this expecting to learn all about the demonfolk.

From what I’d heard, the demonfolk territories didn’t have any diplomatic ties

with the countries that bordered them in the modern day. None of that information—that their lands were only the size of a small peninsula, or that their people were the descendants of demonfolk who had come here from another continent—was common knowledge. In fact, it was totally possible that I was the only human who knew it all.

I hesitated for a long moment, then gulped. *Okay, calm down.* I took a big swig of coffee to steady my nerves, then turned back to the book.

Kazuki spent half a year living in the demonfolk village. Over the course of that period, he could never stop thinking about the story the villagers had told him about their ancestors crossing the ocean. They spoke of another continent, one totally unknown to humanity, and Kazuki was overcome with curiosity.

Where exactly was this mystery continent? What nations existed there? What sort of people lived in them? He couldn't take his mind off those burning questions, and he desperately wanted to go there and find out for himself, even though he knew he wasn't capable of it yet. His curiosity about their homeland stoked his curiosity about the demonfolk themselves, and he asked the villagers if it would be possible for him to visit a larger city.

He didn't get the reaction he was hoping for. In fact, they urged him to reconsider. Although their village tolerated the presence of a select few humans for the purpose of trade, they were very much an exception, and they told him that the level of anti-human sentiment in the larger cities was like nothing he'd experienced before.

The source of their prejudice was clear. There had been a terrible war between a human nation and the demonfolk several hundred years earlier, during which countless demonfolk lost their lives. Lifespans varied slightly between the different tribes of demonfolk, but it wasn't uncommon for them to live for two to three hundred years or longer, and by their standards that conflict and the tragedy it wrought was still a fresh and raw memory.

There were still plenty of demonfolk around who had fought in that war, or lost family to it. To make matters worse, the larger cities were home to some varieties of demonfolk who were notorious for their aggressive, violent

temperaments. If a human like Kazuki were to show up in a city like that, he'd inevitably end up in hot water before he knew it.

Kazuki knew that he couldn't casually disregard their advice. Reluctant though he was, he finally bade farewell to the demonfolk who had hosted him for so long and returned to human territory. He resumed his life as an adventurer, once again traveling far and wide. But no matter where his adventures took him, part of his mind was always focused on that mystery continent and its country of demonfolk.

Three years after he left the demonfolk village, a quest brought Kazuki to a certain town where he stumbled across a secondhand bookstore. He found something of great interest to him within: the journal of Orvo Maijanen, a magical researcher who had dedicated his life to the study of teleportation circles.

Orvo, the third son of a baron, developed a fascination with teleportation circles at an early age and became a researcher for the express purpose of studying them. He eventually found employment at a research institution sponsored by some nation or another, but teleportation circles are a notoriously incomprehensible art to all but a select few, and his early efforts proved largely fruitless.

As time passed by, it became more and more clear that Orvo would never make anything of himself as a researcher, but his lack of talent was not enough to make him abandon his dream. He spent his whole life with his nose to the grindstone, learning everything he could about teleportation circles and performing every sort of experiment he could think of. He left all his findings behind in a series of seven research logs.

Those "logs" could have been better described as loose collections of parchment, really, but in that day and age books of any form were handwritten by necessity and highly valuable by definition. Orvo's seven notebooks cost fifteen gold coins in total, but by that point Kazuki was a successful adventurer of no small renown and could buy all of them on the spot.

Reasoning that learning about teleportation circles might come in handy for the sake of visiting the demonfolk country on the other continent, Kazuki pored

over Orvo's notes. It took several read throughs, even with Magical Profundity backing him up, but in the end he reached a definite conclusion: teleporting to a place you've never been to is impossible.

After all, a teleportation circle has to be established on both ends in order to function. The distance a circle can teleport you and the accuracy with which it can do so are determined by the quantity and quality of information regarding the destination you can provide it, as well as your ability to channel magical power into it with absolute precision and uniformity. In short: a lack of information regarding a far-off destination would make teleporting there impossible on a fundamental level.

To make matters worse, the writing system used to create teleportation circles was nothing like that used to communicate in the common tongue. Just learning the necessary runes supposedly took most people close to a decade.

Magical circles were created by using runes to inscribe information about your destination into the circle. Those runes would then enable the user to channel their magical power in the right manner to invoke the spell. It went without saying that a farther destination required a larger quantity of information to traverse, thus raising the difficulty level of the circle's creation. That would explain why so many teleportation circles were only made to carry the user across short distances.

In any case, Kazuki was despondent. Teleportation circles were a dead end. If he wanted to reach the other continent, he would have to cross the ocean the hard way. He'd considered sailing across it, but the ocean was teeming with monsters. Sailing near the shore was possible, albeit dangerous, but the farther you went onto the open sea the more likely you were to be dragged to a watery grave by a sea serpent, kraken, or other S-ranked ocean monster.

Boats, then, were out of the question as well. That left the flight magic he'd learned in the demonfolk village as his most viable option. It seemed a reasonable one, considering that their ancestors had used it to make their way to this continent in the first place, but they'd done so under the most grave and pressing of circumstances.

Attempting to fly to the other continent without actually knowing how far

away it was posed undeniable risks. Though Kazuki had grown much more proficient with flight magic since he had left the village and was confident in his skills, if he ran out of MP before reaching the other continent he'd be monster-fish food.

In spite of all his setbacks, Kazuki still wasn't ready to give up on visiting the demonfolk continent. Finally, an idea struck him: wouldn't everything work out if he could create a portable teleportation circle?

Teleportation circles large enough to transport people are, generally speaking, rather fragile. If their form is warped or their writing disrupted, the odds of them failing to activate are quite high. That is why they are drawn on flat, level, stone surfaces, as a matter of convention, and why Kazuki never even considered that they could be made portable until that moment.

His plan was simple. First, he would set up one side of a teleportation circle at his current location, and make the other in a portable form he could carry with him. Then he would strike out across the ocean, flying in the direction the other continent was said to lie in. If he grew exhausted before he reached land, he could use the portable teleportation circle to whisk himself back to safety in an instant.

The one flaw in the plan was that the portable circle would be left behind to fall into the sea, but that felt like a worthy price to pay in exchange for his own guaranteed safety. It was the only means he could think of that could take him across the ocean without risking his untimely demise.

And so began Kazuki's efforts to develop a magic item that could serve as a portable teleportation circle. He split his attention between his teleportation research and leveling up as much as possible to increase his MP reserves and extend the time he could spend in flight.

A full year later, all his trial and error finally bore fruit. Kazuki had successfully miniaturized a teleportation circle and installed it upon a stone tablet. He described the process of creating the tablet, and to be honest, it went completely over my head. Something about mixing together a bunch of expensive magical components into a solution, spending ten hours straight infusing that solution with his magic, and then immersing a stone slab in the

resulting magical mystery mixture for a full ten days?

Anyway, the bottom line was that in the end he drew the miniature teleportation circle he'd developed onto the stone tablet he'd created, and successfully produced the portable Teleportation Stone he'd been aiming for. He drew the circle it was connected to within a house he'd purchased when he started his research, and his initial tests all went perfectly. His dearest wish was finally within reach: he could strike out for the demonfolk continent.

The demonfolk in the village he visited had told him that their ancestors came from far to the west, so Kazuki flew from the coast in a straight line in that direction...but his first attempt was doomed to failure. He exhausted his MP reserves in the middle of the ocean, without the slightest scrap of land to be seen in any direction. He was barely able to muster up the last of his power and activate his teleportation stone, sending him back to collapse in the safety of his own home.

The problem was obvious: he just didn't have enough MP to pull it off. Kazuki redoubled his efforts to level up, and over the course of the next year grew strong and renowned enough to become an S-rank adventurer. Finally, he felt ready to make another attempt to cross the ocean.

After flying for three days and nights straight without pausing a moment for sleep or rest, just as he was beginning to think it might be time to turn back, Kazuki sighted land far off ahead of him. Using every last drop of power he had to spend, he just barely managed to reach solid ground. He'd done it. Finally, he'd reached the land of his dreams—the other continent; the demonfolk homeland.

He passed out the second he made landfall.

Some time later, when he came to, a woman more beautiful than any he'd ever seen stood before him. Her skin was pale and unblemished, like that of an exquisitely crafted bisque doll. Her eyes were a lovely shade of pale violet that matched her long silky hair. The blouse and skirt she wore were hardly fashionable, but they also did nothing to distract from her voluptuous figure. Even the black batlike wings that sprouted from her back looked almost impossibly endearing to him.

Kazuki spoke without thinking: “I love you. Please marry me...”

That woman’s name was Jenna and, some time later, she would become Kazuki’s bride.

A seemingly endless series of pages followed in which a lovestruck Kazuki wrote at excruciating length about everything that was wonderful about Jenna. I’m just gonna breeze past all that stuff—long story short, he fell in love with her at first sight and proceeded to persistently court her until she eventually reciprocated his feelings. He somehow smooth-talked her parents into giving them their blessing, and in the end they finally got hitched.

The two of them went out to earn their living as adventurers, traveling all about the demonfolk continent together. And yeah, sure, it was all super interesting, but when I got to the part where he described his first passionate, romantic night with Jenna as a married couple I came dangerously close to chucking his stupid book into a wall.

I still had a few pages left to go, though, so I resisted the urge. I paused for a minute to take another sip of coffee and calm myself down, then resumed reading, intent on finishing the whole book.

Over the course of their travels, Kazuki and Jenna ended up in a coastal town that was home to a regular ferry service, shuttling people back and forth from an island that was home to a race of giants. Kazuki immediately realized that it could only be the very same island that the demonfolk who wound up on his continent of origin were trying to reach when their ship was caught up in the storm. In the intervening period, the route had become established well enough that travel to and from the island was a matter of course.

It seemed like too good of an opportunity to pass up, so the two of them ended up taking a side trip to the isle of the giants. They found a branch of the local Adventurer’s association there—which was apparently what they called Adventurer’s guilds on the demonfolk continent—and happened to hit it off with a local giant named Sandel. The three of them ended up forming a temporary party, and took on all sorts of quests together.

Eventually, Sandel approached Kazuki with an earnest, heartfelt, and shocking request: he wanted Kazuki to marry his little sister. Giant women generally

stood at around two meters tall, while the race's men averaged an astonishing two and a half meters. Sandel's sister, however, was unusually small for her race, to the extent that none of the local men took any sort of interest in her. She was already twenty years old, and was growing more and more depressed as her prospects for marriage dribbled down the drain.

Kazuki might have been a human, but Sandel knew firsthand how trustworthy he was and thought that he could be a good match for his small-framed sister. Kazuki refused, at first—he was already married to Jenna, after all—but then Jenna herself recommended that he at least take the time to meet Sandel's sister first. Local values held that it was only natural for a man of Kazuki's strength to have several wives, apparently.

In the end, Kazuki gave in and agreed to meet with her. Sandel's sister, Vauwra, was around 180 centimeters tall—small for a giant—and had dark skin, wavy black hair, and the figure of a supermodel. She was stunningly beautiful.

Given her looks, Kazuki assumed that she would be the type to pursue her romantic interests aggressively, but moments after they met, Vauwra hung her head and murmured something to the tune of "I knew it—you'd never be interested in a girl like me, would you?" His expectations were blown out of the water, and Kazuki was charmed in an instant. Soon after, he would welcome Vauwra into his family as his second bride.

Kazuki and Jenna resumed their journey across the demonfolk continent, now with Vauwra to accompany them. Then he wrote about how deeply in love with them he was for pages on end again, so I'll just skip over those bits.

Like, two wives? Seriously? And they were both beauties, on top of it? I hope this book ends with him getting kicked to death by a horse. I was just pages away from finishing, so I did my best to endure and keep reading.

After exploring the demonfolk continent for some time, Jenna and Vauwra came to Kazuki with a request: they wanted to pay a visit to his home continent, as well. Thankfully, all they had to do to grant that wish was use his teleportation stone. He had designed it well—so long as you could touch it you could use it to teleport, so in spite of its small size it could transport all three of them back to his home continent without issue.

And so, once again, Kazuki and his wives traveled across a new land. Over the course of their adventures they met an elf named Lyudmila who instantly fell for Kazuki and courted him with such passionate intensity, it wasn't long before she became his third wife.

I had to put the book down for a minute.

A third *wife? Are you* kidding *me?*

Pages upon pages of insufferable gushing followed, which I skimmed through as quickly as I could possibly manage. Finally, I reached the final passage.

I know full well how this will end. Someday I will watch over Jenna and Vauwra on their deathbeds, just as Lyudmila will watch over me. Though I came to this world by chance, I can say this with absolute confidence: living with my wives and the children that each of them has blessed me with has made me happier than I ever could have been in my old world.

Oh, right—I almost forgot to write down the most important part! I've linked the teleportation stone I hid this book within to three other miniature teleportation stones I created later on. As you can probably guess, I left those three stones in the homelands of my three wives, hidden away quite carefully.

If you are an individual worthy of possessing my stone, I figure there's no harm in letting you port around with it. As for how to use it, it's quite simple: just face the teleportation stone and shout one of three phrases.

To teleport to Jenna's hometown, shout "I love you, Jenna!"

To teleport to Vauwra's hometown, shout "I love you, Vauwra!"

And to teleport to Lyudmila's hometown, shout "I love you, Lyudmila!"

That should do the trick! Oh, and you have to shout in Japanese, of course.

I was absolutely gobsmacked.

Gaaaaaahhhhhhhhh! Why the hell *should I have to shout about loving* your *stupid wives?!* I had to literally bite my lip to keep myself from screaming on the

spot.

Stupid! Jackass! Worst Sage ever*!*

Okay, okay, calm down. Caaalm down.

Phew.


I love you, Jenna!
To Jenna's hometown
I love you, Vauwra!
To Vauwr hometow
love you, Lyudmila
To Lyuda's hometown
(in Japanese!)

I finally managed to collect myself, but if Kazuki had been standing in front of me at that precise moment I absolutely would've decked the jerkwad. By the way, I skimmed over it earlier, but apparently *he* (I can't even bring myself to say his name anymore) found an Elixir in a dungeon on the demonfolk continent, which roughly tripled his natural lifespan. It was buried in the gushing-about-his-wives section, so I didn't really get the details.

Anyway, according to *him*, Elixirs can't actually grant perfect immortality, in spite of what the rumors would have you believe. Depending on their degree of refinement and purity, they can do anything from curing wounds and sicknesses to regenerating lost limbs or extending lifespans, but nothing beyond that. I guess that would explain why Sui's Special Elixir (lesser version) couldn't accomplish that last effect.

But anyway, that's all beside the point. The point right now is that I deeply regret reading this stupid book. What an absolute waste of time I could've spent sleeping.

Ugh.

Chapter 3: Y’know What, Let’s Just Pretend That Never Happened

《**Surely you do not believe this to be sufficient? You are slacking.**》

《Yeah, seriously!》

《Aww, is this all?》

The breakfast I prepared the next morning satisfied nobody. I’d made soboro rice bowls, but they were the saddest, barest ones I’d ever produced—just rice, ground meat, and no other toppings to speak of. I really was slacking, honestly. I’d pulled an all-nighter reading Kazuki’s book, and the sleep deprivation was killing me.

“N-Nah,” I stammered, trying to salvage the situation, “I figured I’d ask you guys if you wanted anything in particular for toppings! Like, soft-boiled eggs? Just the yolk? Maybe sesame seeds?”

《**Oh, really?**》 Fel questioned, glaring skeptically at me.

“Y-Yeah, really! C’mon, what’ll it be?”

《**Hmph! Very well. I shall have a soft-boiled egg, as always.**》

“Soft-boiled, got it. Dora-chan, Sui, what do you two want?”

《Same as Fel over here.》

《Sui wants the same too! And the tasty little white thingies that smell good!》

So, eggs for everyone, and pretty sure Sui means it wants sesame seeds on top. Got it. I bought the toppings directly from my Online Supermarket, and everyone seemed satisfied as they dug in.

I, meanwhile, slurped away at a premade pouch of rice porridge I’d thrown into the order for myself. It felt like a good idea to have something easy on the

stomach, since I'd been up all night. But that thought brought my mind back to the book, and I sighed heavily.

Seriously, what am I supposed to do about this? Never imagined I'd end up reading something like that... *You have to shout about loving somebody else's wife to use the stone? What is this, some weird form of torture? Why would you even make it like that? Was Kazuki the dumbest Sage in history?*

To make matters worse, he said there'd be no harm in me using it *if* I was "an individual worthy of possessing" his stone. Meaning there *would* be harm if I wasn't, and that it was just about guaranteed to take me somewhere I really, *really* didn't want to be. Like the middle of a forest that's absolutely lousy with high-rank monsters, or the bottom floor of a dungeon, or something like that. I could see it coming a mile away.

On the other hand, he *did* write a tiny note at the very end of the book which said that if I touched the teleportation stone on the other end and said "teleport" in Japanese, it would take me right back to wherever I'd initially come from. Didn't change the fact that I had absolutely no intention of using the thing, but still, good to know.

I mean, why would I want to visit another continent in the first place? Sure, I was doing a sort of traveling tour around the other world, but there were still a ton of places on my current continent that I hadn't been to at all yet. The Kingdom of Erman was right next to the Kingdom of Leonhardt, and I hadn't set foot in it even once so far. Going all the way out to another continent would be getting stupidly far ahead of myself. Obviously. Not happening, no way, no how.

Thinking back on how I'd found the thing in the first place, I chuckled to myself. Compared to the other loot in the bandit king's lair, it hadn't been treated like it was worth much. All the other magic items had been more or less stacked on top of it.

I mean, it was in the treasure room, so he must've valued it to *some* extent, but I was pretty sure he hadn't actually known what the tablet was for. He knew it was magical, surely, but barely anyone understood how teleportation circles worked, even back then. It was hard to believe a bandit would've been capable of deciphering the intricate magical circle that was written on the slab.

Anyway, the point is that since the bandit king hadn't treated it like anything special, I figured I could pretend I'd never picked it up in the first place. Fel and the others would definitely kick up a fuss if they learned what it could do, so this would probably save me a huge headache in the long run.

The worst-case scenario would be Fel learning about the demonfolk continent. I wouldn't put it past him to demand that we go there immediately, and if *that* was the alternative, then secreting it away was obviously the better course of action.

All right, it's settled. I definitely never found the teleportation stone or Kazuki's book. They weren't in that cave to begin with.

《**Hey! What are you muttering about over there?**》

"Huh? Me? N-Nothing, why?"

《**Have you heard so much as a word I said? I have asked for seconds time and time again!**》

《Yeah, we've been waiting for ages! Seriously!》

《Sui wants seconds too!》

"Sorry, my bad! It'll be ready in just a minute." I whipped up another set of saboro rice bowls and served them right up.

《**Does something ail you? I noticed you were up quite late last night,**》 asked Fel as he dug into his meal.

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine. I just couldn't fall asleep, no big deal."

It was all Kazuki's fault for leaving that stupid thing lying around. Part of me wanted to find him and demand he give back the time I could've spent resting up, but I knew I had better things to be doing.

"All right, once you're all done eating we're getting back on track and making for Karelina!"

I just wanted to get home as fast as possible and sleep to my heart's content in my own nice, fluffy bed.

◇◇◇◇◇

“Look, there it is!”

The familiar sight of the city of Karelina finally appeared in the distance. Demiurge’s oracle about the bandit king’s treasure cave had led us on quite the digression, but after we were finished with that, the journey proceeded almost astonishingly smoothly. Fel really picked up the pace too, so the trip was much faster than it had been on the way out.

I flashed my Adventurer’s guild card and watched as the city’s front gate slowly creaked open for me. The gate guards were used to us, at that point, and didn’t so much as bat an eyelash at Fel and Dora-chan. We made straight for my estate, and were greeted with a shout by Barthel and Peter, who were apparently on guard duty at the gate that day.

“Hey, we’re back,” I said, returning their greeting. “Anything happen while I was away?”

“Welcome home,” replied Barthel, “and nah, everything’s been nice and quiet ’round here. If I had to complain, guess it’d be ’bout how I never thought teaching’d be as rough as it’s turned out!”

“Everyone’s still working hard on their studies, then?” I’d suggested that he help everyone else with their education before I left, and from the sound of things they were really following through on that. It was nice to hear.

“More or less, yeah. Kosti ’n Tabatha’re doin’ good work, but, well...those halfwit twins are always memorizin’ the letters wrong, and keeping ’em in check’s been a real hassle.”

“It’s true,” added Peter. “They kept insisting that they knew how to read, so they’d be able to write well enough, one way or another. They really didn’t like the idea of being taught... It’s not every day that you get the chance to learn like this, though, so I really think they should give in and take advantage of it.”

“Ha ha ha, those two, huh? Yeah, I’m not surprised. You can sorta tell they’d be the type to hate studying just by looking at them.”

“Gwa ha ha ha, you’ve got that right! Peter here, though—he’s another story! Real hard worker, this one. His math’s still got a ways to go, but unlike those two, he’s puttin’ the effort in. Kid’s got his readin’ down pat, and he’s even

writin' simple stuff already, no problem!"

"Oh, already?" I said, impressed. "You really have been working hard."

"I just didn't want to waste the opportunity, that's all," Peter replied sheepishly. His bashful nature and massive body always felt sort of at odds with each other.

"Oh, that's right," I said, suddenly remembering, "I brought back a bunch of food and stuff, so I figured I'd make a big meal for everyone. You two should c'mon in and have some too."

Barthel looked a little hesitant. "What about guardin' the front gate, though?"

"Fel and the others are here now, so I think it'll be fine. And honestly, I don't think there's a burglar out there who'd be stupid enough to try and rob the place knowing he's around." Barthel and Peter both nodded, immediately convinced. "C'mon, let's go! I got some really great ingredients from the meat dungeon, plus a bunch of stuff from the food stalls in Rosendahl."

《**Hmm? You mean the skewers from the food stalls? I shall partake as well.**》

《Same here!》

《Sui too!》

"I know, I know! Don't worry, I bought enough for everyone."

A short walk down a paved pathway later, my house finally came into view. I hadn't lived there for very long at all, but there really is no place like home, when all's said and done. Knowing that you've finally arrived home after a long trip's always sorta emotional.

"Ah, it's big brother Mukohda! Welcome hooome!" Lotte, who'd been playing around in the garden out front, came running up the moment she noticed me.

"I'm back, Lotte! And I brought plenty of the meat you asked for! We're all having a feast tonight!"

"Hurray!" The second she heard the word "meat," Lotte's face lit up and she literally jumped with joy. "Oh, right! I've gotta tell everyone you're back!"

Lotte dashed off toward the servant's houses behind the main building. It

wasn't long at all before I was surrounded by familiar faces. I was relieved to see that nobody looked any different than they had when I left.

"I'm home!"

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"Guess I'm making a hot pot, then," I muttered as I stared at a massive, heavy head of Chinese cabbage. Its outside leaves were a bright, vivid green, and it was obviously of exemplary quality. It was one of the vegetables Alban had grown in the field out behind the main house.

He'd told me that everyone loved the leafy green vegetables he'd grown from the seeds I gave him. I wasn't totally sure if he meant cabbage or lettuce by that, and when I asked about it, he went out back to get one for me. I hadn't realized it at the time, but apparently there'd been some Chinese cabbage seeds in the assortment I gave him before leaving for Rosendahl.

I must not've been paying close attention at the time, and couldn't remember what specifically I'd given him at all. I'd handed over the leftover seeds from my first attempt at gardening, plus a bunch of random stuff I'd bought from my Online Supermarket. I hadn't even opened the bag they came in, in retrospect. The Chinese cabbage seeds must've come from there.

I'd been planning on making something everyone could try, using either dungeon pork or dungeon beef, and a hot pot felt like it'd fit the bill perfectly. Given that I had plenty of pork and a spectacularly high-quality Chinese cabbage on hand, a particular recipe sprang instantly to mind: I'd use dungeon pork ribs to make a mille-feuille hot pot. I'd made hot pots for everyone before, and it seemed like the perfect style of cooking for a big group.

My plan settled, I rallied all the women who knew how to cook and got to work.

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"Is this right?" asked Lotte.

"Yeah, that's perfect! You're so good at this," I replied. She beamed at my praise. She'd been really insistent about helping out with the meal, and since setting up a mille-feuille hot pot mostly just involves laying slices of pork

alternating with Chinese cabbage leaves, I figured it'd be easy enough for her to handle.

That's really all there is to it—it's super simple. All you do is lay down a cabbage leaf, then cover it with a layer of thinly-sliced dungeon pork. I explained the technique as I demonstrated the process to Lotte, Theresa, Aija, and Selja. They mimicked me and were all layering pork and cabbage together in no time.

Once you've built up three layers of cabbage and meat, you slice the pile into roughly five-centimeter-wide strips and layer them in the pot, making sure to pack them super closely together and not leave any gaps. Then you scatter some instant dashi powder onto it, add just enough water to submerge the cabbage, bring it to a boil, and it's done!

It's best eaten with some sort of sauce—personally, I'm a fan of ponzu and sesame-based sauces for this particular dish. Ponzu gives it a refreshing, citrusy bite, and the thick, rich flavor of sesame sauce really complements the simplicity of the cabbage and meat. They're both delicious, and well worth a try.

I'd also once made a version of the same dish with a miso-based soup. I had a feeling that miso would pair really well with the rest of the ingredients, and all I had to do was substitute the dashi powder for some miso-based concentrated soup. I used the same miso soup base that I always had on hand, which had a bit of a spicy kick to it, and as expected, it turned out excellently. The spiciness of the miso base really soaked into the cabbage and the meat—it was irresistibly delicious. Just remembering it was enough to make me drool...

In any case, neither version took many ingredients and they were both super easy, so I decided to make both flavors. I piled the stall food I'd bought in Rosendahl up on some platters, and we set them and the hot pots out on my house's long dining table. I dropped off a pile of everything for Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui too, of course.

"Okay, dinner's served!"

"Arright, took you long enough!" shouted one of the twins. Those two raucous morons, Luke and Irvine, were the first to the table.

Their sister, Tabatha, looked on from a distance and shook her head.

“When’re you two gonna learn to restrain yourselves? I’m ashamed to be related to you, I swear. Look at those three,” she said, gesturing to Tony’s children: Kosti, Selja, and Alban. “They’re just kids, and they’re a hell of a lot more collected than you!”

Her words fell on deaf ears. “Ahh, man, she’s off on one of her tirades again.”

“Hah, when *isn’t* she ranting about something? Just ignore her, she’ll go away eventually.”

“Good plan.”

I could see what was about to happen coming a mile away, and sure enough...

“Think you can backtalk me, eh?!”

“Augh!”

“Ouch!”

Tabatha gave the both of them a smack on the skull. Closed-fisted too.

“When’re you two gonna learn yer lesson...?” sighed Barthel. Peter didn’t say anything, but he did nod in agreement. I just let out a strained laugh.

Around the time everyone was sitting down, I felt an ominous aura building up behind me. I turned around to find Fel staring down at his mille-feuille hot pot, his nose wrinkled and absolute disdain written all over his face.

“S-Something wrong, Fel?”

“‘Is something wrong’? You truly have to ask? How many times have I told you that I cannot abide these *leaves* you call food?”

“Oh, is that all?”

“What do you *mean*, ‘is that all’?!”

“Whoa, too close, too close!” Fel had leaned in so far toward me, his face was practically pressed up against mine. “But, I mean, I know you always say you don’t like vegetables, but you eat ’em anyway, don’t you?” For such a self-proclaimed hater of greenery, he certainly ate his fill of it whenever I served a vegetable-heavy dish.

“Whether or not I eat them, the fact remains that I! Want! Meat! Have I

made myself clear?!”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

《Okay, that’s enough of that,》 chimed in Dora-chan. 《You don’t have to bite his head off, Fel. I was thinking it’s a bit light on the meat too, but it’s actually real tasty. Just try it! Especially with the sorta sour sauce—this stuff hits the spot!》

《Sui likes it with the thick sauce that smells nice!》

Dora and Sui were both meat lovers, but they didn’t share Fel’s carnivorous distaste for vegetables and were digging into their hot pots enthusiastically.

“C’mon, Fel, we’ve got plenty of skewers, and those are nothing *but* meat. Can’t you hold yourself over with them for tonight?”

“Hmph... Very well, but tomorrow, we eat meat. And I do mean *only* meat.” Fel finally started munching away at the miso hot pot in front of him.

Of course he’d actually eat it in the end, I thought, but decided not to say it out loud. I knew he’d get all snippy again if I did.

“Everyone ready?” I asked, turning back to the table. “Let’s eat! There’s plenty, so have as much as you want.” I directed that last part toward the kids in particular, and as expected, Lotte was the quickest to get to work.

“I wanna try this!” she squealed, reaching for the hot pot that she’d helped make.

“Good choice! That one goes well with one of these sauces, if you want.”

“It does? Then I wanna have this one first!” She splashed some ponzu onto her food and took a big bite, stuffing her tiny cheeks full. She spent a moment slowly chewing, then swallowed it down in one big gulp. “This is so good! It’s a little sour, and that makes it even better!”

“Yeah, that’s the sauce. It’s called ponzu—works really well with this sorta hot pot, right?”

“Yeah!”

“C’mon, what’re you waiting for, everyone?” I asked, turning to the rest of the

table. “Dig in!”

Everyone finally started helping themselves to the hot pots. Tony and Alban’s households were happily eating away in their own little family groups, and it looked like they were really enjoying it. Tabatha and the rest of my guards, meanwhile, were devouring their helpings in perfect silence. I had to wonder if they’d been starving themselves up until now, or something.

“Oh, right! Almost forgot,” I said as I produced a bunch of beer for the adults and a bottle of orange juice for the kids. I’d already used my Item Box and Online Supermarket in front of everyone before, so there was no need to be sneaky about it. Barthel the dwarf’s eyes lit up as he saw me bring out the beer.

“I knew you had it in you, Mukohda! You really know yer stuff!” He pulled open his can’s tab with a practiced motion and chugged it down in a single draft. “Now *that’s* the stuff!” he shouted. He made having a beer sound really, really nice, and everyone else quickly cracked open their cans as well. I joined in, of course, and took a nice, long swig.

“Yeah, this really is the best!” I sighed. “You gotta have a beer to get the most out of a hot pot!” I was talking to myself, but surprisingly, the rest of the adults nodded in agreement. *I guess the people of this world can appreciate how well beer and hot pot go together, as well.*

“This meat’s really something too! Gotta be some top-shelf stuff, right?” asked Tabatha.

“Huh? Nah, not really. It’s just some dungeon pork I picked up in the meat dungeon.” My Item Box was absolutely full of the stuff, not to mention all the dungeon beef.

“Dungeon pork?” said Luke, a little skeptically. “Since when was dungeon pork this good?”

“Yeah, I remember it being a little tougher than this... Not that it was bad, of course,” added Irvine as he scratched his head.

“No big surprise there. This is high-grade dungeon pork, after all,” I mentioned offhandedly. All the former adventurers at the table spun about to gape at me.

“High-grade?!” they shouted in unison. Thinking back on it, they’d been pretty shocked that one time I had served them rockbird in a hot pot as well.

“You can’t just go serving us top-class meat like this, Mukohda!” scolded Tabatha. “You know we’re supposed to be slaves, right?”

“Not gonna complain about getting to eat tasty stuff like this, but yeah, she’s got a point,” added Luke.

Irving nodded in agreement as well. “Yeah, right? It’s totally unthinkable.”

“When you put it that way,” chimed in Barthel, “we’ve been eatin’ better here than we ever did in our adventurin’ days, eh?”

Peter nodded in agreement, and all of them stared at me in dumbfounded astonishment. Tony, Alban, and their families had never even seen meat from the meat dungeon before, much less eaten it, so it didn’t look like they were keeping up with the conversation this time around.

“Okay, sure, but it’s honestly not a big deal. You wouldn’t believe how much of this stuff I have stored away.” The former adventurers glanced behind me, where Fel, Dora, and Sui were all chowing down. I think they got the point.

“Yeah, I could see Fel and the others hunting down a mountain of the stuff, and enjoying every second of it...”

“Right...?” Luke and Irvine looked like they were mid-flashback. They’d been out orc hunting with me before, so they knew what it was like.

“The monsters in the dungeon really did only drop meat, and everyone went pretty overboard...” I sighed. “They hunted the place dry of high-grade dungeon pork *and* beef.” It’d taken a horrifying amount of time just to pick up all the meat that had dropped.

“High-grade dungeon pork...”

“*And* beef...”

“They hunted the dungeon dry...?” The five former adventurers’ faces were frozen, aside from the occasional twitch.

“Hey, aren’t you gonna eat any?” asked Lotte. She looked mystified by our conversation.

“Huh? Yeah, ’course I will,” I replied. “Like I said, it’s not a big deal, so don’t worry about it. Eat up!”

Tabatha sighed. “Okay, I get it. Thinking about you and your familiars like you live in the same world as us normal adventurers was my bad.”

“Wait, what? It’s just Fel and the others, I’ve got nothing to do with it. Don’t lump me in with them! I’m totally normal!”

“Normal? Hah, as if!” Luke laughed.

“Right?” Irvine agreed.

“You tamed familiars like *them,*” added Barthel. “Ain’t a chance yer anythin’ close to normal.”

“Very true,” said Peter with a nod.

Okay, but I’d lose hard if I went one on one with literally any of you.

“I demand seconds!”

《Same here!》

《Sui too!》

“Seriously, already? And wait, you’re telling me a certain someone who was all complaints just a minute ago wants seconds now?”

“If you have a point, then out with it.”

“You know what? Never mind. I’ll have it right out, just a minute.” I hurried off to fix up a second helping for my familiars, and the former adventurers looked inexplicably self-satisfied as they watched me go.

“Yup, knew it, Mukohda’s one of them after all,” said Luke with a nod. “He’s the only man alive fearless enough to talk back to Fel like that.”

“You said it,” agreed Irvine.

Me? Fearless? Nope, nope, absolutely not!

Something about their attitudes was weirdly upsetting.

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After our little banquet concluded, I took a nice, long, relaxing bath with Dora-

chan and Sui. All we had left to do after that was hit the sack. My familiars were out like a light in minutes, but I had one more thing I needed to get done that day: it was time for my offering to Demiurge.

I'd decided to send him offerings once a week, but since I'd been mid-trip at the usual time, that week's portion ended up a little late. I didn't think he'd be upset about that, unlike a certain group of unreasonably materialistic deities, but I decided to get him slightly more sake and canned snack foods than I usually would as an apology anyway.

Liquor Shop Tanaka happened to be running a special on umeshu, a type of Japanese plum liquor, so I decided to get him some of that as well. The plums give it a really pleasant, fruity sweetness, and it doesn't have the harshness that makes some hard alcohols hard to drink if you're not used to them. People used to think of it as a sort of girly drink thanks to its sweetness, but apparently it's been growing more and more popular among men as well lately—hence the special on it.

The special had a ranking of the best varieties the store had in stock, as usual, so I decided to make it easy on myself and buy him the top three items from that list. Number three on the ranking was a sparkling variety of umeshu that apparently had an almost champagne-like quality to it. According to the description, it had a little rose essence infused into it as well, giving its flavor a slight classy floral note. Even the bottle looked fancy in a way that'd you'd expect from champagne more than umeshu, so it seemed like a perfect gift all around.

Number two on the ranking came in a sort of squat, much-less-classy bottle, but was apparently a sort of umeshu made with brandy as its base. The brand was known for the time and craftsmanship that went into its production, and it supposedly had an almost syrupy consistency that made it an excellent drink to sip and savor over the course of an evening.

At the top of the ranking list was a brand from Wakayama, a prefecture in Japan known for producing the best umeshu around. The plums that went into this variety were an incredibly specific and valuable variety that you could only grow in Wakayama, harvested at the absolute peak of ripeness. Not only was it from the holy land of umeshu, but it'd also won first place in a contest devoted

to the liquor. It was a strong, high-class drink that drew out the absolute best in the plums' natural balance of sweet and sourness.

I was far from an umeshu connoisseur, and had only ever drunk one particularly famous brewer's product, so I was sort of astonished to see that there were that many varieties available. I knew that the production process involved soaking the plums in another liquor along with a ton of sugar, but I'd been under the impression that it was only ever made with clear, uncolored alcohols like shochu and sake. The fact that you could make it with brandy or whiskey really caught my attention.

I was so intrigued by everything I'd learned that I couldn't help but slip another bottle of the number three umeshu into my basket to try out myself. I was really looking forward to giving it a try, but since I had everything I'd be offering Demiurge picked out, I knew I should take care of sending that off before anything else. I double-checked that everything I meant to send was in the cardboard box, and slipped in a few extra items as well: both varieties of the mille-feuille hot pot I'd made earlier that night, plus the ponzu and sesame sauces that went along with them.

"I'm sorry it's a bit late this week, but please accept this offering, Demiurge! I made a cabbage and dungeon pork mille-feuille hot pot to go along with it, as well—I hope you enjoy it."

＜*Oh, no need to worry about punctuality! I'm more than happy enough just to receive your offerings. And a hot pot as well? My thanks! I will enjoy these.*＞ My offering vanished in a flash of light.

"The hot pot with the translucent soup is best with sauce, so I sent along a couple bottles for you to try with it. The other one's miso-soup-based, so I recommend trying it as-is."

＜*Oh, they smell wonderful! I can hardly wait to try them.*＞

"I also sent some of your usual sake, plus a few bottles of a liquor called umeshu for you to try. It's made from a particular sort of plum."

＜*A fruit liquor, is it? I* am *partial to those, on occasion. I will look forward to sampling them as well! Ho! Ho! Ho!*＞ His calm but booming laugh echoed in my mind.

“Also, I ended up checking out the mountain that you told me about the last time we spoke...” I explained about how I’d found the bandit king’s treasure cave, and the diary of a Sage named Kazu who hailed from the same homeland as me, plus the teleportation stone that he’d made. “I’m guessing you sent me there because you wanted me to find that stone, right?”

The stone was nothing but trouble in my mind and I was all set to seal it away forevermore, but when I really thought about it, Demiurge himself had sent me to that mountain. Considering my personal connection with the stone, it would make total sense if he did so for the specific purpose of helping me find it. And if that was the case, I couldn’t exactly bury the thing and call it a day, could I? For all I knew, Demiurge might’ve been specifically trying to guide us toward the demonfolk continent.

＜*A-Ah, yes, that was part of it.*＞ *A teleportation stone?* thought Demiurge, totally unbeknownst to me. *Was there really one of those in that cave?*

“I knew it... So then, was this your way of telling me that we should go to the demonfolk continent?”

The demonfolk continent? I’d entirely forgotten that the teleportation stone was even there; of course I wasn’t trying to tell him anything of the sort! It is *quite the coincidence, though, so it makes sense that he would read into my motives. What to tell him...? I’ll just have to make up something vague but plausible and hope he doesn’t make too much of it!*

＜*N-No, that was not my intention. Whether or not you go to the demonfolk continent is your decision to make. I led you to that stone because, umm...because I believed it would be most fitting for it to wind up in your hands, seeing as you and its creator shared a homeland! Yes, that’s right.*＞

“Oh, really? So you wouldn’t mind if I decided not to go?”

＜*Not in the least.*＞ *I only led him there as thanks for the offerings he always sends to me and the other gods, honestly.*

“Great! That’s a relief.”

＜*You are free to live as you see fit. Just know that we will always be watching over you. Until next time!*＞ Demiurge ended his oracle.

“Phew! Seriously, thank goodness.” Demiurge went out of his way to say that I was free to do whatever I wanted, so I was under no obligation to force myself into a trans-continental trip. I could secret the stone away, never tell my familiars about it, and pretend that none of this ever happened. I had a feeling that I’d be sleeping well that night, and mere moments after crawling into my futon I proved myself correct.

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“Hey, what are you doing?”

“Huh? Oh, didn’t I tell you? I’m planning on heading to the Adventurer’s guild today, and I’ll be selling off the loot we got in the bandit king’s cave. I figured I should appraise all the magic items we found before I go so we can keep any that sound like they might be useful.”

I was out in the garden in front of my house, and had all the magic items from the cave spread out on the ground when Fel wandered over.

“Where’re Dora-chan and Sui?”

“Napping, though given how early in the day it is, perhaps ‘oversleeping’ would be more apt. It would seem they feasted too freely at breakfast and lulled themselves back to bed.”

“Hah, those two sure are taking it easy!”

“Have you already appraised everything?”

“Nah, I’m just getting started. I’ve only looked at this one so far,” I said, pointing to one of the items. It was a square panel with a magical circle inscribed on it. “It’s a soundproofing item, looks like! If you activate it and stand in the circle, absolutely no noise you make will be audible to anyone outside of it.”

Fel looked skeptical. **“What use would anyone possibly have for such a thing?”**

“I guess it could be handy if you had something to say that you really, *really* didn’t want anyone uninvolved to overhear?” Magic items were expensive by default, so I was sure it had to be worth something. I definitely didn’t want it,

though. “We have a bunch of them, so I figured I’d appraise them all and see what turns up.”

“Magic items are of some interest to me as well. I shall assist.” Fel and I appraised item after item together. Most of them seemed questionably useful at best, but a few caught my attention.

Stuff like a magical slab that could shoot pretty large fireballs and an item that drove monsters away were totally useless to me. I had Fel on my side, after all, and since I could use fire magic, I could make my own fireballs without a magic item. The one that drove away monsters almost certainly wouldn’t work on any high-ranked creatures, so it didn’t seem like it’d be especially useful either.

One of them seemed handy, though: a water jug that kept itself magically full, generating fresh water out of thin air. I thought that Alban and his family would appreciate it, so I was planning on installing it in their house. I’d heard that Theresa usually took the lead on cooking everyone’s meals, and the capable-of-cooking brigade would gather in her kitchen to help out, so it seemed like a good place for it. Drawing water from the well had to be a pain, so it’d save them a lot of work.

Then there was a box-shaped item that was infused with ice magic—an ice maker, basically. I thought it was a good find for a moment, but according to Fel’s appraisal it could only produce a small amount of ice at once, and took a long time to do so on top of that. I decided to sell it off.

The rest of the items we appraised fell into a similar range. There was an item that could replicate a water cutter spell, for instance, and a magic stove. You’d think the stove would catch my attention, but it only had one burner and wouldn’t let you fine-tune its heat output. It couldn’t hold a candle to the magic stove I already owned.

Finally, we came to the last item. It was an intricately carved and elaborately decorated square wooden chest that measured about one meter long on each side. In spite of how old it had to be, it didn’t look worn or deteriorated in the slightest. It opened from the side rather than the top like a normal chest. I had pretty high hopes for it.

“Okay, last one!”

“Is it? Were there not more than this?”

I gulped. It goes without saying that I hadn’t brought out the teleportation stone. There hadn’t been all that many magic items in the first place—had Fel noticed that it was missing?

“Nooope, sorry, no more after this one!”

“Oh? Very well, then. I shall appraise the final item.”

“Y-Yeah, great, thanks! You get more info than I do, so that sounds good to me.” *Phew! That was a close one.*

“Hmm,” said Fel after a lengthy pause, **“it would seem to be a magic item intended to keep food and drink cold. An item to prevent food from spoiling, if you will.”**

“Wait, but that means—it’s a refrigerator! A magic refrigerator, nice! This is great, we can definitely use this one!”

“Can we?”

“Yeah, it’ll be handy for all sorts of things. Marinating meat’s the big one. I never really liked the idea of leaving that stuff out at room temperature. This country’s big, and with the climate changing depending on where you go, it just doesn’t feel safe. A fridge means I’ll be able to marinate stuff without worrying about food poisoning, though! It’ll let me make a bunch of desserts like puddings and jellies and stuff too!”

“Is that so? Most excellent! Let us put it to use at once—prepare us some meat!”

“Sorry, but ‘at once’ isn’t gonna happen. My schedule’s totally packed today. We’ll do it tomorrow, all right?”

“Hmph. I shall hold you to that.”

“Yeah, I know, I know. All right, let’s haul the rest of this stuff over to the Adventurer’s guild!”

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It felt like it’d been quite a long time since Fel and I had paid a visit to

Karelina's Adventurer's guild. Dora-chan and Sui were both still fast asleep, so we ended up leaving them at the house.

"Oh, you're finally back!" cried the guildmaster, Willem, who met us by the door.

"We are, yeah. Nice to see you."

"Hah hah, indeed! So? What do you think?" he asked as he stroked his hair, which was even longer and fuller than last time I'd seen him. I got that he was so happy he just had to brag about it, but honestly, it was getting sort of obnoxious.

"Umm, looks like it's working out well, huh? Good for you."

"It most certainly has, thanks to your shampoo and hair growth tonic! It just keeps growing and growing! Thanks to you, my hair's the talk of the town!" He explained that while I'd been away, his incredible transformation had attracted quite a fair bit of attention. A bunch of formerly high-ranked adventurers who he'd known for ages had started pestering him relentlessly for his secret, and some people had actually traveled to Karelina from far and wide just because they'd heard the rumors about him.

The guildmaster had been at such a loss as to what to do about his incredibly persistent friends, he'd actually gone to Lambert for advice. Lambert eventually agreed to allow those whom Willem judged to be economically stable (that is, to be capable of paying full price for the tonic) to purchase their own supply, albeit through the guildmaster as an intermediary. Lambert had apparently been *very* insistent that Willem be careful about who he allowed to take advantage of that privilege, though personally, I was grateful that he was helping me sell the stuff off.

"So anyway," I said, changing the subject, "I stopped by today to let you know I'm back in town and to see if you'd be interested in taking some stuff off my hands."

"Again? What outrageous nonsense have you brought to me this time?"

"What do you mean, nonsense? I've been adventuring like the adventurer I am, and it's all stuff that I earned while I was doing my work!" *Technically,*

that's all totally true.

"Fine, fine. Let's talk in my office." He led us up to his room on the second floor.

The moment we stepped inside, Fel curled up into a ball and fell asleep in the corner. I sipped at a cup of tea that one of the guild's employees brought me as I told the guildmaster about the treasure I'd obtained on my way back from Rosendahl.

"So, yeah, I was thinking you might want to buy some of the bandit king's treasure." I paused. Willem's mouth was hanging wide open, and he was staring at me in complete, dumbfounded silence. "Umm... Guildmaster?"

He snapped back to reality with a start. "Ah! Lost track of myself for a moment. You really have done the unthinkable again, I swear... I'll have you know that more adventurers than I can count have gone out searching for the bandit king's treasure over the years." He looked oddly conflicted as he explained it all to me.

"Oh, huh. That so?" I didn't know what else to say. I mean, I found the thing, and there wasn't much I could do to change that fact. Hell, I was guided there by an oracle from the gods themselves, which made it doubly not my fault.

"So," Willem continued, "what did you want to sell us?"

"Umm, well, the treasure was mostly coins, jewelry, and the like, but there were also some weapons, armor, and magic items. I was hoping you'd at least be able to take some of the jewelry off my hands."

"Jewelry, eh? I certainly *could* buy it off you if you absolutely need me to, but you should know that you'd get a better price if you sold them in a dungeon city or the capital."

Dungeons were known for producing fine jewelry, and merchants who specialized in the field tended to gather in the cities surrounding said dungeon specifically to buy that sort of item. The capital, meanwhile, was host to the nobility, and they were always in the market for fancy trinkets. Karelina was fairly provincial, as far as cities went, and there just wasn't that much demand for jewelry and the like. Most of this was news to me, but it did make sense.

“In that case, I’ll try to sell that stuff the next time I’m in a dungeon city... Oh, right! I did have one more favor I wanted to ask, if that’s okay.” I hadn’t paid a copper for any of the stuff I found in the cave, and if it wasn’t worth anything more to me than the price tag a merchant would slap on it, I figured I might as well send something to the king as a gift.

I told the guildmaster about my idea, and he explained that he’d have to report about the bandit king’s treasure finally being discovered to the Adventurer’s guild’s national headquarters in the capital regardless. He said that he could get in contact with the royal palace while he was there.

“No chance they’ll refuse the gift if I tell them it’s coming from you. So, what were you planning on giving him?”

“I was thinking these three might be good.” One of the pieces I’d chosen was a mithril tiara that was covered in diamonds of all shapes and sizes. The second, also made from a base of mithril, was a diamond-studded pendant with a massive ruby set in its center. The last was a beautifully engraved golden ring set with a huge sapphire.

Those three items, plus the mithril and diamond necklace that I’d tried to give to Dora-chan, were the most obviously extravagant pieces of jewelry I’d found in the hoard. Dora-chan had said he didn’t want the necklace, but he also hadn’t seemed to hate the idea of owning it, so I decided to keep it around just in case he changed his mind.

“I’m not even close to an expert on jewelry,” said Willem, “But even I can tell these are worth a fair sum... So, which are you planning to offer?”

Frankly, I would’ve been fine with giving all three of them away. I’d never been interested in jewelry, so even if I kept them I’d just end up selling them in the end. *Hmm... Y’know what, why not? I’ll send ’em all the king’s way! Hopefully he’ll take the hint and keep letting me do my own thing without having anyone meddle in my affairs.*

“All of them, actually.”

“A-All of them?! You’re a generous one, I’ll give you that. Well, I’m sure the king will be delighted—not to mention the queen.”

Yeah, no kidding. Having both sides of the monarchy backing me couldn't possibly be a bad thing, in my mind, and it wouldn't surprise me at all if she held an awful lot of power herself. This world was no different from mine, in that respect.

There was no way the guildmaster could carry jewelry that valuable to the capital on his own, so he made arrangements for a couple of former high-ranking adventurers who worked as instructors at the guild to escort him there. He would set out in roughly a week.

I felt bad about making him go through the trouble, but he reassured me that his branch had made almost unbelievable profits thanks to my work, and that it was the least he could do to repay me. I agreed to keep hold of the items until the day of his departure.

After that, we moved over to the storehouse to take a look at the weapons, armor, and magic items I was thinking of selling. There weren't all that many of them, but since each one would require appraisal, I was told it would take around five days for them to finish.

With that, our business at the Adventurer's guild was settled. Fel and I set off to our next destination: Lambert's store.

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"Nice to see you, Marie! Is Lambert in?"

"Oh, Mukohda! You're back in town? Welcome!"

"Looks like business is booming, huh?"

Marie chuckled. "All thanks to you! Karelina's women can't do without your shampoo and soap anymore. I've heard rumors that some of our customers come all the way from out of town, just to shop at our store!"

Considering the world was more or less overrun with monsters, traveling from town to town carried substantial risk. Apparently, though, there were people willing to take that risk just for a bar of soap. I was once again struck by how terribly tenacious women could be when it came to cosmetics.

"I'd love to open up a branch store, really..." muttered Marie. I took that as a

hint that she wanted me to provide her an even bigger stock than I already was. Kosti, whom I'd put in charge of my shampoo and soap stocks, had already mentioned in passing that she'd been asking about bumping up those numbers.

They really are flying off the shelves, huh? I mean, all I have to do on my end is buy 'em from my Online Supermarket, so it's not like it'd be impossible... Guess I'll have to ask everyone in charge of repackaging the stuff to pick up the pace a little.

"I'm not sure how much more I'll be able to get you, but I'll do what I can."

"Really?! Please do, absolutely! We're counting on you!" Her eyes were so wide and she was staring at me so intently, it was sorta scary...

"Y-Yeah, great. Umm, so, is Lambert around?"

"Oh, pardon me for delaying you! I was so distracted by my own affairs, I forgot entirely. My husband's in the back—please, follow me."

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"In short," Lambert concluded after a lengthy explanation, "your hair growth formula is practically flying off the shelves in the capital!" He'd brought fifty bottles of Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power to present to Earl Langridge, but he'd also taken an additional fifty to sell, and those had vanished in the blink of an eye.

"And that's in spite of the fact that I only sold them to customers the earl directly introduced me to!" he excitedly declared. "Of course, it only takes a glance at the earl himself to see how effective the formula really is."

That was pretty easy to believe. According to Lambert, the earl's transformation was nothing short of astonishing. He was a walking advertisement for the formula, and an exceptionally effective one at that.

"It would seem the earl has shared his portion with a number of his close associates as well. He told me at great length how effective of a tool it was." I assumed that in this instance he was talking about its efficacy as a tool of diplomacy, not about how well it made hair grow. It wasn't surprising, really. If someone who was worried about their thinning hair saw the earl before and after his transformation, of course they'd want to learn his secret, no matter

what it took.

In any case, the earl had become an overnight sensation among the capital's nobility, and it wasn't long before he'd received a veritable mountain of invitations to parties and the like. Whether that was all part of his plan or just a happy coincidence, the earl didn't waste the opportunity to make the rounds in the nobles' social world and forge as many connections as possible.

Perhaps thanks to those efforts, Lambert was bombarded with introductions and business inquiries from the earl's acquaintances. Knowing an incredible opportunity when he saw one, Lambert rushed back to Karelina, picked up the remaining stock of the formula I'd initially sold him, then took off for the capital once more without a moment's rest.

"And would you believe those hundred extra bottles sold out in a flash as well?!" he exclaimed.

I remembered him saying that he'd set the price at fifty gold coins for a single bottle, but apparently he'd been selling it bundled together with the shampoo I provided to him, making it even pricier. Considering his buyers were almost all nobles, I guess the price didn't really matter much at all. Either that, or his sales just went to show how many of them were worried about their hair. Maybe managing a domain like lords do was more stressful than you'd think?

From the sound of things, Lambert had managed to make a fair share of connections with his noble buyers as well. A merchant's business lives and dies on the people they know, so he was ecstatic that things had turned out that way.

"As such, I'd be most obliged if you could provide more stock of your formula!" He explained that not only had the earl requested another delivery of the stuff on the double, but the nobles who he'd introduced Lambert to were just as persistent on the matter.

He wanted the same number as last time—two hundred bottles—at the very least, and as fast as I could procure them. If more than two hundred was feasible, he'd take as many as I could possibly provide. His attitude made it clear just how great the demand for the formula was.

That wasn't even the end of his story. According to Lambert, the earl's wife

and daughter had heard the rumors about the shampoo I'd been selling through his shop and had gone out of their way to obtain it before anyone else in the capital. It had very quickly become something of a daily essential for them.

Not just the shampoo either—they'd also had my hair treatment, hair packs, and high-quality rose-scented soap brought into the capital. According to Lambert, their hair could hardly look more luxuriously silky. There was no way the other noblewomen and girls would let that pass by without comment.

"I guess they're probably attracting just as much attention as the earl, huh?" I mused.

"They are, yes, and thanks to them we've received an absolute flood of orders for all of our hair products."

"Marie did mention that she'd like to stock more shampoo and soap, if I could manage it. Guess all those orders from the capital would explain that."

"It certainly would! I've seen products being sold in stores in the capital that I'm quite certain originated in my shop."

Resellers, huh? That explains a lot too. I'd thought I'd left him with an ample supply before I'd departed for Rosendahl, but that might've been optimistic of me. I was starting to understand just how crazy the demand was.

Incidentally, we'd been using wooden tags to keep track of Lambert's sales and how much he owed me, and their current balance worked out to well over two thousand gold coins. It was already extremely clear that the Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power would be profitable, so he agreed to pay me up front in cash for those.

I wanted to stay in Lambert's good graces, so I felt obligated to fulfill his requests. In other words, things were going to get a lot busier for everyone back home. I decided to ask Tabatha and the other guards if they could start helping out with that.

"Okay, I think I get the picture. I'll do my best to provide you the stock you need." He wanted it as quickly as possible, so after a bit of discussion we decided that I'd deliver the goods in two days' time.

"Oh, and while we're at it, the earl mentioned something you should probably

be aware of.” Lambert explained that the earl had attended a banquet at the royal palace, where I’d happened to come up in a conversation with the king himself. The earl had mentioned he’d met me, and the king had dropped some roundabout hints that he would very much like to make my acquaintance as well.

The earl, of course, knew about my distaste for associating with bigwigs and was apparently rather put on the spot. After all, he knew very well that Fel was my familiar, and that meant that he couldn’t force me to do anything against my will. There was no telling what Fel might do to him if he tried.

The king knew that just as well, in theory, but I could imagine he was somewhat put off by the fact that I’d met with an earl but still showed no inclination to pay him a visit. It wasn’t totally unreasonable—I’d been making excuses to avoid an audience with him for a long time, at that point, and still had yet to meet with him so much as once.

But all that said, it wasn’t like I’d met with Earl Langridge by choice. The circumstances at the time had forced my hand. Plus, I figured his resentment probably wouldn’t last after he received the extravagant three-piece jewelry set I’d be sending his way. Looking at it that way, there couldn’t have been a better time to accidentally offend the king.

I’d heard that the king of this country was a very practical sort of person, and I was sure he’d appreciate the ‘I’d like to stay in your good graces’ nuance to my little gift. This was the second time I’d sent him a present, after all.

“I don’t think that’s going to be a problem,” I reassured Lambert. “I’ve already got a plan to keep the king happy with me. Let the earl know that I’ll be fine, okay?”

“Well, if you’re certain! I’ll inform the earl, of course.”

Although, if I’d read the king wrong and he started raising a fuss about this, I could always get all my stuff together and move my entire household to another country. I didn’t think it’d come to that, but I was keeping my options open.

“All right, I’ll be back again the day after tomorrow!”

“I’ll look forward to the delivery—thank you again!”

《Hey, Fel,》 I projected telepathically, 《we’re heading home now!》

He yawned as he sluggishly roused himself. 《**Finally. I have grown hungry.**》

《I know, I know, we’ll eat when we get back. Dora-chan and Sui’re probably awake and waiting for us by now.》

Fel still looked half-asleep, but he plodded along at an impressive pace as we made for home.

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I stopped by a few general stores on the way back from Lambert’s place and bought up as many bottles as I could to package the Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power in. Counting the bottles I’d bought when I’d made the first batch, I had about a thousand in stock by the end of it. I figured that’d be plenty.

The moment I got home I went straight to Tony’s and Alban’s houses to ask them to help get all the shampoos and stuff repackaged. I knew they’d have to spend all their time on the job if they wanted to get it done in two days, so I offered to handle cooking their meals until they finished. Lambert had asked me to get him as much product as I possibly could, so I also asked everyone to work overtime if they could manage it.

In exchange, I offered to get a present for everyone—they could each ask for one thing, whatever they wanted. Tony and Alban refused at first, claiming that I was already providing them a lifestyle beyond their wildest imagination and that it would be unthinkable to ask for more, but I thought it was totally reasonable to compensate them for working during a time they’d usually spend relaxing at home. I would absolutely not let my home turn into some sorta sweatshop.

The kids, in contrast, were raring to go after I explained my offer to them. I wanted all hands on deck if possible, so I asked Tabatha and the other guards if they could help as well, and they were all for it. With me at home—and more importantly, with Fel at home—they didn’t really have to bother going on guard duty anyway, and had plenty of spare time.

With that, everyone was ready to get to work repackaging my cosmetics. I,

meanwhile, got an early start on making everyone's dinner.

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Buying up all the bottles I could get my hands on had taken a pretty long while, and by the time I got back it was well past lunch time. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were practically drooling with anticipation, but I managed to pacify them with a massive helping of premade food I had in stock.

"I'm planning on making more meat than even you guys could eat for dinner tonight, so you'll have to hold yourselves over with that for now."

"I shall consider that a promise. I will not allow you to change your mind under any circumstances!"

《Lookin' forward to it!》

《Masteeer, I wanna eat lots and lots of meat!》

Ha ha, looks like they've got their expectations way up. That wasn't a problem, though. I had absolute confidence that the dish I was planning to make would satisfy my carnivorous familiars.

This time, I'd be making beef cutlets for everyone. At first I'd been planning on making another hot pot, since it's such an easy dish to share with a large group, but with everyone working so hard for my sake I decided to make something a little more extravagant than I usually would.

It didn't take long to settle on a main ingredient, considering the ridiculous excess of dungeon meat I had on hand. When I thought about extravagant meat dishes, a big, thick cut of steak was the first thing that came to mind, but that seemed sort of uninspired, and I eventually settled on beef cutlets as a more elaborate alternative.

I used to make them for myself every once in a while—mostly when I'd just gotten paid and was in the mood to splurge. They satisfy a different sort of appetite than steak does, especially when you smother them in a rich, thick demi-glace sauce, and I find myself craving them every once in a while.

There was a fringe benefit to making beef cutlets, as well: whenever I made them, I'd always make a few extra to use in sandwiches the next day. Beef

cutlet sandwiches have a special sort of appeal to them, even a day after you made the cutlets themselves. Just thinking about them was starting to make me drool.

At that point, I was totally settled on making beef cutlets for dinner. And with that decision made, my next step was to move over to the kitchen and buy all the ingredients I needed off my Online Supermarket. It was a shorter list than usual since I already had the dungeon beef I'd be using as the main ingredient, and I had plenty of cabbage and tomatoes from Alban's garden.

I bought flour, eggs, and panko for the breading, plus canned demi-glace, red wine, and butter for the sauce. I'd need ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and sugar for the sauce as well, but I already had all those on hand. A cardboard box full of all the ingredients appeared out of thin air the moment I paid my bill, and I got to cooking right away.

First up was the demi-glace sauce. I'd made some before back when I used chimera meat to make cutlets, but I'd be adding some red wine this time around to give it an even greater depth of flavor.

Step one is to bring the red wine to a boil and reduce it to roughly half its initial volume. Then you just add the can of premade demi-glace, some Worcestershire sauce, ketchup, butter, and sugar. Simmer it all for another two minutes or so, and it's ready to go! I'd spoon it over the beef cutlets right before serving them.

And on that note, it was time to make the cutlets themselves! You start by cutting dungeon beef (the high-grade stuff, of course) into relatively thick slices, seasoning them with salt and pepper. Then you dredge them in flour, shake off the excess, dip them in the beaten egg, and cover them in panko. Next, just fry them until they're golden-brown on both sides.

Scoop the cutlets out from the oil, then let them rest on a cooling rack for a minute or two so the lingering heat can finish permeating through the meat. All that's left at that point is to slice them into bite-sized strips and cover them in the demi-glace.

I looked down at my own handiwork and gulped. "Man, these turned out really well, if I do say so myself!" One of a cook's privileges is being the first to

taste test their own handiwork, and I couldn't resist immediately taking advantage of that right. I bit into a piece of cutlet with an incredibly loud crunch.

"Oh, *man* that's good!" The dungeon meat was cooked to a perfect rare, its insides still soft, pink, and juicy. The demi-glace was exactly as rich and full-bodied as I'd hoped, and complemented the cutlet exquisitely.

As I helped myself to the freshly-fried cutlet, I felt something poking at my shin. Glancing down, I found that I had a guest.

"Oh, hey, Sui."

《Masteeer, Sui wants to try some too!》

I was pretty impressed that it had managed to catch me right as I was taste testing the dish. On the other hand, I was surprised that *only* Sui had caught me. Where were Fel and Dora-chan? I glanced around—from the look of things, the two of them were in the living room, and showed no signs of wandering into the kitchen.

"I made this for taste testing, so just a little, okay?" I whispered to Sui. "Oh, and don't tell the others!"

《Okay! Sui'll keep it secret from Fel and Dora-chan!》 I surreptitiously set the rest of the cutlet down for Sui to try. 《This is so tasty!》

"Right? You can eat your fill of it at dinnertime, so be patient until then."

《Okaaay! Sui's so excited for dinner!》 It bounced about happily as it went back into the living room.

"All right, looks like they're really gonna stuff themselves this time. I'd better fry up as much as possible." I just kept frying and frying, swapping out the oil every once in a while, until I had enough cutlets for both dinner and the next day's sandwiches.

"Phew!" I exclaimed after I'd finally finished. "Think that should do it, hopefully. Feels like a good time to have everyone wrap up their repackaging work for the day too." I headed downstairs to the workshop where everyone was busy with all those cosmetics.

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When everyone had gathered in the dining room and sat down at the table as usual, I brought out a platter piled high with beef cutlets and smothered in demi-glace sauce. I'd kept them in my Item Box, so needless to say they were still piping hot. I also served shredded cabbage and quartered tomatoes from Alban's garden on the side, along with a bunch of dinner rolls I bought from my Online Supermarket. Everyone was free to help themselves.

I gave Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui their own individual plates, each of which had five beef cutlets covered with demi-glace stacked on top. No veggies for them, apparently. Everything from Alban's garden was delicious, so they were really missing out.

"Thanks for all your hard work today, everyone!" I said, addressing the table. "Let's dig in!"

I crunched into a piece of the cutlet, and yup, it was just as delicious as it'd been when I was taste testing them. That's when I noticed that it was really quiet. Like, *weirdly* quiet. I glanced around the dinner table and found that everyone else was absolutely spellbound as they slowly and deliberately savored their first bites of their cutlets. A moment later they swallowed, took a deep breath, and started raving about how good it was.

"Mom, dad, this is so tasty!" cried Lotte. "I've never had meat like this before!"

"It really is," replied Theresa as she wiped a tear from her eye. "I can't believe we're allowed to eat something this delicious..." Alban was in tears as well. And Tony and Aija, for that matter. *Wait, seriously? I know it's good, but it's nothing to cry over, is it?*

"Everything Mukohda's made us has been incredible," said Tabatha, "but tonight's is a cut above. This stuff's really something special." The other former adventurers all nodded in agreement.

"Okay, okay, you don't have to be all solemn about it! C'mon, eat up! There's plenty for everyone to have seconds."

The twins were the first to take me up on it. "Seconds?!" shouted Luke.

“Seriously?! We can have *more?!”*

“Three cheers for mister generous!” added Irvine.

“Yeah, you can, but I’m gonna work you hard again tomorrow in exchange,” I cautioned.

“We know!” they shouted in unison before stuffing their faces.

《**I demand seconds!**》 roared Fel in my mind barely a second later. 《**You were not exaggerating—this is easily as delicious as you claimed!**》

《Seconds for me too! This sauce is crazy rich! It works so well with the meat! I love it!》

《Sui wants to eat more too!》

“Right, right, I know—pff!” I barely stifled a laugh. Fel and Dora-chan’s mouths were totally covered in demi-glace. *Hah! I’ll have to wipe that off for them later.*



Chapter 4: A Moment of Relief & Wait, Him? Seriously?

Everyone got right back to repackaging cosmetics early the next morning. I ended up helping out for a few hours as well. Between this morning's work session and yesterday's, we managed to produce a pretty decent stock of Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power, which was a relief. At the rate things were going, I wouldn't have to ask everyone to work overtime again that evening.

When it felt like we were at a good stopping point, I suggested that we break for lunch. I already had our food all ready: we'd be eating the beef cutlet sandwiches I'd made the night before.

To make a cutlet sandwich, you just lightly toast two pieces of bread, then spread butter and spicy Japanese mustard on them. Since Sui and the kids would be eating them as well, I decided to go light on the mustard this time. Then you sauce up a cutlet, sandwich it between the slices of bread, and, well, that's all it takes!

It's a super simple recipe, but oh man, are they ever tasty. You could add cabbage or lettuce to the sandwich if you wanted, but I'm of the opinion that when you use a nice cut of meat for the cutlet, those just distract from the experience.

Lotte was absolutely beaming as she bit into her sandwich. "This is so good!" she shouted ecstatically. Oliver, Erik, Kosti, and Selja were smiling just as broadly as they ate. As expected, the sandwiches were a hit with the kids. In my experience, children love foods they can really sink their teeth into, as it were.

Which isn't to say the adults weren't enjoying theirs! The way they were scarfing them down made it pretty clear that they liked them. I couldn't blame them for eating like that—not to talk myself up or anything, but the sandwiches really were just that good. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were all totally absorbed in

their meals too.

《**Another!**》

《Make that two!》

《Sui wants more!》

Did you guys even chew? I mean, I get it, you like the sandwiches, but that was crazy fast! I figured I might as well bring out my whole stock, and piled up a veritable mountain of cutlet sandwiches on a platter. My familiars were more than happy to dig into them.

Meanwhile, Irvine was sighing with satisfaction. “Seriously,” he said, “getting to eat something this delicious for lunch is as good as it gets!” Everyone else agreed, the former adventurers nodding with particular vigor.

“Working as an adventurer means skipping out on lunch, more often than not,” explained Luke. The others piped up in agreement once again.

Huh? But wait—I’m technically an adventurer too, and I’ve been eating three square meals a day without fail! I mean, technically I’ve ended up too busy to make lunch a few times, but my familiars always give me an earful when that happens, so I try to avoid it at all costs. Making sure our meals don’t get disrupted has been priority one for me.

“Rations’re ’bout the best you can expect when you’re out on a quest,” added Barthel with a grimace. “The worst’re those long-term jobs, like when you get stuck on escort duty...”

“Those rations are so bad, I can barely bring myself to eat them...” said Peter in a quiet, solemn tone. The other former adventurers nodded in agreement.

I knew about rations too, of course, but since I had a handy little skill called Online Supermarket I’d never actually needed to try them. From what I understood, they were made by working flour and water into a paste and baking it to make an incredibly unpalatable cracker. Flavor aside, they were supposedly incredible for replenishing your energy when you were out on the job, and as such were an indispensable asset for travelers and adventurers.

“I swear, it feels like my mouth goes bone dry the second I bite into one of

those things," commented Irvine. "And the more you chew, the worse it gets. It's like trying to eat wadded-up chunks of paper."

Apparently, that was a step too far for Tabatha's taste. "Dammit, Irvine, we're eating the best food we've ever had and you're making me think about how rations taste?!" she shouted as she smacked him upside the head.

"Ow! What was that for?! Back me up here, Mukohda—you're an adventurer, right? You know how vile those things are!"

Oh, come on, why're you asking me*?*

"W-Well, I, uh, actually..." My stammering only attracted more attention than ever. Everyone, from the former adventurers to Alban and Tony's families, was totally focused on me. "Umm, I know *about* rations, but I've never actually bought them, I guess... I mean, you know how it is for me! I couldn't exactly buy food I know's going to be gross, could I?"

I glanced over at Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui. Just imagining what would happen if I served up something nasty was unpleasant. Worst-case scenario, Fel could freak out and go on a rampage. And if a legendary monster like him ran wild... I shivered. *Seriously, I don't even wanna think about it.*

"What was that about gross food? I trust you know what will happen if you serve me something unpalatable...do you not?" Fel, sharp-eared as ever, gave me a suspicious glare.

"Y-Yeah, I know, of course! I've never served you anything nasty so far, have I?"

"Hmph! So long as you are aware of where you stand, there will not be an issue."

The others, who'd been listening in to our exchange, suddenly looked a lot more understanding than they had before. "You've got it rougher than it looks, huh?" muttered Luke, seemingly on behalf of the rest of the group.

Yeah, those three are a huge help, but they only really pull out the stops when food's involved. You'd never know it from looking at them, but my familiars are a real bunch of foodies.

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Later that day, Fel decided to interrogate me about the dishes I'd told him I could make using the magic refrigerator. I caved, and was busy preparing a massive quantity of cockatrice meat to marinate in the fridge (some in a soy-sauce-based marinade, and some in a salt-based one) when Aija came looking for me.

"Excuse me! We've finished repackaging everything you asked for."

"Oh, wow, already? Great work, thanks!" I went straight down into the basement, where I found an absolute ton of neatly stacked boxes filled to the brim with all sorts of bottles. Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power, shampoo, soap, it was all there. Even setting aside the Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power, there was enough shampoo and soap to fulfill several ordinary deliveries, from what I could tell.

I figured that *had* to be enough to satisfy Lambert, at least for tomorrow's order. With the work all finished, I had everyone gather up in the living room so I could listen to their requests, just like I'd promised.

"All right, great work, everyone! A promise is a promise, so I owe all of you one thing, whatever you want. Who's up first?"

Unsurprisingly, the first person to raise her hand was the ever unreserved Lotte. "Me, me, me!" she shouted. "I want something sweet!"

"Something sweet, huh? I can work with that—wait just a second." I opened up my Online Supermarket.

"Something sweet" would mean candy, I guess... Oh, I should go with hard candy! That way it'll last her for a long time. Hmm... Oh man, these're a blast from the past!

I'd found a sort of hard candy that had been sold since long before I was born. They came in little tin cans with openings just big enough to shake one candy out from. Since each tin can contained a bunch of flavors and you never knew which was going to come out, they were a lot more interesting than individually packaged candies you could pick and choose from. I decided they'd be perfect for Lotte.

“All right, here you go! Do you see the little cap here? You just pull it open like this...” I popped the lid off the can. “Okay, hold out your hand.” She did, and I shook a single piece of hard candy into her tiny palm.

“Wooow, it’s so pretty!”

“Go on, eat it! Careful, though, don’t bite down.” She popped the candy into her mouth.

“Itsh sho shweet!”

“Right? There’s a bunch of different flavors in there. Just try not to eat them all in one sitting, okay?” Lotte was overjoyed as I passed the tin over to her.

“Now, who’s next?” I looked around at everyone, and my gaze eventually fell on Selja, who was fidgeting excitedly. “What would you like, Selja?”

“Umm, well—please wait just a moment!” She dashed out of the room, only to return a short while later clutching the notebook I’d given her before I left for Rosendahl. “I want one of these!”

“Whoa, does that mean you already used that one up?” She held the notebook open, and every one of its pages was indeed covered in densely packed writing. She’d really been practicing as hard as she could—even the margins were full of letters. I felt sort of proud of her. “You really used every last bit of this thing, huh? That’s awesome, great work!”

She looked a little embarrassed by my praise. A moment later Lotte’s brothers, Oliver and Erik, piped up as well.

“U-Umm, I’d like the same as her, please!”

“M-Me too!”

Those two must be studying hard too, huh? This is giving me an idea...

“All right, then—I’ll get full writing sets for all three of you!”

The sets I bought for them each contained ten notebooks, a dozen pencils, and three erasers. That many notebooks and writing implements would surely last them a fairly long while. I know I said I’d get everybody *one* thing they asked for, but even though there were a bunch of things in each set they still counted as *one* set for each of them. I mean, everything was packaged

together, so of course it counted as one! And if I say it counts as one, it counts as one, end of discussion.

"I'd, umm, like the same, thanks!" said Kosti, who'd been helping teach the others. I bought a set for him too. Guess teaching everyone had the side effect of encouraging him to further his own studies as well.

Man, what a good kid! I only ever studied the night before my tests when I was a student, if that. All these kids are really something compared to a slacker like me.

"Could I have one of those as well, please?"

"Huh? You too, Peter? You're sure that's all you want?"

Peter nodded. "I really like studying. Learning new things always feels really nice." Come to think of it, Barthel *had* mentioned that Peter'd been studying hard. I nodded happily—getting educated would be good for him, no doubt about it. I bought another set of writing implements for him.

"Next up is... How about Tony, Aija, Alban, and Theresa? What do you all want?" The four of them had been really hesitant to ask for anything at first, but I wasn't about to let them go unrewarded. I'd made a promise, after all, and it'd be really unfair if I bought stuff for some people but not others.

I kept emphasizing that they could ask for anything until they all finally came up with something. Tony wanted a sturdy hatchet that would let him cut through thicker vines and branches in the yard, Aija wanted a nice, big frying pan, Alban wanted a hoe to help him plow his field, and Theresa wanted a bigger pot.

I'd been under the impression that Alban already had a hoe, and it turned out he *did* at one point, but its handle had apparently snapped recently. He had other tools available that he could use, but when all was said and done none of them let him do as good and quick of a job as a decent hoe would, so he wanted a nice, sturdy one that would last. The first hoe breaking might've been my bad, I reflected. It was totally possible that it hadn't been a particularly good one to begin with.

The frying pan and pot were kitchen tools, so I knew for a fact I could get

them from my Online Supermarket, but I wasn't so sure about the hoe and the hatchet. It turned out I needn't have worried—the menu had a gardening tab which offered exactly what I needed. I was once again reminded that my Online Supermarket's selection of products was nothing to scoff at.

I bought Aija a big, deep frying pan that was advertised as nonstick, scorch-resistant, and easy to maintain, while I got Theresa a very large and sturdy-looking stockpot made of stainless steel. There was only one hoe and one hatchet available for Tony and Alban, but both of them looked like they were of decent enough quality. Everyone was really happy with their rewards.

That just left Tabatha, the twins, and Barthel. I could more or less guess what they'd want, but I decided to ask anyway, just for good measure.

"Booze, o'course!" cried Barthel, to nobody's surprise. "What else would I want? I'll take that strong stuff you gave us before!"

"Same over here! I'll have more of that 'beer,' myself!" added Luke.

Irvine quickly jumped in as well. "Beer for me too! Thought the stuff was bitter and kinda nasty at first, but it's the damnedest thing—the more I drink, the better it tastes."

"How about you, Tabatha?"

"I'll, umm, I'd like... I think I'd like some of the shampoo and hair treatment that you're selling at Lambert's place."

Wait, really? I was convinced she'd ask for alcohol too, but guess not. It did make a certain amount of sense—I'd provided everyone with a stock of shampoo, but it was that two-in-one combination shampoo and conditioner stuff, so if she wanted her hair to be really nice and silky, having separate shampoo and hair treatments would probably help.

"Okay, sure, can do. So that makes booze for Barthel, Irvine, and Luke, plus shampoo and hair treatment for Tabatha." I opened up my Online Supermarket once again and bought everything they wanted.

It felt like buying Tabatha exactly the same stuff that they sell in Lambert's store wouldn't really feel like a special, personal reward, so I decided to get something of roughly the same value from a different brand instead. It was an

old, well-established and respected brand, just like the stuff I sold wholesale to Lambert, but unlike that shampoo, this one was designed with a focus on bringing unruly hair under control. Considering how much hair Tabatha had to work with, I figured that'd probably be desirable. It also had a fruity scent with a subtle floral hint to it, which was nice.

"Pff, look at her, finally setting her sights on a guy! Figures it'd be Pe—"

"Shut up, dumbass!" Luke clamped a hand over Irvine's mouth, but it was too late. Tabatha was already smiling in that absolutely terrifying sort of way that tells you you're in big, big trouble. *Morons.*

"Irvine, Luke," she growled, "stick around after we're done here. We're gonna have a little *talk.*"

"Wha—hey! I didn't say anything, I'm innocent!" protested Luke.

"Shut it! You're guilty by association!"

"Oh, come on! Man, why'd you have to drag me into this?" Luke pouted, smacking Irvine upside the head.

"My bad, my bad," said Irvine. "Just slipped out, y'know? I mean, come on, when was the last time we got to see her act like this? Never, that's when! What is she, a maiden who's found her first love? Ha ha ha ha!"

"Hah! I mean, yeah, I get it, but you still can't *say* stuff like that! Times like these, it's a sibling's job to keep quiet no matter how funny it is."

"Irviiine? Luuuke? Shut. *Up.*"

"S-Stay calm, okay, Tabatha?" I said as carefully as possible.

It's not like I don't understand how you feel, but seriously, chill out. And wait—first love? Tabatha? She's in love? Since when? With whom? I looked over at Tabatha, who was blushing as she shot glances toward Peter.

Wait, him? *Seriously? I-I mean, not like I have a problem with my workers falling in love, and I'm definitely not the sort of jerk who'd try to meddle with their love lives. I think this budding romance is gonna be pretty rough on the both of them, though...*

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I delivered the goods to Lambert without issue. The final shipment came out to around a thousand bottles of Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power, which had Lambert absolutely over the moon. I was hopeful that having that big of a stock would help things calm down on his end, at least a little.

I ended up deciding to deliver the usual amount of shampoo and whatnot, but also let him know that we had more in stock if he ever needed to place another order. He paid me...a lot. Like, a *lot* of money for it. The sack he handed over to me was small, but it was absolutely stuffed full of shiny platinum coins.

Now fully stocked with hair tonic, shampoo, and all that stuff, Lambert informed me that he'd be heading back to the capital at some point within the next few days. He'd made the rather shrewd decision of accompanying the master of the Adventurer's guild.

With two former high-ranking adventurers serving as the guildmaster's guard, Lambert would be in good company. He'd also hired a party of adventurers he and I were well acquainted with—Phoenix—to come along, so the trip to the capital would be just about as safe as it could ever possibly be. I had to imagine that having a big shot like the guildmaster along would make for a pretty stressful journey on Phoenix's part, though.

My business with Lambert settled, I was on my way back home when Fel suddenly spoke to me telepathically.

《**Is it not time for us to go yet?**》

《Time for us to go where?》 I didn't want to attract suspicion from any passersby, so I responded telepathically as well.

《**To our next dungeon, of course!**》

《You mean the one in the next country over that's supposed to be super hard?》

《**Indeed. Though the last dungeon provided us with an ample supply of meat, it was also a joke. I want a challenge!**》

Ugh... I was hoping my familiars had forgotten about that place. No such luck, I guess.

《Dungeooon!》 The word must've caught Sui's attention. It started quivering with excitement in my bag.

《**With this delivery done, your business in this city is complete, is it not? Let us depart for the next dungeon at once. I look forward to seeing whether a 'super hard' challenge proves a true test of my mettle.**》

《Right?!》 shouted Dora-chan, who chose that moment to join the conversation. 《Let's hurry up and get moving!》

《Sui wants to go to the dungeon too!》

All three of them were chomping at the bit to rush off to the murder dungeon. I, in contrast, really wanted to take some more time to actually enjoy my new home. I'd *just* bought the thing, for crying out loud!

《W-Well, but, I mean, uhh... R-Right, that's it, I asked the Adventurer's guild to assess those magic items and see if they'd buy them, so we have to wait till they're done.》

《**Hmph! They said it would take five days, did they not? In other words...they will be finished three days from now.**》 *Dangit! Fel's memory is obnoxiously good when he wants it to be.*

《Okay, but, like, there's a whole bunch of other stuff I have to get done here too!》

《**Nothing you cannot finish in three days, surely? You will finish your business, and we will depart at once. Understood?**》

I hesitated, but there was no way out of it. Fel was clearly not open to compromise. 《Understood.》 *Ugh, this sucks!*

It was settled—we'd be leaving for the next dungeon in three days' time. Dora-chan and Sui were thrilled.

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With our dungeon plans set in stone, much to my chagrin, I had to prepare our mid-journey meals right away. It was a major time sink, but there was no telling how Fel and the others would react if I didn't put the effort in. We'd be traveling to another country this time around, so it'd likely be a long journey. I

had to be really thorough with my preparations.

Since I was stocking up anyway, I took the opportunity to buy all the daily necessities everyone back home would need while we were away. I was anticipating a roughly three-month trip, just like I'd budgeted for our journey to Rosendahl, so I bought more or less the same things as last time. Everyone told me that they still had plenty left over from what I bought them back then, so they'd be fine with less this time around, but I figured there was no harm in keeping them well-provisioned, and I got them the same amount anyway.

Aija and Theresa were in charge of making everyone's meals, so I left them with three months' worth of food (meat, seasonings, and the like) plus some money to buy flour and whatever vegetables they couldn't grow themselves in the field out back. They were both astonished and tried to convince me that they still had food and money left over from last time, but again, nothing wrong with giving them a little extra. I'd lent them a Magic Bag, so it wasn't like they had to worry about any of it spoiling.

Next up were Barthel and the twins. They'd asked—almost demanded, really—that I leave some booze with them, and they practically jumped for joy when I acquiesced. I cautioned them not to overdo it when I handed the bottles over, but there was no telling how that'd turn out. I wasn't too worried, though, seeing as Tabatha was around to make sure things didn't get too out of hand.

The regular study group, of course, would be carrying on as usual. The kids and Peter were already so gung ho about it, I didn't even need to encourage them. Tabatha had a natural talent for taking care of people, so she made for an excellent teacher. According to the kids, she was always incredibly kind and helpful whenever they asked about something they didn't understand—they made it very clear how much they loved their beloved Miss Tabatha. Tabatha, meanwhile, seemed a little embarrassed about getting called "Miss," but not totally displeased.

In the end, my preparations for the trip were complete and everything at home was so squared away that I figured I wouldn't have to worry about everyone while I was gone. Even if the absolute worst-case scenario came to pass, I'd made sure to pay them their wages well in advance. If something happened to me, they'd still be able to take care of themselves.

All that was left was that month's offering to the gods. I'd taken some time the night before to listen to their requests, so all I had to do was buy everything off my Online Supermarket—not that anyone had asked for anything different this time around.

Ninrir raised a fuss about wanting Fumiya's cakes, as usual. She took great care to remind me to get her all the seasonal cakes I could manage. That made things easy enough, so I opened my Online Supermarket and went straight to Fumiya's menu.

Oooh, they've got a Girls' Day promotion going on right now? I guess it must be early March back in Japan, then. Part of the Girls' Day tradition in Japan involves displaying a pair of ornamental dolls representing the Emperor and Empress, and the first cake to catch my eye was an incredibly elaborate shortcake with what looked like those little dolls made out of marzipan on top, along with a bunch of sliced peaches.

I also got her a chocolate cream shortcake with an image of the same traditional dolls drawn on a white chocolate plate on top, plus a strawberry compote tart for good measure. I got all of them as whole cakes, naturally, though I also threw in about ten assorted cake slices, plus a bunch of her favorite dorayaki and pound cake. I figured that would be enough for her.

I...*hoped* that would be enough for her.

In any case, whether or not it lasted her a month was all up to Ninrir's own sense of self-restraint. As a side note, it might not've been any of my business, but the other gods *had* all been harping on her weight an awful lot lately. I couldn't help but worry if she'd regret all that cake eventually, but, well, I'd just have to hope she'd be responsible about it. It wasn't *my* responsibility, that was for darn sure.

Next up was Kisharle. Needless to say, she asked for beauty products again. She happened to be just about exactly a month away from running out of her usual skincare products, so she asked for a set of facial foam, cream, lotion, and the like. She'd also taken a particular liking to a premium beauty lotion I'd bought her recently. It was supposedly packed full of all sorts of beautifying compounds, and she had me order her another package of it.

Finally, she told me she'd been worried her skin was losing its luster lately. I was vaguely aware that that sort of issue was caused by gunk building up in your pores, so I bought her a mud mask that was supposedly really effective at cleaning those out. It was pretty expensive, but it apparently had a reputation for being quite gentle on the skin in spite of the fact that it was made of mud, so I imagined it would satisfy her.

Then there was Agni, who asked for beer, just like she always did. I got her a pack of beers from various microbreweries, a pack of foreign beers from all across the world, the usual premium and black beers from S-company, and a case of Y-bisu beer. She'd also really liked the hot dogs I'd given her the previous month and asked for them again. I didn't have any on hand, so I ended up throwing a batch of them together in a rush.

For the rest of her offering, she told me to just give her "whatever you think would be good with beer." I'd made a bunch of beef, pork, and ground meat cutlets for the journey ahead, so I decided to give her some of those along with an assortment of other fried stuff I'd made.

Ruka, as usual, asked for cake and ice cream. She wanted slices of cake as opposed to whole cakes this time, so she could try as many varieties as possible. I ended up getting her a wide assortment of the cake slices Fumiya had to offer. I went in a similar direction with the ice cream, getting her as many flavors from as many brands as I could manage out of both Fumiya and my basic Online Supermarket's selection.

She also asked for the hot pots we'd eaten recently—apparently, she'd been watching us at the time and developed a craving for them. She wanted both the cockatrice and tomato hot pot we'd eaten on the road as well as the dungeon pork mille-feuille hot pot I'd made just the other day, so I made one of each for her. Fel, of course, showed up almost immediately and waited behind me in the hopes of a meal, drooling all the while. So that was awkward.

Last up were the two boozehounds, Hephaestos and Vahagn. They wanted, surprise surprise, whiskey. They kicked up a huge fuss about how they literally couldn't live without the stuff anymore, then asked for their usual one bottle each of the world's best whiskey and left the rest up to me. As always, I turned to Liquor Shop Tanaka for their portion.

I scanned through the shop's stock, and eventually discovered that you could actually narrow down the ranking lists, to an extent. For instance, I could go to the whiskey menu, search for Scotch whisky in particular, and it would bring up a specific ranking of only Scotch whiskies. I recognized a few of them as brands that I'd already bought for the two gods, but there were even more that I definitely hadn't sent them yet.

I decided to get the most popular items from that list for them that time around. The first one I picked was a whiskey that used a peat made primarily of seaweed and moss in its production. That peat smoke gave it a very distinctive odor that people compared to disinfectant or some of the more pungent stomach medicines available. It didn't sound appealing to me in the slightest, but apparently its fans swore by the stuff and it was actually really popular.

Next up was a Scotch so popular in America, it was apparently what people's minds would immediately jump to when they heard the term. It was the most popular whisky in the country, and was supposedly delicious when made into highballs. I threw in a whisky that was actually from Scotland as well—the brand with the highest sales in the country, in fact. It had won gold medals in all sorts of international competitions, and was best drunk either straight or on the rocks, according to its description.

The next whiskey on the list was one with an aftertaste reminiscent of chocolate and cookies. It was a little on the expensive side and came in a fancy box, which apparently made it a popular gift. Last up was a whiskey with a very distinctive bottle featuring a logo that depicted three monkeys in a row. It was a blend of three top-class single malt whiskeys, making it a triple malt whiskey, and apparently went down easily enough that even people who weren't usually whiskey fans could enjoy it.

I decided to buy a few other bottles while Liquor Shop Tanaka's menu was open as well. I'd be making my offering to Demiurge soon, so I figured I might as well pick out stuff for him too while I was at it. That, of course, meant that I'd be buying sake. I went for a set of three famous sakes from Kyushu this time. Thinking about Kyushu made my mind jump to sweet potato shochu, so I got a couple bottles of that to throw in with them.

One of the shochus was made with black rice malt and apparently had a really

strong umami quality to its flavor. Its aftertaste was refreshing and it was a very common brand, which had earned it quite a devoted following among sweet potato shochu lovers. The other one was a brand named after a horse that features in Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Its description claimed that it had a deep, complex, and full-bodied flavor.

Last up for Demiurge was the usual set of premium canned snack foods. I figured he could slowly sip at the shochu while he picked away at the canned snacks, which sounded...pretty darn nice, actually. This was no time to be tempting myself with luxuries, though—the cardboard box containing all the offerings had already arrived. All I had left to do was pass them off to the gods later that evening.

Tomorrow I'll stop by the Adventurer's guild to finalize the sale of those magic items, then set off for the dungeon in the next country over. Ugggh... Wish I could take it easy for at least a little while longer...

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Later that night, I got ready to send the offerings I'd purchased to the gods.

"All right, first up's Ninrir's batch," I muttered to myself. I brought her cardboard box out from my Item Box and placed it on a table. Barely an instant passed before it was engulfed in light and vanished. *I know you're excited, but come on, wasn't that a little* too *fast?*

＜*Caaaaaake! Finally!* Finally!＞ Her voice was accompanied by the unmistakable sound of a cardboard box being torn open. I heard one of the other goddesses sigh—Kisharle, most likely.

＜*Really, Ninrir? Didn't you learn anything from what happened last time?*＞

＜*'Course she didn't,*＞ chimed in Agni. ＜*She wouldn't be stuffing her face if she had. Maybe if she did, she'd manage to last a whole month without running out.*＞

＜*What a dummy,*＞ added Ruka.

＜*It's in one ear and out the other with that girl!*＞ shouted Hephaestos.

Even Vahagn jumped on the bandwagon, chiming in with a ＜*You said it!*＞

Ninrir...

＜Oh, in one ear and out the other, is it?＞ said Kisharle. *＜Don't you think the same could be said of you two?＞*

＜Yeah, she's got a point. You guys never shut up about being outta whiskey.＞

Ruka punctuated the goddesses' comeback with a sigh. They had the whiskey-lovers' number, and I heard the two of them gulp.

＜Y-Yeah, sure, we might run out of whiskey toward the end of the month every once in a while, but at least we're not as bad as her!＞ stammered Hephaestos.

＜R-Right? We're not even close to her level!＞ agreed Vahagn. They didn't do a very good job of denying the fact that they were cut from the same cloth as Ninrir on a basic level, though. *＜A-Anyway, we're wasting time! Hurry up with the next one, Mukohda!＞*

And, he changed the topic. Whatever, I guess—next offering, coming right up.

"I'll send Kisharle's over next." I set a box that was packed full of cosmetics onto the table.

＜Hee hee hee, I've waited so long for this! Thank you kindly!＞

"Oh, right—I remembered that you were talking about your skin looking a little dull lately, so I threw in a mud mask for you to try this time."

＜A 'mud mask'?＞

"Yeah. When your skin gets dull like that, it's because of gunk that builds up in your pores. Apparently this mask is made using a sort of mud that's really good at cleaning all that out. You just plaster it all over your face—except your eyes, I mean—then wash it off again after about fifteen minutes. Oh, right, almost forgot—I've heard that doing it in the bath's the most convenient way to make use of it."

＜Oh, is it now? I was just about to take a bath, conveniently enough. I'll try it out right away.＞ I heard her open up the box, presumably to check out its contents on the spot like Ninrir did. I'd never sent her a mud mask before, and

from the sound of things, she'd taken a real interest in it.

"Next up's Agni," I said as I put a box stuffed to the brim with beer on the table.

＜*Took you long enough! Woohoo, beer! Thanks again—I'm gonna head home and crack one open right away!*＞ I heard footsteps fade off into the distance. Agni must've also split the second she had her offering in hand. The gods were as exasperatingly free-spirited as ever.

＜*Me next.*＞

"Yup, here's yours, Ruka." She got a box full of cake and ice cream, with a couple hot pots in spare earthenware bowls I'd bought off my Online Supermarket stacked on top. They already had their lids on, so all she had to do was bring them to a boil and they'd be ready to eat.

＜*Ice cream, cake, and hot pots that I'll eat tomorrow. Thanks.*＞ The significantly quieter tapping of Ruka's footsteps let me know that she'd sped off on her way as well.

＜*We're next!*＞

＜*Whiskey, whiskey!*＞ The boozehounds were cheering boisterously. *Seriously, just how much do they like this stuff?*

"I decided to theme your offering around Scotch whisky, this time."

＜*Did you put the usual stuff in too?*＞

"Yup, there's a bottle of the world's best whisky in there for both of you."

＜*All right!*＞

＜*Knew I could count on you!*＞

"Okay, all yours."

＜*You have our gratitude, Mukohda!*＞

＜*Yeah, thanks!*＞

＜*It's time, War God! Tonight, we drink till dawn!*＞

＜*You know it, Blacksmithing God!*＞ They stomped off, their boisterous

laughter fading away into the distance. *Phew! Finally finished.*

＜Hey, I have one last quick question!＞ Huh? Kisharle? Guess she didn't leave after all. ＜Can you wait for just a moment? It'll be really quick, I promise!＞

"I guess. What d'you wanna ask?"

＜Oh, I was just a little curious about your level! Now, I'm not trying to rush you or anything of the sort, but I thought that you juuust might be getting close to your next Tenant! And you know, all the other gods have Tenants that were practically made for them, but here I am, left out of the picture...＞

Oh, right. I'd almost forgotten that I might get a new Tenant soon. For that matter, it'd been a pretty long time since I'd checked my status at all. Kisharle had a point too—none of the Tenants I'd chosen so far were the sort of stores she'd be interested in at all.

"I haven't checked my level in a while, but I also haven't really been fighting lately, so I doubt it's gone up much... Anyway, Status Open."

【Name】Mukohda (Tsuyoshi Mukouda)

【Age】27

【Race】Kind of Human

【Job】Victim from Another World, Adventurer, Cook

【Level】78

【HP】467

【MP】460

【Attack】449

【Defense】441

【Agility】365

【Skills】Appraisal, Item Box, Fire magic, Earth magic, Perfect Defense, Double Experience Gain, Familiars (Contracted Magic Beasts): Fenrir, Huge Slime, Pixie Dragon

【Unique Skill】Online Supermarket

《Tenants》Fumiya, Liquor Shop Tanaka

【Blessings】Blessing of the Goddess of Wind, Ninrir (small); Blessing of the Goddess of Fire, Agni (small); Blessing of the Goddess of Earth, Kisharle (small); Blessing of the God of All Creation, Demiurge (small)

I was pretty sure I'd been level 77 the last time I checked, which meant I'd gone up by one level. I relayed that fact to Kisharle.

＜*I see. I believe you were planning on going to a dungeon soon, correct?*＞

"It's not *my* plan, that's for sure, but yeah."

＜*Whoever's plan it may be, your next Tenant is due to unlock at level 80. I think it's quite likely you'll reach that point, don't you?*＞

"Yeah, dungeons are good for power leveling, no question. You're probably right, odds are good I'll get there."

＜*So if, just hypothetically, a drug store is available as one of the options, I'll be counting on you!*＞ *Makes sense that she'd be this persistent. Feels like she practically lives off beauty products, after all.*

I wasn't exactly opposed to the idea. Having a drug store available could be useful for all sorts of things, so if one did end up being available to me I wouldn't mind going with it at all. It'd probably have a lot more bath powders and stuff than my Online Supermarket, and I was very much a bathing aficionado. Dora-chan and Sui were too, so I figured they'd be just as happy about it as I would.

"I'll do what I can, but I can't promise it'll be an option."

＜*Oh, of course, I understand! We'll just have to pray that there's a drug store in your list this time around!*＞

Hah, even goddesses pray? That's a new one.

＜*Like I said, I'll be counting on you!*＞

"Got it." *My third tenant... Wonder what sort of options I'll get?*



“Everyone’s gone, right? That means it’s time for Demiurge’s portion...”

＜*Ho ho ho! You rang?*＞

“Whoa!” *Pretty fast on the draw today, huh, Demiurge?* “Umm, I’ve got the usual sake and snacks for you, if you’d like! I also got a sort of shochu that’s made out of sweet potatoes for you to try.”

＜*Oh, a potato liquor? That sounds quite intriguing! Thank you, as always, for both these gifts and those you gave to the others.*＞

“It’s fine, really! You’ve all given me your blessings, so this is the least I can do.”

＜*If you say so. I’ve heard you intend to visit a dungeon soon?*＞

“Yeah, that’s right.”

＜*Then I recommend you keep your eyes peeled around the twentieth floor! Who knows, you might just stumble across something interesting. Ho, ho, ho!*＞

The twentieth floor, huh? “Something interesting”? Demiurge hasn’t let me down yet, so I’ll keep it in mind, I guess.

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The next morning dawned, and the time finally came for us to set out for the dungeon in the neighboring country. We said our goodbyes and left my house behind, stopping by the Adventurer’s guild on our way out of town to pick up the payment for the magic items I sold off.

According to the appraiser, their designs were all really outdated, so it didn’t end up being an especially large payday. I couldn’t really say that was much of a surprise—the bandit king had hidden them all away in that cave a hundred years ago, so of course they’d be old. Not a big deal, in any case.

After hitting up the guild, we headed straight for the town’s main gate. Fel and the others wouldn’t have it any other way—they were just that excited about the dungeon, and they weren’t hesitant to let me know.

《**Finally, a dungeon that could pose a real challenge! I can hardly wait to**

begin!》

《Same! Who knows what sorta monsters we might find in there? This is gonna be great!》

《Sui's excited for the dungeon too!》

"C'mon, guys, you're getting way ahead of yourselves! I looked into the dungeon city we're heading for, and it's gonna be a really long trip. It's even farther from here than Rosendahl was—that's the place with the meat dungeon, if you forgot."

《**Hmph, distance means nothing to me! I shall bring us there in no time.**》

"Huh? You'll—nope, nope, hold your horses! You know you're carrying me on your back like usual, right?"

《**Hmm. I suppose I am. I shall take that into consideration.**》

"H-Hey, 'into consideration'? What's that supposed to—"

《**Sui, you are in your usual position, correct?**》

《Yeah, Sui is!》

《**And Dora will have little difficulty keeping up with my pace.**》

《Damn straight!》

《**Good. Then we shall set forth at once!**》 I clung to Fel's back as he shot forward, picking up speed at a terrifying pace.

"Wha?! Hey, Fel?! What happened to taking me into consideration?!"

《**I have taken you into consideration, and concluded that this pace will suffice.**》

"You're not considering me at all, dammit! *Aaaaaauuuggghhhhhh!*"

Gossip: A Glimpse at the Study Group

I got up in the morning and ate breakfast.

Mom and Aija made it for me.

I ate with mom, dad, Oliver, Erik, Tony, Aija, Kosti, Selja, Miss Tabatha, Mister Beard, and Mister Big.

We all ate together!

I didn’t eat much in the village, but I eat lots of good food here!

I can have seconds, which makes me happy!

After I eat breakfast, I do chores.

Today I helped dad in the field.

The tomatoes were really big!

Dad said it was thanks to big brother Mukohda.

I finished my chores, then ate lunch.

Mom and Aija made it, and we all ate together.

After lunch, I studied.

I don’t like studying, but mom and dad said I should study hard, so I study hard.

Mom and dad said that I only get to study because of big brother Mukohda.

Mom, dad, Tony, and Aija say thank you to big brother Mukohda every day.

Mom and dad say that I have to be thankful too.

I don’t understand, but big brother Mukohda feeds me lots of tasty food, so I love him!

When I grow up, I might want to marry big brother Mukohda.

When I told mom and dad, they looked happy.

I wonder why?

Every day here is fun. Today was fun too!

"Finished!"

"Oh, done writing already? Let's have a look."

"Okay, Miss Tabatha!" Lotte passed her notebook over to Tabatha, who quickly read through her work. Her handwriting still left a lot to be desired, but all things considered, her essay was quite well written.

"Nice writing, Lotte! You did good." Lotte's assignment had been to write about what she did today, and she'd certainly done just that. "Time to present your work! Can you stand up and read your essay to everyone?"

"Okaaay!"

The study group that Mukohda had recommended was well under way. Lotte stood up in front of her fellow pupils and read her essay out loud. Her parents, Alban and Theresa, looked a little uncomfortable about it, especially toward the end. Kids are really good at observing adults, especially when the adults in question think they aren't watching.

"Aha ha ha ha ha! You're gonna be Mukohda's bride, eh, Lotte?"

"Looks like we've got a li'l gold digger on our hands!"

The beastfolk twins, being the insufferable jokesters they were, got a huge kick out of her essay.

"Hmm, I dunno yet. Big brother Mukohda feeds me lots and lots of tasty food, so I think marrying him might be okay!" Lotte replied thoughtfully, and the twins exploded with laughter. "Hey, hey, dad? What's a gold digger?"

Lotte's question came from a place of pure, innocent curiosity, and Alban's pained silence came from a place of intense, awkward discomfort.

"Do you know, mom?" she asked, turning to Theresa, who unfortunately fared just as poorly as her husband.

Thankfully, Barthel the dwarf was there to lend a helping hand by way of brutal honesty. “Bein’ a gold digger means marryin’ a rich man fer his money, Lotte,” he explained bluntly.

“And if you marry a rich dude, that means you can buy anything you want and eat all the tasty food you want!” said Luke, stoking the flames.

“Yeah! It means never having to worry ’bout money, and living a life of luxury!” added Irvine, who also seemed dedicated to exacerbating the situation. Thankfully, their sister was there to settle the matter with a few swift blows to the head.

“Shut it, you two! You’re not helping!” she shouted, but it was too late.

“Oooh, wow! Then I really do wanna marry big brother Mukohda!” Just the promise of all the delicious food she could eat was enough to settle the matter for Lotte. Meanwhile, Tony and Aija were whispering with their daughter Selja, who was blushing furiously. The natural parental desire for their children to live a life free of toil was apparently manifesting itself in the most awkward way possible.

“Anyway, what about you, sis?” asked Luke. “You’re not gonna try and romance your way into a piece of Mukohda’s fortune?”

“Hmm,” Tabatha replied, “I’m grateful for everything he’s done for us, of course, but I can’t say I’m interested in marrying the guy. He’s not exactly my type, if you know what I mean.”

“Ouch, getting the not-my-type treatment from *you?* Now I just feel sorry for him!”

“Where do you get off being all choosy, anyway? How old’re you, again?”

“Oh, that’s *it,* you little jerks!” The twins took their teasing a step too far yet again and got a fist to the skull for their trouble. Everyone else chuckled at their improvised slapstick act.

“I’m right there with ya when it comes to bein’ grateful to Mukohda, anyway,” said Barthel in an unusually earnest tone. The others nodded in agreement.

“This country guarantees slaves like us the bare minimum to stay alive, at least,” said Peter, breaking his usual silence, “but I still thought that becoming a slave would mean losing my freedom and working myself to the bone...”

That assumption was not mistaken, by all reasonable standards. Even if they were guaranteed what they needed to live a stable life, a slave was still a slave. It was far from unusual for slaves in Leonhardt to be tasked with the sort of work that no one would ever agree to do unless coerced, and long, backbreaking hours were considered the norm.

“Gotta say, compared to the way we lived when we were adventurers, this place might as well be heaven.” Once again, everyone nodded in agreement with Tabatha’s words.

“Yeah,” said Luke, “I’m with you there. We never knew when our next payday was coming in the adventuring business, if it ever came at all... Not having to worry ’bout finding a bed to sleep in and a meal to eat every night’s the best!”

Irvine nodded. “’Sides, Mukohda keeps feeding us top-grade meat and stuff like that! Dunno if the guy even knows we’re slaves at all. I’m more worried ’bout him than I am ’bout myself, these days.”

“And that’s not to mention how he’s given people of our standing the opportunity to learn to read and write,” added Tony, who was illiterate in spite of his age. “I’ve never met a man of his like. He’s almost a god.”

“You said it!” agreed Alban. “We grew up without ever getting the chance to learn all those things. I always assumed that’s just how it had to be, but now that I’m finally learning to read and write, at least a little... I really can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.” Having been born into a family of destitute farmers, Alban was genuinely moved to have the opportunity to study after spending all his life uneducated. Aija and Theresa nodded in agreement with their husbands.

“Way I see it, we’ve gotta pay the man back,” continued Barthel. “Mukohda asked us to watch over this house for him, so we’ve gotta make sure nobody who’s not supposed to be here so much as sets foot in the place!”

“You’re not wrong about that, but let’s get back on track for now. C’mon, people, back to your books!” The twins groaned with annoyance, but Tabatha wasn’t about to stand for their whining. “You’re not getting out of this that

easily. Mukohda told us to hold this study group, remember? Knock it off and get to work, already."

"Peh! Thought we'd finally made her forget all about it. Sure, we owe Mukohda a lot, but studying? At our age? Screw that!"

"Right?!"

A vein started visibly pulsing in Tabatha's forehead as she listened to her brothers' whining. "Look at Tony! Look at Alban, and the rest of 'em! They're working their hardest to learn how to read, and there you two are, not giving a damn! I'm ashamed to call myself your sister!"

"But, I mean, c'mon!"

"We already know how to read and write just fine!"

"You wouldn't *be* here if you were 'just fine' at it! That does it, you two're getting extra work on top of the usual assignment! If you don't finish it before the session's over, you're skipping breakfast tomorrow!"

"What the hell, sis?!"

"This is tyranny!"

"Shut up and work!"

Barthel and Peter sighed as they watched the beastfolk family's back and forth.

"Those two never make it easy, eh...?"

"Luke and Irvine are nice enough when they're not running their mouths, but, well..."

They gave up on the siblings and their spat, Peter quickly falling back into his role as a student and Barthel stepping in to act as his teacher. When all was said and done, Oliver, Erik, and Kosti—none of whom had stopped studying to join the discussion in the first place—probably had the right idea. Tony, Aija, Alban, and Theresa, meanwhile, quietly cautioned their children to not let themselves grow up to be like a certain pair of twins.

Chapter 5: Welcome to the Kingdom of Erman

“Is that the border crossing? Sure is crowded, huh?”

I’d heard that trade was flourishing between the Kingdoms of Leonhardt and Erman, and the sheer number of people crossing over the border would seem to back that up. We got in line right away and waited for our turn. Plenty of people were shocked to see my familiars (well, to see Fel, really), but as soon as they noticed me riding on his back, they realized that they were with a tamer and quickly calmed down.

As I continued to observe the flow of traffic, I noticed that in spite of the massive crowd of travelers slowing the process down, those with guild cards were being waved through without much hassle at all. I took that as a sign that this would be pretty easy for me as well, and confidently flashed my own card at the guard when it was finally my turn. Well, mostly confidently—it was a little worrying that the instant I stepped up to the border, the guard who’d been checking everyone up to that point was swapped out in favor of a man who was clearly his superior. *What’s going on here?*

“S-Sir Mukohda, is it? Welcome to the Kingdom of Erman! W-We sincerely hope that you enjoy your stay!”

“Okaaay?” Everyone else had been waved through without a word the moment they showed their cards, so *that* was weird. He handed my card back to me, and as I passed through the gate I overheard some of the other guards whispering to each other off to the side.

“Is that the adventurer who has a Fenrir in his party?”

“He’s got a tiny dragon and a slime too, from what I hear!”

“Were you watching the captain? He was shaking in his boots!”

“’Course he was, our orders about that guy came straight from the royal

palace! ‘If an adventurer named Mukohda shows up with a Fenrir in tow, take every precaution and employ *great* care not to offend him,’ they said!”

“Didn’t they also say something about making sure not to treat him like a noble, though?”

“Yeah, that’s right! They said to ‘act natural, no matter what.’”

“And to ‘try to casually talk up our country,’ on top of it. Talk about asking for everything at once, right?”

“Bet the captain’s relieved he made it through.”

“I mean, wouldn’t you be? Gotta give him credit—pulling off orders like *that* without a hitch when a monster straight outta the legends is staring you down takes some real guts.”

“True enough.”

My level-enhanced ears picked up the whole exchange, clear as day. *If they got orders from the royal palace for how we should be treated, does that mean that the Kingdom of Leonhardt told them something about us in advance? I don’t really get what’s going on here, but, I mean, we got into the Kingdom of Erman easily enough. Whatever that was all about, I’m just gonna assume it’s fine.*

《**The dungeon is in this country, yes? Let us make haste!**》

《Yeah! I wanna dive in as soon as possible!》

《Dungeon, dungeon!》

“Okay, settle down, everyone. We’ve still got a long ways to go before we get to Brixt and its dungeon.”

《**Hmm? Is that so?**》

“Yeah, I’d say we’re just about halfway there now. We’ve been making crazy progress, though—I heard it’d take about two months to make the trip by cart!”

《What, so the dungeon’s not near here after all? Lame.》

《Sui hopes we get there soon! Dungeooon!》 The three of them seemed genuinely let down to learn that we were still a ways off from our destination.

“C’mon, the dungeon’s not going anywhere. Let’s at least *try* to enjoy the trip, okay?”

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We carried on down the road, heading straight toward Brixt, until Fel sent me a telepathic message completely out of the blue.

《**There is a group of humans ahead of us, under attack by a monster.**》

《Huh?》

《**The monster attacking them is a forest scorpion.**》

《A forest scorpion? I’m guessing those are probably venomous, right?》

《**Quite. Somewhat clever, as well—they employ two forms of toxin. One, used upon those they do not intend to eat, is instantly fatal. The other, for those they plan to devour, is made to induce paralysis.**》

《*Gaaaaaah!* Holy *crap,* you could’ve opened with that! Dora-chan, fly ahead and save them!》

《On it!》 transmitted Dora-chan before shooting off like a speeding bullet.

《We should hurry too!》 I sent to Fel.

《**Indeed, though with Dora on the way, I doubt there is any cause for concern.**》

We chased after him as quickly as we could.

“Heeey! You guys all right?” I called out as we came across a fairly modest carriage with a group of people around it, all collapsed or stunned by sheer terror. 《What happened to the forest scorpion, Dora-chan?》

《Killed it dead, of course! See? It’s right over there.》

“Oh, jeez, that thing’s huge...” Dora-chan had pointed a short ways ahead of the carriage where an enormous scorpion lay dead in the road. Measuring from its head to the tip of its tail, it was easily over three meters long. Just looking at the horrible thing made me involuntarily grimace.

《Heh heh! Skewered the sucker clean through with water magic!》 bragged

Dora-chan.

"Yeah, I can see that. Nice work."

《Nice enough to earn me an extra helping of pudding tonight, right?》

"Sure, sure. I can make that happen."

《**Then perhaps I should remind you who it was that warned you of the forest scorpion's attack in the first place? I believe I have done exemplary work as well.**》

"I know, I know!"

《Pudding? Are we eating sweets?》 The word 'pudding' caught Sui's attention, and it poked its head out of my bag.

"Yeah, but not until after dinner, okay?"

《Aww, not now...? Ah, Sui's never seen one of *those* before!》 Sui finally noticed the scorpion corpse, which grabbed its attention even more than talk of pudding had. It bounced up and down with excitement.

《Heh heh, that one was my kill!》

《You beat it up, Dora-chan? Aww, lucky! Sui wants to beat one too!》

That's the first thing you think after seeing a big-ass, horrifying scorpion corpse? My familiars really are fearless, huh? Ha ha ha... I, in contrast, didn't even want to get near the thing even though I knew it was already dead.

"Hey," said a man clad in leather armor. He looked like he was probably in his mid-twenties, and I assumed he was an adventurer. "Is the tiny dragon that did in the giant woodland scorpion your familiar?"

"Yeah, he is."

"Then you saved our lives. We owe you big time."

"Umm, wait—what'd you just call that thing? It's not a forest scorpion?"

"Think I've heard people call 'em that before? Probably a regional thing." Given the sheer size of the abomination, I assumed that "*giant* woodland scorpion" was its more technical name.

“Looks like everyone around your cart’s alive, huh? Anyone wounded?”

“Just one. One of my party members got a full dose of paralysis poison... Look, I know you just saved us and I know that asking this is gonna make me look like an ass, but do you have any antidotes on hand? I’ll pay good money for ’em if you do.”

Hmm—hate to say it, but I sure don’t.

I gave the honest answer, and the man sighed heavily and mumbled “Yeah, figures...” He hadn’t had his hopes set particularly high in the first place, from the sound of it, but he was still crestfallen.

But, I mean, it’s not like paralysis poison’s life-threatening, is it? Just as the thought crossed my mind, a slender man in a robe ran up to us. He was around the same age as the man in the leather armor, and I assumed they were part of the same party.

“What’d they say? No antidotes?”

“Not a one.”

“Yeah, of course they don’t. Guess we should just be glad he made it through alive and give up on curing him.”

“Not like we have any other options.” Both of them looked really grim, and I was starting to wonder if there might be a big problem after all.

“Umm,” I spoke up, “is something wrong?”

“Right, sorry. Not like filling you in’s gonna change anything, but I guess you’d be curious...”

The men explained that they’d been hired to guard the cart and its owner on their journey. They weren’t on track to fail that quest, but if things kept going the way they had so far it would end up being a really bad look for their party and would probably erode a lot of the trust they’d managed to build up so far. The forest/giant woodland scorpion hadn’t used its instant death poison, thankfully, but their paralysis poison was apparently just as potent in a different sort of way. It tended to put its victims down for the count for at least a full day.

“We’re a three-man party, counting the guy who got poisoned. Having him

out of commission for a whole day's bad enough, but even worse, we'll have to load him up onto the cart until he can move again, and that thing's not exactly spacious to begin with...” The entire point of the quest was to protect the cart, so having a full third of their fighting force unable to work did sound like it'd be a big issue. “If we just had a single antidote on hand we might still be able to turn this around, but you can't exactly conjure the damn things outta thin air.”

The one upside was that the cart itself was undamaged, and its driver—that is, their employer—was unharmed. If they could only cure their third member of his paralysis, then the quest could still be salvaged as long as they managed to avoid any further major issues. That one condition was a major obstacle, though.

I had Fel with me, thankfully, so I'd never had to worry about any of that sort of stuff, but I imagined that for a normal adventurer, keeping up your reputation was pretty darn important. Your ability to keep a consistent workflow might very well hinge upon it. Not that there were any jobs I could think of where keeping your clients' trust *wasn't* important, to be fair.

In any case, I didn't have any antidotes on hand and there wasn't anything I could do to change that fact. I only had normal potions—if you could call Sui's Special High-Grade Potion “normal,” anyway.

Wait a second...antidotes? Ah, right! I might just be able to work something out after all!

I'd just remembered the time I gave an adventurer who'd been attacked by a wyvern one of Sui's potions. It'd cleared away the monster's poison, no problem. In retrospect, Sui's Special High-Grade Potion might have had the effects of an antidote bundled into it.

《Hey, Fel, is wyvern poison lethal?》 I asked telepathically.

Fel replied with a simple 《**Yes.**》

《How bad is it compared to the forest scorpion's poison?》

《**Though both are lethal, I would imagine a wyvern's poison would be slightly stronger.**》

Okay, that clears that up. Since the high-grade version had cured a wyvern's

poison, I figured it would probably be overkill for a weaker monster's weakest toxin. I decided to give Sui's Special Mid-Grade Potion a try, to start, and upgrade to the high-grade one if it didn't work out.

"Umm, so, I really *don't* have any antidotes, but I think this potion might help with the poison too. That's what they told me when I bought it, anyway," I said, keeping things vague and covering for myself in advance.

"Really?! I've never heard of a potion like that! Hey..." he said, glancing at his party member.

"Yeah, I know. Our party's rep's riding on this. We finally managed to rank up and find some regular clients, and we can't afford to lose their trust. If you can spare the potion, please, we need it!"

They reached a consensus in no time flat, and I handed over one of Sui's Special Mid-Grade Potions. The man in the robe went right over to their paralyzed comrade and poured some of the potion into his wound. The reddish discoloration on his arm quickly faded as the wound closed up, and moments later it looked like he'd never been stung at all. The man groaned, and his eyes flickered open.

"Hey, can you hear me?! You awake?!" The man in the leather armor leaned over him, clearly worried.

"Here, drink this," said the man in the robe, helping his wounded friend sit up and offering him the rest of the potion. He drank it down, and the effects kicked in immediately. He was fully conscious in moments, and able to stay upright on his own not long after.

"That stuff clears poison away fast!"

"Closed the wound perfectly too."

The adventurers were both astonished by the potion's effects. I was just a little proud of my talented familiar, myself. Not that I was planning on telling them who'd made the potion.

"I think we'll be able to salvage this situation after all. You really did save us, and I can't thank you enough," said the man in the armor before giving a slight grimace. "First things first, though—what do we owe you?"

The potion was more effective than the stuff people usually sold as “high-grade,” and the men clearly knew it. They didn’t look convinced they had enough money on hand to pay for it. I wasn’t looking to bankrupt them, though, and I remembered that the standard market rate for a mid-potion was one gold, so that’s what I charged them, much to their surprise.

They asked me if I was really all right with selling a potion like that so cheaply, but even if it did have Sui’s magic touch, it *was* still just a mid-grade potion. Not to mention the fact that Sui had made it on its own with ingredients I didn’t pay for, so my total investment in its production was a flat zero gold. I tried my best to convince them that one gold was more than enough, but they were so convinced that would be ripping me off that they finally convinced me to double the price. I gave in and accepted the two gold.

In return for my generosity—not that I saw it that way in the first place—they offered to buy up any mid-potions that I had lying around in stock, and I was more than happy to take them up on that. I had an awful lot of Sui’s Special Mid-Grade Potions taking up space in my item box, after all.

“This is a huge help, seriously! Considering we still have the rest of this quest to get through, having potions that work against poison could make all the difference. Thank you, uhh...” he paused. “Guess we were so panicked we never actually introduced ourselves, come to think of it.”

They rectified that mistake at once, explaining that they were a newly-promoted C-rank adventuring party called Trickster. Their leader was the man in the robe, a mage named Geremia. The one with the armor was a swordsman named Lumir, and the one who’d been poisoned was a scout named Luc. They were on a quest to escort the cart and its owner to the capital of Erman.

I introduced myself as well, and surprised the hell out of them when I admitted that I was technically an S-rank adventurer. *Not that anyone would ever guess it just by looking at me. Ha, ha, ha.*

“An S-rank, huh? That explains everything—no wonder you’re carrying so many good potions,” said Lumir. “We’d have been up a creek if we hadn’t met you, so I guess that makes us pretty damn lucky.” Geremia and Luc both agreed, and a moment later Luc thanked me repeatedly after it finally hit him that I was

the source of the potion that had saved him.

“That thing caught me way off-guard. I never thought I’d run into a giant woodland scorpion in these parts...” The other two nodded in mystified agreement.

According to them, forest scorpions showing up in this area was more or less unheard of. There weren’t any venomous monsters native to the local region at all, for that matter, which certainly explained their lack of antidotes. Now that one giant woodland scorpion had shown up, though, they couldn’t rule out the possibility of running into more. They were especially grateful to get their hands on all the mid-potions I’d sold them, considering that.

We chatted for some time, but it wasn’t long before I had to excuse myself. “I think your client’s calmed down and Luc’s up and about again, so we’d better get a move on.” Fel and the others had been mentally spamming me with “Let’s go, let’s go!” since pretty early on in the conversation, and they were really starting to get on my nerves, so I didn’t have much of a choice. They were way too excited about reaching the dungeon to put up with standing around in the wilderness for long.

“Seriously, we owe you one! Thanks again!”

“The capital’s our home turf, so if you ever wander over that way, hit us up! We’ll give you the grand tour!”

“Thank you so, so much!”

“No problem—see you around!” I waved goodbye to the Trickster trio as we hit the road once again.

The forest/giant woodland scorpion’s corpse was apparently prized for its use in crafting some sort of poison or another, and would sell for a good price, so in the end I snapped it up before I left. It really was weird that a monster like this one would turn up around these parts, though, especially at exactly the same time we did...

Was something chasing it? Nah, no way, right? It’s gotta be a coincidence, that’s all... Right?

《**Hey, stop letting your mind wander! Hold on tightly if you do not wish to**

fall off!》Fel's telepathic reprimand crashed right into my train of thought.

"Agh, whoa!" I managed to grab onto his neck barely a second before I would have toppled off his back. "I-I know, okay?!"

《Ha ha ha, careful up there! Unless you wanna eat dirt, I mean!》It was Dora-chan's turn to send me a message next. He was flying along beside us and laughing his head off, the little jerk.

《Masteeer, Sui's huuungry!》Sui complained from inside my bag.

《We'll have dinner soon—let's get just a little farther today first, okay?》

《**Indeed. Though I am also famished, we must forge ahead! The farther we run, the closer the dungeon will be!**》

《That's the spirit! I wanna get there as quickly as possible!》

《Okaaay. Sui wants to reach the dungeon soon too, so Sui can be patient.》

The call of the dungeon must've been mighty indeed to win out against my familiars' appetites.

We spotted a town ahead of us right around dusk. I'd done my homework before we set out, and was relatively confident I knew where we were.

"Pretty sure that town's called Hirschfeld. This is perfect timing—let's spend the night there."

《**Hmm? You mean, within the town?**》

"Yeah, I figure it'd be nicer than camping out. I'd really like to get a good night's sleep in a nice soft bed."

《Doesn't stopping in town mean it'll take even longer to get to the dungeon, though?》interjected Dora-chan.

《**Quite. We should ignore the town and press on.**》

Both of them were against the plan, much to my dismay. "Wait, what? Come on, why not stop in? We haven't spent a single night in town since we started this trip! And besides, the Adventurer's guild asked us to take on as many quests as we could from the towns we passed through on the way, right?"

《**Perhaps, but regardless—**》

“Oh, and stopping in town means I’ll be able to cook a real, proper meal! Don’t you wanna eat something tasty? If we rent a house like we usually do, we’ll be able to soak in a nice big bathtub too,” I said, deliberately targeting Fel and Dora-chan’s interests to sell them on my idea.

《**A proper meal, you say?**》

《And a big tub...》

“Sounds nice, right? The dungeon’s not going anywhere, so let’s take it easy in town for just a little!”

《**Hmph, very well. But not long!**》

《And you’d better rent a house with a big bath!》

I managed to secure Fel and Dora-chan’s approval, and we made our way into Hirschfeld. Incidentally, Sui spent the entire conversation fast asleep in my bag.

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I plopped down into a big luxurious chair in the living room of the house I’d rented and took a moment to stretch.

“Finally, a real house with a decent bed!” I said to myself. “I’m gonna sleep well tonight, that’s for sure.”

The moment we got into town, we went straight over to the Merchant’s guild to rent the house I was now lounging in. It had twelve bedrooms in total, which made it larger than the sort of place I’d usually go for, but its massive bathtub had caught my and Dora-chan’s attention. It was nice and close to the Adventurer’s guild too, where we’d have to go the day after.

Unsurprisingly, a house of that size in that convenient of a location came with quite the price tag attached to it. I had no shortage of funds thanks to my familiars, though, so I rented it on the spot without even bothering to tour the other houses that were available to me.

《Hey, Master, Master! Is it dinner time?》

“I, too, grow hungry.”

《Yeah, same here!》

C'mon, guys, seriously? I literally just *sat down.* "I know, I know! Gimme just a minute, okay?" I grumbled. I wanted to relax at least a little before jumping into cooking.

"Did you not claim that a stay in town would allow you to cook a proper meal? I shall count on you to make good on your word."

Ugh... The pressure's on, I guess. Wish you wouldn't do that, Fel.

I certainly had used good food to lure Fel into town, but I wasn't in any mood to cook something elaborate. My familiars would definitely give me hell if I pulled something premade out of my Item Box and gave it to them as-is, though. That left me with just one good option: use some of the premade food, but get creative with my presentation and combine a few dishes into something worth more than the sum of its parts.

Let's see, what do I have to work with...? All right, I know exactly what I can do with this! I decided to use some of the karaage I'd fried up in advance to make a not-particularly-authentic approximation of a yurinchi: a Chinese-style fried chicken dish that's topped with a special sauce. All my familiars loved karaage, so I'd made more than enough to use some for this dish and still have a ton left over. Faux-yurinchi used to be my go-to meal when I had frozen or leftover karaage in my fridge and felt like spicing things up a little.

My dish picked out, I moved over to the kitchen, and was unsurprised to find that it was just as extravagant as the rest of the house. It almost felt like a waste to use that nice of a kitchen if all I planned to do was whip up a pan of sauce, but the feeling wasn't quite strong enough to convince me to make anything more effort-intensive. I bought some green onions, garlic, and ginger off my Online Supermarket to use in the sauce, plus some lettuce to serve the chicken on top of. That was all I needed to jump right into preparing the dish.

First up was the sauce. I finely chopped the green onion, then minced the garlic and ginger. All I had to do next was throw them into a bowl and mix them together with soy sauce, vinegar, water, some sesame oil, and a touch of honey. That's all it takes to make sauce for yurinchi—it's the easiest thing in the world. You can even use those little tubes of garlic and ginger paste if you can't be bothered to mince the fresh stuff yourself; it'll still turn out just fine. Same goes

for the honey. I happened to have some on hand, but if you don't, sugar works perfectly well too.

I gave my sauce a taste test, and decided that it needed just a little more bite. A splash of vinegar later, and it was good to go! All I had left to do was prep the lettuce and get ready to plate everything. I shredded the lettuce into roughly centimeter-wide strips and gave it a quick soak in cold water to crisp it up. Then I dried it off, laid down a bed of lettuce onto the plate, and put the karaage—still fresh and piping hot, thanks to my Item Box—on top. Finally, I poured a generous helping of the sauce over it all, and my faux-yurinchi was complete!

I tried a piece of chicken, and it was out of this world. The sauce was refreshingly tart in a way that really elevated the karaage. I'd made plenty of it too, so I was fully prepared for my familiars to demand seconds. It was time to serve dinner.

"Okay, it's done!" I called as I walked back into the living room.

"What is this—karaage? Did we not have the same thing merely a day or two ago...? It *is* delicious, though, so I do not especially mind."

"Karaage's *part* of it, yeah, but the sauce on top makes it a different dish. It's still really good, though! Give it a try!"

Fel gave the yurinchi a skeptical sniff before taking a bite. He spent a moment chewing thoughtfully, then dug in, scarfing his chicken down at an astonishing pace. The dish definitely passed the Fel test.

《Karaage's tasty enough on its own, but this sauce makes it even better!》 exclaimed Dora-chan before going back to stuffing his face.

《Sui loves how the sorta sour sauce tastes with the karaage! They're so good together!》 Sui's portion vanished in the blink of an eye.

"More!"

《More for me too!》

《And for Sui!》

I served up plate after plate of the faux-yurinchi until they were all finally satisfied, and I somehow managed to secure a moment to have a serving for

myself as well. Maybe a little more than just one serving, actually—it paired so well with a bowl of rice, I couldn't help myself.

After dinner, of course, came dessert time. Fel had his usual strawberry shortcake, which ended up plastered all over his face, while Dora-chan slowly and deliberately savored his pudding. Sui, of course, engulfed its usual slice of chocolate cake whole with a happy wobble. I'd eaten a bit too much and decided to skip dessert, opting instead for a cup of black tea, which I'd recently started to acquire a taste for.

"We'll head for the Adventurer's guild right after breakfast tomorrow, okay?" I said to my familiars.

"For a quest, correct? Hmph—I would sooner skip such tedium and make for the dungeon once more."

"Oh, c'mon, don't be like that. For all we know, they might have a quest that'll be fun for you guys."

《Hah, I wish!》

"Come on, Dora-chan! We won't know unless we go and check, right?"

《It'll be okay, Master! If they say we should fight monsters, Sui'll beat them all up!》

"I bet you will! Counting on you, Sui. Anyway, looks like we're all done eating, so how 'bout we take a bath?" I drained the last of my tea and stood up.

《Oooh, bath time? All right!》 shouted Dora-chan.

《Yaaay, bathtime!》 Sui, who was just as much of a bath-lover, chimed in with its agreement. It'd been a long time since we'd had the chance to use a nice big bath, and we were all looking forward to it.

"How 'bout you, Fel?"

"Do you truly believe there is any chance I would join you? I shall sleep. Prepare my futon."

"Okay, okay, coming right up." I spread out Fel's personal futon in the master bedroom, and he immediately plopped down onto it.

“Okay, we’ll be in the bathroom!”

“Do as you will.”

As I made for the bathroom I realized that I’d reflexively set him up in the master bedroom with me, in spite of the fact that the house had twelve rooms and we could’ve easily all had our own private quarters. We’d been in the habit of sharing a room for so long it would’ve been pretty awkward to suggest we break it, so I decided to just let it go. Dora-chan and Sui were already having a soak when I arrived at the bathroom, and I was happy to join them and enjoy my first real bath in what felt like ages.

Chapter 6: Middle Management Blues

The next morning, we paid a visit to Hirschfeld's Adventurer's guild. It was located in a much smaller building than Karelina's guild occupied, and in spite of the early time of day, the place seemed to be in an uproar. I struck up a conversation with a nearby adventurer.

"Hey, what's going on? Did something happen?" I asked.

"Hmm? You must be new in town, huh?" He glanced over at me, then recoiled. "*Whoa* there, that's a biggun you've got with you! And is that little thing a *dragon?*"

"It's fine, they're both my familiars."

"Oh, a tamer, eh? Don't see many of you folks around. Anyway, what was I saying... Oh, right! Everyone's freaking out 'cause the forest to the south's been declared off-limits."

He explained that a number of adventuring parties had traveled into the southern woods recently, never to return to town. A B-rank party that had happened to be in the area was dispatched to figure out what was going on in there, but they had returned to town at a sprint the moment the gates opened earlier that morning. According to them, the woods had become the residence of a snake monster known as a woodland tyrant python.

In spite of woodland tyrant pythons' serpentine nature, they didn't actually make use of any venom at all. They were just really, really big and really, really hungry. Whenever one turned up in an area, all the other wildlife—monstrous or not—tended to make itself scarce. Considering the beast's presence, it seemed more likely than not that the missing parties had all been devoured.

"I'm impressed the scouts made it back, considering," I commented. From the sound of things, witnessing a woodland tyrant python and making it out alive was quite the feat.

“Yeah, they got real lucky. They spotted the very tip of the thing’s tail, and had the sense to make tracks without trying to take a closer look.” *Oh. That’d do it.*

Another huge snake monster, though? It was starting to feel like they were drawn to me, or something—Fel had dealt with them in dungeons, and I’d seen my fair share of them in the wild as well. Just how big would a woodland tyrant python be compared to all those other ones? Fel had the highest chance of knowing, being the oldest in our group, so I sent him a telepathic message.

《Hey, Fel, do you know about these woodland tyrant python things?》

《**But of course. Put plainly, their brains are as small as their bodies are large.**》 *Well, somebody’s not mincing words.* 《**I once encountered such a python that attempted to have me for a meal the moment it laid eyes on me. It had no conception of my power. It died as it lived: stupidly.**》

《I’ve run into one of those things too,》 added Dora-chan. 《Same deal—tried to eat me. That pissed me off, so I used my lightning magic and rammed a hole straight through the thing’s stomach, but it still didn’t die! Spilled most of its guts out as it ran away, though, so I didn’t bother chasing it.》

Woodland tyrant pythons must have been pretty memorable for both Fel and Dora-chan to have stories about them. The fact that one of them took Dora-chan’s magically-charged tackle and managed to survive was really impressive. They’d have to have crazy high levels of vitality to slither away from a hit like that.

《**You know them as well, Dora? They *are* tenacious, I will give them that.**》 Fel explained that while he instantly slew the one that had tried to eat him, it had kept moving around for quite a long time even after he had relieved it of its head. 《**There is no point in hunting them. Their meat is tough, and so gamey it hardly counts as edible,**》 he added with a scowl.

《Oh, you ate yours? I sorta wondered if I’d wasted some good meat after mine got away, but sounds like not going for it was the right call after all.》

《**Indeed. There are few creatures that taste worse, and you are better off for having not tried it.**》 The fact that Fel knew they were gross, of course, implied that he *had* taken a bite or two himself. Between that and all the

poisonous stuff he'd tried, he was a surprisingly adventurous eater.

In any case, considering the state of things in the guild I decided that it would probably be best to come back another time. Just as I was getting ready to leave, though, I heard a shout of surprise from across the room. I turned to look, only to find a man I could only describe as resembling an office worker on his last legs. His back was hunched, his hair was combed over in an ineffectual attempt to hide his sizable bald spot, and he was pointing directly at me.

"You!" he shouted, "You, yes, you! You're Mukohda, aren't you?!" He jogged over to me.

"Huh? U-Umm, yeah, that's my name..."

"*Huzzah!* By all that is good and decent, I'm *saved!* The gods haven't abandoned me after all!" he shouted as he grabbed my arm, dragging me off to who knows where, whether I liked it or not.

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I ended up seated in the combover guy's office. Judging by the guest chair and the other assorted furnishings, I assumed it was the guildmaster's room, which would make him...

"Allow me to introduce myself! My name is Isaac Schjerven, and I'm currently employed as the guildmaster of the Hirschfeld Adventurer's guild. A pleasure to be of service!"

That settled it—the combover guy really was the local guildmaster. He certainly didn't look the part, though. All the Adventurer's guild masters I'd met up until that point had given the clear impression that they'd worked as adventurers until they were promoted to the post, but in Isaac's case, I couldn't possibly imagine that was true.

"Umm, nice to meet you? My name's Mukohda," I replied hesitantly. Isaac was absolutely beaming at me.

"Mukohda the S-rank adventurer, yes? I've heard all about you! That would make the Fenrir and the pixie dragon behind you your familiars, but weren't you supposed to have a slime...?"

“Yeah, it’s named Sui. It’s right in here,” I said, patting my bag. The pat was enough to wake Sui up, and it poked its upper half out to see what was going on.

《Is it mealtime, Master?》

《No, sorry. You can go back to sleep.》

《Nah, Sui’s all awake now.》 It bounced up onto my lap.

“Perfect, perfect! I see your familiars are all just full of energy!” said Isaac. “Now then, on to business—I have a quest I’d very much appreciate if you’d take! It’s an emergency, in fact! I want you to venture into the forest south of town and slay the woodland tyrant python! *Please!”*

I had a feeling he was going to say that. I also had a feeling that Fel wouldn’t be into the idea, though, which posed an obstacle. I glanced over in his direction, and as expected, he was scowling.

“Absolutely not.”

“Oooh, so the Fenrir really *does* speak! Most impressive—and on a related note, ‘absolutely not’?! But, *why?!”*

“They taste vile.”

“You mean woodland tyrant pythons? Of course they would, they’re completely inedible! Inedible, yes—but their skin and fangs fetch incredibly high prices if you sell them as materials! How do you like the sound of that?! I bet I have your interest now!”

“You do not. I cannot eat them, and dealing with their stupidity is a trial I do not care to endure.” Isaac was desperate to catch Fel’s interest, but Fel just wasn’t taking the bait. He turned away with a snort, signaling that he was done with the conversation. Dora-chan, meanwhile, was putting on his best ‘not my problem’ expression. One look at Isaac’s frantic attempts to bring Fel on board was enough to convince the little dragon that he wanted nothing to do with the conversation.

“SSurely you can’t be serious?! Mukohda, please, I’m begging you! At this rate, I’m going to take all the blame for this nightmare!” He gave up on Fel and

set his sights on me next, leaning over the table between us and clinging to my shoulders like a drowning man would cling to a piece of driftwood. “Please, take the quest! *Pleeease!”* he wailed.

“Hey, too close, too close! Look, just calm down for a minute, okay?!” I somehow managed to push Isaac away from me and convince him to mellow out a bit. At that point he finally explained the details of his situation, and I began to understand why he was so desperate.

In short: not only were the adventurers of Hirschfeld pressuring him with all their might to do something about the serpent, the non-local adventurers who happened to be working in the area were liable to move on to somewhere they could make more money if things didn’t change soon. With fewer adventurers around, the guild wouldn’t be able to fulfill requests from merchants for escorts, which would drive *them* away from the town as well. To top it all off, the townsfolk were worried that a lack of adventurers could impact their safety.

The worst-case scenario was the lord of the region getting involved, and if nothing was done to address all those complaints, it wasn’t difficult to imagine that coming to pass. Isaac hung his head as he explained it all to me, his sorrow and exhaustion written all over his haggard face. He was the spitting image of a put-upon middle manager.

“Why am *I* taking all the heat for this, anyway?!” he whined, his gloom shifting to indignation. “Isn’t that unfair?! I never even wanted to be a guildmaster in the first place...”

“Right.” I felt obligated to reply with vague, halfhearted affirmation—maybe it was my Japanese upbringing at work. Unfortunately, that was enough to set off a burst of complaints on Isaac’s part.

“You mean you’ll actually hear me out? So, you might’ve figured this out from my name, but I’m technically the son of a noble family! A petty, middle-of-nowhere barony, sure, but still. The thing is, I’m the fourth son, so the odds of me inheriting the title are next to nil. I had to leave home to make my own fortune, and you wouldn’t believe how *that* turned out...”

Isaac’s whiny tangent went on for way longer than I would’ve liked, so I’ll just sum up the important parts. In short: as the son of a noble family, even with

three older brothers, he was privileged enough to be sent to a school that educated the up-and-coming children of nobles, wealthy merchants, and the like. That school taught lessons on magic, sword fighting, and other practical pursuits, and many students who specialized in those areas found employment well before they graduated.

Isaac, on the other hand, had virtually no talent for magic and even less for combat. He didn't stand a chance of securing a job while still in school, and he knew it, which led him to consider finding work in the civil services. Unfortunately, his grades were middling enough to make him question whether he could get a job in that sector either. Isaac thought long and hard about what sort of job he could definitely land that would secure him at least a moderate wage.

After a long period of research, he settled on one option in particular: the Adventurer's guild. Their members were very vocal about how understaffed the guild was at the time—not that that had changed in the intervening years—and even with mediocre grades, the fact that he had graduated school, was literate, and could do simple calculations would make him a valuable asset by their standards.

His theory was proven correct in very short order. The guild's upper management quickly set their sights on him. He found himself rising into positions of greater and greater responsibility with dizzying speed, in spite of the fact that he'd never been an especially ambitious man. He was finally promoted to a position as a guildmaster at the relatively tender age of twenty-eight. In retrospect, that was where his troubles really began.

The mere fact that Isaac had attended school made him more competent than any other member of his guild's staff. He was capable of handling all the paperwork and management responsibilities of his position more or less perfectly. Since most guildmasters started their careers in the adventuring field, their organizational abilities simply couldn't hold a candle to his. The upper echelons of the guild were well aware of that fact, and ended up using Isaac as their resident problem-solver, transferring him to serve as the guildmaster of one troubled branch after another.

When he got his first guildmaster position at the age of twenty-eight he

assumed he'd be there for life, but in the end he was ordered to move to a different branch barely three years after he took up the post. The new branch he was supposed to lead was in an absolutely appalling state when he arrived. He spent two years frantically working to undo the damage their sloppy bookkeeping had dealt, only to be transferred again the moment he'd restored some semblance of sanity to their system. The same process repeated itself in his third post—Hirschfeld was the fourth town Isaac had worked as guildmaster in.

"You know how old I am now, Mukohda? Thirty-seven."

"Huh?" *For real?* He didn't look it, especially around the hairline. I found my gaze lingering awkwardly on his combover.

"You thought I was older than that, didn't you? I don't blame you. I've seen my own head... But I didn't look like this just a few years ago! It's the stress, I tell you! It just kept piling up, and before I knew it, I was in this sorry state..."

From the look of things, the Adventurer's guild was about as exploitative as companies could get. Or maybe Isaac was just a special case. The higher-ups had found an incredibly useful tool in him, but were doing a poor job of wielding it responsibly.

"Hey, Mukohda, be honest with me. I should just quit, right?" He gazed at me with a look of exhausted anticipation that made me incredibly uncomfortable. "I know the pay's not bad, I *know*—I'm still a guildmaster, even if all the details are messed up. But the thing is, having all the money in the world doesn't make a lick of difference if you don't have the time to spend it! And that's not even starting on my social life—I haven't met a woman in years, and I'm still single to this day! The only other people I know who're still unmarried at my age work in the church and took vows of celibacy!"

Thirty-seven and single. Now *that,* I could relate to. I was still about a decade off from his age, but considering how young people in this world tended to marry, I felt a weird sort of sympathy for his struggles. Suddenly, I actually wanted to help the poor guy out.

《Hey, Fel? Dora-chan? Sui?》

《**Hmm...? What is it? Have you finally finished talking?**》

《Mnhh? What? Done? Are we leaving now?》

They hadn't been listening. At all. Actually, I was pretty sure they'd been asleep. Sui was still out like a light—it was napping on my lap, not moving at all.

《I was just thinking I might wanna take on that woodland tyrant python quest after all.》

《**You what? Were you not listening when I explained that their meat is abhorrent?**》

《I was listening, really! It's just, y'know, this guy—Isaac—has it really rough right now.》

《**Hmph! His troubles are no concern of mine.**》

《Oh, come on... Okay, how about this: if you agree to do the quest and slay the snake, I'll make dragon meat for dinner.》 As a fellow man, I felt an obligation to play my trump card for Isaac's sake. My familiars were the ones who had hunted the dragons and gotten me that meat in the first place, of course, but details.

《**What?!**》

《Dragon meat?!》 As expected, Fel and Dora-chan instantly took the bait.

《That's right, dragon meat! How about it?》

《**Hmph—in that case, I would consider it.**》

《Yeah, I'm up for it too if it means dragon meat!》

《Great! I'll tell him we'll take the quest, then.》

《**Not so fast. I said I would consider it, not that I would do it. If we are to take on this quest, you will be serving a *thick* cut of dragon meat. I will not allow you to buy us off with table scraps. Understood?**》

《Yeah, yeah, I know. You'll get a big, thick cut of dragon steak.》

《**Good. So long as we have an understanding, we shall take the quest,**》 Fel said with a smirk. Dora-chan was grinning right along with him.

A thick cut of dragon meat, huh? It felt like I'd paid a pretty hefty price for the arrangement, but for the sake of helping out a long-suffering semi-comrade, it

was worth it. Isaac was so happy when I said we'd take the quest, he literally wept with joy. The poor guy really did have it rough.

I was considering slipping him some Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power before I left. I still had three bottles on hand, and even if Lambert's company was in charge of distribution, we *were* in a completely different country. Surely he and the earl wouldn't mind? I decided to wait on that decision until later, though—the woodland tyrant python hunt was definitely the more pressing matter at the moment.

I told Isaac about the forest scorpion we ran into on our way to the town, while we were on the subject of giant, vicious monsters, and he simultaneously went pale and freaked out. According to him, the scorpion's presence was likely the python's fault—the scorpion had sensed the oncoming danger and fled.

That meant there could be more of them, and though it wasn't the busiest road, it was still fairly well traveled, so they'd have to be dealt with as quickly as possible. Isaac put out an emergency quest, dispatching all the adventurers he could that were ranked C or higher to keep watch over the road into town. If he wanted to solve the problem for good, though, the woodland tyrant python would have to be eliminated.

"I hate to ask this of you, Mukohda, but it would be an enormous weight off my mind if you'd start your quest and make for the southern woods right away..." he pleaded. I'd already agreed to do the quest and he was more or less begging with all his heart, so I didn't have it in me to refuse, even though I'd initially planned on heading down there the day after.

I asked Fel and Dora-chan, and they both replied that if we were going to go through the trouble of dealing with it, we might as well get it done as soon as possible. That made the decision unanimous (discounting Sui, who was still fast asleep): we'd head into the southern woods immediately.

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We made our way deeper and deeper into the forest.

"Sure is quiet," I commented. "Not even any birds chirping..." The forest was so silent and still, it was sort of creepy.

《Even if there were any birds here to start with, most of 'em would've gotten eaten by that dumbass snake.》 *"Dumbass snake"? Really, Dora-chan? Surely there has to be something better you could call it.*

《**Look over there,**》 said Fel. I climbed down off his back and peered out in the direction he gestured toward. I could see what he was talking about immediately: a trail of small trees and undergrowth that had been flattened, almost like something had crawled across them. Even the ground itself was sunken, so whatever it was, it must have been massive.

"Is that the woodland tyrant python's trail, you think?"

《**Yes. I sense it up ahead, so there can be no mistaking it.**》

"Just up ahead, huh? Seriously, though, how huge is that thing...?" The trail it had left was about a meter and a half wide.

《Looks like this one's even bigger than they usually get,》 Dora-chan chimed in.

《Oooh, a big monster? Sui wants to go pew pew and beat it up!》 Sui had woken up over the course of the trip into the forest, and was now chomping at the bit to fight the woodland tyrant python.

《Whoa there, no hogging the glory, pal! I wasn't into this whole thing at first, but as long as I'm out here I want in on the snake hunt too!》

《**Indeed, it is just as Dora says. I did not trek all this way into the woods to watch someone *else* hunt.**》

《Boo! Sui could beat it alone!》

"C'mon, Sui, don't be selfish. The three of you are friends, right? Why not get along and hunt the snake together?"

《Okaaay. If you say so, Master!》 With that settled, we set about following the woodland tyrant python's trail. It wasn't long, however, before Fel's voice rang out in my mind again.

《**Halt.**》 We came to a stop. 《**There it is. Just ahead of us.**》

Fel gestured with his nose, and there, between the trees, slithered the most preposterously massive snake I'd ever seen. Its skin was mottled in a manner

that really did remind me of a python.

"H-Holy crap, that thing's huge..." I whispered. Its body was long and thin, but only by the standards of its relative scale. The thing *had* to be as tall as I was, in terms of diameter, and I didn't even want to think about its circumference.

It was easily as large as the vasuki I'd encountered as a boss in Dolan's dungeon, and even rivaled the hydra that had served as the final floor's boss in Aveling's. It might've actually been even bigger than either of them, and just looking at the thing sent my blood pressure spiking through the roof. I couldn't stop myself from gulping, maybe just a little too loudly.

《Hey, it's onto us!》 shouted Dora-chan. The woodland tyrant python whipped its head around to look directly at us.

"Whoa! H-Hey, is it just me, or is that thing pretty fast?" I stammered. It slithered toward us with astonishing grace and speed, and I found myself reflexively backing away from it.

《**A meal stands before its eyes. Of course it would move fast.**》

"Okay, but it sorta feels like it's going for me in particular!"

《Probably means it thinks you look the tastiest out of all of us, but quit talking and start running! You're gonna get caught in our attacks!》

Dora-chan's warning spurred me into action, but as I turned to flee, the woodland tyrant python sensed that its prey was making a run for it and picked up the pace as well. In a fraction of a second its gaping mouth was right in front of me, so of course I shrieked incoherently before falling right on my ass. I scrambled around, trying to regain my footing, but was so hopelessly panicked I couldn't actually stand up again at all.

《**What are you doing? Hurry up and flee!**》

Before the snake could make a snack of me, Fel calmly interposed himself between us.

"R-Right!" I shouted, finally managing to stand up and move away from the monster. Before I could get far at all, though, a loud, dull thud rang out as a spherical *something* traveling at an incredible speed smacked the woodland

tyrant python right in the side of the head, sending it flying.

《Sui'll protect you, Master!》

Oh. Fel was definitely trying to look cool, but Sui had gone and stolen the spotlight. I glanced over at Fel, and sure enough, the corner of his mouth was twitching with annoyance.



Is it just me, or have we been through this exact sequence of events before?

《*Bwa ha ha ha ha,* F-Fel, you were totally ready to pose it up and have your big moment, but then, then—*ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!*》

"H-Hey, knock it off, Dora-chan! It's not *that* funny." Dora-chan was clutching his stomach and laughing uproariously.

《But, I mean, c'mon, he just—*pfff!*》

"F-Fel? Sui's still just a kid, all right? You can't blame it for not realizing what you were going for!" Fel's mouth twitch was getting worse, and he was starting to hyperventilate. I frantically attempted to pacify him. "J-Just calm down, okay?"

《**You are to blame for this. *Die.***》

"What?!"

《Hey, Fel, no hogging the fight to yourself!》

The woodland tyrant python had already managed to recover and close in on us once more, its gaping maw opened wide and ready to swallow us whole. It never got the chance, though—at the same moment Dora-chan shouted, a massive pointed pillar of ice he conjured slammed into its head about halfway between its eyes and its snout, piercing directly through its jaw and pinning it to the ground.

The serpent thrashed about wildly, but in spite of its incredible weight, it was unable to dislodge itself. Its writhing did plenty of damage to the surrounding forest, though. Trees splintered all around it, coming crashing down with a thunderous roar one after another.

"Oh, crap! *Aaaugh!*" I screamed as I barely managed to dodge a tree that toppled into the space I'd been standing mere moments before.

《**Grrrrrr! I shall deal the killing blow! *Perish!***》 Fel let out a rage-filled growl as he raised his foreleg, then brought it down with all his strength, severing the woodland tyrant python's head with a single stroke. Which was great, in theory, but didn't exactly have the desired effect.

“Wh-What the hell?! That thing’s dead, right?!” Even without its head, the rest of the snake’s body was writhing around as wildly as ever.

《**I decapitated it, so of course it is. Worry not. This is perfectly normal for these wretched creatures. It may keep moving for a time, but it will fall still before long,**》 explained Fel. He still sounded pretty disgruntled.

《Guess that wraps that up!》 added Dora-chan as he alighted in front of us.

《Aww, it’s over already? Sui never got to pew pew the snake!》 Sui sounded almost as dissatisfied as Fel. That first tackle had ended up being its only contribution to the whole battle.

《**Hmph, I will hear none of your complaints. You interrupted me right at the good part!**》 Fel murmured sulkily.

“Don’t take it personally,” I said, forcing a smile and patting him on the shoulder.

《Yeah, why get pissed about a small fry like that? This was just a warm up—the real deal’s still waiting for us in the dungeon!》

《**I suppose you have a point. I shall channel this frustration into the dungeon’s conquest.**》

《That’s more like it! Anyway, let’s hurry home and break out the dragon meat!》

《**Ah, yes, I almost forgot! Indeed, tonight we shall eat our fill of dragon meat!**》

《Dragon meeeat!》

I collected the woodland tyrant python’s corpse, heckled all the while by my impatient familiars, before starting the trip back to Hirschfeld.

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“We’re back, Isaac!” I called out as we stepped into the Adventurer’s guild. Isaac’s jaw dropped as he spun about to face us.

“Wh-Wh-What? But you only just left this morning! *Please* don’t tell me you decided to abandon the quest!”

I guess we got back so early he couldn't believe we were already finished, which was surprising, considering everyone had been so hungry we'd stopped for lunch on the way back. We arrived at the Adventurer's guild around dusk, but apparently that still counted as fast. Incidentally, even though everyone was super excited about the dragon meat, I managed to persuade them to hold off on it until dinner. We ended up having ginger-fried orc bowls for lunch instead.

"What? No, we didn't abandon it. We just already took care of it."

"R-Really?! You know you can just tell me if you failed, right?! Please don't lie to me!"

"No, seriously, we didn't fail! It's dead!"

At that point Fel, who'd been listening to the conversation from behind me, suddenly loomed forward and spoke out loud with a scowl. **"This man's insolence grows tiresome. Shall I bite him?"**

《Do it! Let him have it! That'll teach him to think we could ever fail!》

"Of course you shouldn't! And stop egging him on, Dora-chan!" The fact that Isaac couldn't hear his provocation was no excuse.

"H-H-He wants to b-b-bite me?! I-Is he serious, Mukohda?!" Isaac was cowering before me, which conveniently meant he could use me to shield himself from Fel.

"Fel, stop saying stuff like that, you're freaking him out. You want to hurry this up so we can go home and have dinner, right? The longer you drag it out, the later we'll end up eating."

《**Hmph! I shall tolerate no delays. Finish your business, and let us be off.**》

"Right, right. Anyway, the woodland tyrant python's pretty big, so I think I should wait to bring it out until we're in the storehouse."

"I-Is it? In that case, f-follow me, please!"

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The woodland tyrant python was stashed away in the magic bag Fel kept hung around his neck. I assumed that they'd heard a fair bit about me from the Leonhardt Adventurer's guild, considering Fel's presence didn't raise a fuss even

when he decided to bust out his most intimidating glare, but I still decided to err on the side of caution when it came to showing off my Item Box. It *was* a totally different country, after all.

The moment I pulled the snake out of Fel's magic bag, Isaac froze in place (with the exception of his jaw, which dropped once again).

"One woodland tyrant python, as requested. I think this proves we slew the thing, right?"

《**As is only natural. Few would dare to imply that we could fail a quest, and those few are fools to the last man.**》

《Right? Between me, Fel, and Sui there's no way we'd fail to take out a single snake, even if it *wasn't* dumb as a brick!》 I was starting to get really sick of Fel and Dora-chan's incessant grumbling.

"I can't thank you enough, Mukohda! Now everyone will finally, *finally* get off my back, at least for the moment..." Isaac sniffled. *Look, I get that you're relieved, but having a balding old man break down in tears in front of me is really, really awkward!*

"So, umm, can we take care of my pay?"

"Ah, excuse me! Your reward, of course! Seeing as this was an emergency request, the quest itself will pay 230 gold coins. That just leaves the matter of the monster's materials—what would you like to do with them? Would you be willing to sell them all to the guild?"

The materials, huh? If the meat were good I'd ask for it, no question, but according to Fel that was very emphatically not the case. I didn't have any particular need for the other materials either. *Oh, but maybe I'll ask for a piece of the skin? It's definitely a rare material, and since Lambert's technically supposed to be a leatherworker, he'd probably appreciate it as a souvenir.*

I'd more or less left my hair tonic business entirely in his hands, so I certainly owed the man. I decided to ask for about a third of the skin and let the guild buy the rest. I told Isaac, and he explained that even if they fast-tracked the job, they could only get me my part of the skin and the money for the rest of the materials by the day after tomorrow, at the earliest.

“That so? Guess we’ll be staying in this town for another day, then.” No sooner had the words left my mouth than the heckling began.

《Whaaat?! But what about the dungeon?!》

《**Indeed—what about the dungeon?!**》

“Give me a break, guys, it’s not like we have a choice here! It’ll take that long to get the skin and the reward money, so we’re stuck, like it or not.” Fel shot Isaac a sharp glare. “C’mon, no glaring! Look at the thing, it’s huge. Of course it’d take ages to skin! Right, Isaac?”

“Y-Yes, quite! I-I assure you we’ll do everything we can to speed up the job, but I’m afraid the day after tomorrow is the absolute fastest we can possibly manage it.” Fel’s menacing stare was sending him into a panic.

“See? Nothing we can do about it, so quit asking for the impossible. I keep telling you, the dungeon’s not going anywhere.”

《**Mmph! You only say such things because you have no desire to visit the dungeon in the first place.**》

《Right?》 They gave me a suspicious glare, and I felt myself shiver.

“N-No, that’s not it! It’s just that, I, uhh... H-Hey, Isaac, I had a question I wanted to ask while we’re here!”

《He’s totally trying to change the subject.》

《**He is indeed.**》

Oh, shut up, you two.

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After wrapping up our business with Isaac, we headed back to the house I’d rented. Fel, Dora-chan, and the recently awakened Sui were all excited for their dragon meat dinner, and they weren’t exactly being quiet about it.

“It is time to make good on your word! Bring out the dragon meat!”

《Yeah, hurry up and get cooking!》

《Sui wants to eat dragon meeeat!》

“I know, I *know,* okay? We’ll have an early dinner, I’ll start cooking right now.” They were so impatient, they actually followed me over to the kitchen. There’d be no talking them out of it, so I decided to give in and make a bit of a show out of grilling up their dragon steaks.

I asked my familiars if they’d prefer earth dragon meat or red dragon meat, and they all simultaneously replied “Both!” I’d already promised to feed them dragon meat and didn’t feel like dashing their expectations by refusing to make both types, so I gave in and brought out lots of each, just like they wanted.

I decided to start with the red dragon meat. I cut a beautiful vividly red slice of steak, seasoned it with sun-dried salt and pepper I freshly ground using a mill, then slapped it down into a piping-hot frying pan. The steak let out an incredibly satisfying sizzle, and its meaty smell immediately permeated the room. Fel and Dora-chan’s eyes were lit up with anticipation, while Sui was quivering with what I assumed was excitement.

“I-Is it not finished yet?”

《Hurry up and let us eat!》

《Sui’s huuungry!》

The three of them just wouldn’t stop pestering me, but this was something I couldn’t compromise about. *Don’t they know that half of what makes meat like this so good is cooking it right?*

“Hmm—needs just a little longer,” I told them. My usual technique for cooking red meat involved searing both sides, then taking it out of the pan at just the right moment, covering it with aluminum foil, and letting it rest for about five minutes. If you get the timing right, that’s the easiest way to cook a steak to a perfect medium rare.

“H-Hey, surely it must be done by now?!” shouted Fel.

“Yeah, I think that should just about—ugh, Fel, gross! You’re drooling all over the place...”

“S-Silence! You are the one tempting me with these delectable smells, then making me wait, so you are to blame!”

“Yeah, yeah, sure I am. Sorry for the wait, food’s up!” I placed a plate with a massive dragon steak on it in front of each of my familiars, and they dug in ecstatically.

“Mmmhhh! Dragon meat truly is exquisite!”

《Yeah! It’s crazy how juicy this stuff is! Dragon meat really is as good as it gets!》

《Dragon meat’s so yummy!》

It really was incredible that simple seasoning with just salt and pepper and a few minutes in a frying pan could produce something that delicious. Dragon meat was in another league entirely, no question about it. I couldn’t imagine anything beating it. Needless to say, I grilled up a steak for myself as well—it wouldn’t be fair for my familiars to keep it all to themselves! I relished in its meaty goodness right along with them.

“I just can’t get over how good this stuff is,” I muttered.

After that simple salt and pepper start, we moved on to the usual soy-based steak sauce. I used that to cook both earth dragon and red dragon steaks, and they were both delicious, but that still wasn’t enough to sate my familiar’s appetites. I had a plan, though—I knew just the right dish to satisfy them...

“I recognize this process. You are making a ‘cutlet,’ are you not?”

《Those’re the ones you fry, right? The crunchy ones?》

《They were really tasty when we ate them with bread too!》

“Ha ha ha, guess I’ve made cutlets with a bunch of different types of meat, haven’t I? No wonder you guys would recognize it. I was thinking we’d keep it simple this time and just eat them with salt.”

“Salt alone?”

“Yeah. Meat this good can stand on its own—I think it’ll be plenty tasty with just a bit of salt. Go on, give it a try!” I presented each of my familiars with a crunchy golden-brown dragon cutlet. “Here, you just sprinkle a little on like this,” I said as I shook just a pinch of off-white salt I’d bought from my Online Supermarket onto their cutlets. The salt I’d chosen was a seaweed salt known

for its smooth, mellow flavor, and was a personal favorite of mine.

《Mmmh, dang, you weren't kidding! Just a little salt's all this stuff needs!》

"Indeed. When the meat itself is this good, perhaps it is best to savor it with as few distractions as possible. Not bad, not bad at all."

《It's so tasty, even without anything else on it! Sui wants more!》

"Okay then, try it with this salt next." The next salt I'd prepared was a yellowish yuzu salt. The slight citrusy aroma of the yuzu made it a perfect salt to pair with fried foods, in my opinion.

"Hmm, yes, this is good as well. It has a certain freshness that spreads throughout my mouth with each bite."

《Yeah, the cutlet's sorta oily from the frying, and this stuff works really well with that flavor!》

《Sui might like this one even better!》

As I fried up cutlet after cutlet, I felt a sudden urge to have some for myself. I waited for an opportunity, and as soon as I got the chance I snagged a piece of cutlet and popped it into my mouth.

"Ahh, hot! But man, it's so crunchy and delicious! Yuzu salt really was the right call!" It was the perfect fit for fried food, no question about it.

"Hey, I want more! Keep frying!"

《Yeah, what Fel said! I spent all day looking forward to this, so I'm gonna stuff myself until I can't eat another bite!》

《Sui's gonna eat lots and lots of dragon meat too!》

They'd already eaten an incredible amount of meat between the steaks and the cutlets, but they still hadn't had enough yet. "Fine, fine! I'll fry up another batch, then."

After that point, Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui just kept eating and eating. They really hadn't been exaggerating about how they planned to eat as much as they possibly could. Fel stuffed himself so comically full that I couldn't help but crack a smile in spite of myself.

In retrospect, though, offering them all-you-can-eat dragon meat as a reward was a terrible idea. My stock of dragon meat was a precious resource, and they took a distressingly large chunk out of it. *Sucks to be me...*

Chapter 7: The Hirschfeld Orphanage

The next day I made use of the info I'd obtained from Isaac. I told my familiars that I wouldn't be going out of town at all that day, but they decided to tag along anyway, presumably out of sheer boredom.

Sui, as usual, slept in my bag for most of the time we were out. I had to wonder why it didn't just stay at home if it was going to spend the whole day unconscious anyway, but on the other hand, I *would* be a bit worried about leaving it alone in the house. In any case, it was pretty much business as usual for the four of us.

《**So? Where are we going? Will we be finding food stalls to eat at, like usual?**》 inquired Fel.

《Ooh, I like the sound of that!》 Dora-chan chimed in. 《Those stalls always go light on seasoning their meat, but with a couple shakes of our own seasonings, they end up real tasty!》

Nope, sorry, not happening today. I wasn't planning on stopping for food at all. I also felt like getting Dora-chan used to putting my seasonings on food we bought from other people was a mistake—the last thing I needed was him picking up even more rude habits.

"Nah, we're heading for this town's orphanage."

《**The orphanage?**》

《Why're we going to a place like that?》

"Just an idea I had..."

When I had first arrived in this world, I'd been super anxious about my financial future, but ever since I met Fel and the others, I'd been totally economically stable. 'Stable' would actually be selling it short—thanks to my familiars' random acts of chaos and violence, I'd actually been accumulating

money. Those three carnivores kept bringing in carcass after carcass for me to cook for them, and all the bits that *weren't* edible always ended up getting sold off for an incredible sum of money.

To be completely honest, I had so much money built up that not even *I* knew exactly how sizable my savings were. I certainly couldn't put anything close to a precise figure on it. And yet even though I had all that money, I didn't have anything good to do with it. Buying anything that caught my interest and ordering stuff off my Online Supermarket was the best I could manage, and no matter how luxurious my tastes grew, expenses like those didn't even make a dent in my ridiculous pile of cash.

I mean, sure, I bought that magic stove and my house in Karelina, plus all the slaves who were keeping it maintained (though for what it's worth I sincerely thought of them as my employees rather than my possessions), but even if those were expensive, they were one-time purchases. I couldn't exactly keep buying house after house.

Long story short: my income exceeded my living expenses by such an outrageous margin, my savings were piling up way past the point of reason.

"So, I'm really grateful that I haven't had to worry about money thanks to you guys, but I actually have too much of the stuff right now."

《**Hmm? You really have that much?**》

"Yeah. I stopped counting somewhere around when I hit a hundred thousand gold coins. I don't even know how much I have at this point, to be honest."

《Guess we *have* hunted down an awful lot of stuff, when you put it that way,》 mused Dora-chan, crossing his tiny little arms.

"You really have. I mean, take the dragons—those things made me a crazy amount of money." Both the earth dragon and the red dragon had produced so many valuable materials, the Adventurer's guild couldn't even come close to buying them all. Most of that stuff was still sitting in my Item Box.

And when I really thought about it, it wasn't just the dragon bits. I had a whole bunch of other materials I'd more or less forgotten about stashed in there, not to mention a few whole monsters I hadn't even attempted to sell yet.

Trying to deal with those felt like it'd be kicking a hornet's nest, though, so I decided to keep ignoring them for the moment.

"Anyway, the point is that we keep making money and don't really ever spend it."

《**That may be the case, but we have little need for your human money. The food stalls are the only place I have ever had a use for it.**》

《Right?》

"Yeah, I know, I've seen how you guys act in town. But you get where I'm coming from about how it's been building up, right?"

《**Perhaps, but what do you expect us to do about it? If you mean to ask us to stop hunting, that will not be possible. However much you wish for us to restrain ourselves, should another dragon come calling, we shall slay it without hesitation.**》

《Yeah, I'm not about to stop hunting either! It's an instinct thing, y'know?》

"I know, and that's not what I'm getting at. You guys all eat a ton, so it saves me a lot of trouble when you hunt down your own meat. Plus, not gonna lie, the meat that you three find for me's worlds better than the stuff I could get at most butcher's shops."

《**Indeed! Such is the way of things.**》

"Really wish you'd cool it with the dragons, though."

《**Hmph! I shall agree to not proactively seek them out, though should one cross our path, I will not hesitate to hunt it down.**》

《Yeah, same! How could we not hunt a dragon when it flies right in front of us like the red one did? Of course we're gonna hunt those!》

"Please, *don't.* But, look, we're getting off-topic. The point is that I've been thinking of a practical use for all this money that's been piling up."

《A practical use?》 echoed Fel and Dora-chan in unison.

"Yeah, in a giving-back-to-society kinda way."

I'd been thinking about that sort of thing ever since I'd gotten back from

Rosendahl, the city with the meat dungeon. The donation I'd made to the orphanage there was the trigger, even though it was *technically* an unnecessarily large payment for a bunch of bread rather than a classic, no-strings-attached donation. The orphanage itself had been shockingly rundown and their staff were barely keeping the place open, and yet from what I understood those kids were actually better off than the majority of orphans in this world.

The more I learned about their situation, the more I realized how hard orphans had it. Adults have to take the good with the bad, no matter what, but in my opinion people should at least get to be happy and carefree when they're kids. I knew that some people would probably call me a hypocrite for it, but I figured that since I *had* all that money at my disposal, using it for the orphans would beat the hell out of not using it at all.

In the end, that train of thought naturally led me to the conclusion that I could just keep making donations. I'd been planning on talking with my familiars about all that stuff for a while, but then the woodland tyrant python quest had happened, we had gotten busy, and I'd ended up with even *more* money to deal with.

"Long story short, I was thinking of donating some of it to the local orphanage," I explained. "Though I guess since we're on the way there now, I sorta already started the process unilaterally? My bad. What do you think, Fel? Dora-chan?"

《**In this regard, you may do as you will. So long as my meals remain delicious, I shall not object.**》

《Same over here. I'm in it for the grub, and going around to human towns means getting to go to dungeons too! This is the life! As long as you keep the food coming, the rest is all up to you.》

"Got it, thanks." Fel and Dora-chan gave me the go-ahead without hesitation, which just left Sui. It was still a child, but since it had been going out and hunting monsters with the other two, it was still responsible for providing me with my livelihood. It would've felt wrong not to run my plan by it too. I shook it awake and explained the situation in as simple terms as I could manage.

“So, what do you think?”

《Umm, Sui doesn’t really understand, but if Sui can eat Master’s cooking, Sui doesn’t mind! Ooh, and Sui wants to fight more and pew pew bad guys! That’s so much fun!》 *Well, that was off-topic. I guess this subject might be a little too mature for Sui?*

《**Sui would not take issue with your plan,**》 chimed in Fel. 《**Like us, it has no need or want for your human money.**》

《Right? Even I’d be shocked if I saw a slime bouncing around town to go shopping.》 *I think that’d surprise anyone, Dora-chan.*

“In that case, it’s settled—I’ll be making that donation! Though I have to check the place out myself first, of course. If whoever’s in charge is some sort of greedy, selfish sleazeball, they’d probably just embezzle it anyway. Oh, and I was also thinking of donating to all the goddesses’ temples while I’m at it.”

《**A sound idea. Ninrir will be delighted.**》

“I mean, I’ll be donating to all the others too.”

《**Let us be off! The day is wasting!**》

“Hey, wait, Fel, wrong way! We’re going to the orphanage first! Fel!”

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I surreptitiously studied the orphanage Isaac told me about from the shadow of a nearby building. Even at that distance, I could hear children shouting happily inside. I was already a little relieved—they certainly didn’t sound like they were terribly impoverished and underfed. That said, the building itself was unsurprisingly not in great shape. It looked just as old and rundown as Rosendahl’s orphanage had been.

“Guess I might as well ask around about the place...” I muttered to myself. The one problem: everyone I approached took one look behind me at Fel and Dora-chan, turned around, and fled without pausing for a second to hear me out.

I tried making “Those two are my familiars, it’s fine, don’t worry about them” my opening line, which helped a little, but even if they stuck around, they were

still too freaked out to actually tell me anything of substance. I clearly wasn't getting anywhere, so as a last-ditch effort I tried smoothing things over with a silver coin. *That* certainly got people talking in an awful hurry. They told me all sorts of things—even things I hadn't actually asked about—and I finally learned everything I wanted to. It all worked out in the end thanks to the power of bribery.

As for the actual information I got from all those passersby, first up was the fact that the orphanage was ostensibly under the management of the Temple of the Goddess of Water. It was actually managed by a grizzled old ex-adventurer, though, who happened to be a layman of the temple and did the majority of the actual work taking care of the kids.

One old man couldn't possibly handle all those kids and the challenges they brought with them on his own, though, so the church sent over a few of its apprentice nuns every day to help him out. Thanks to them, the orphanage had been running relatively smoothly under his leadership.

From the way the townsfolk described him, he had that classic ex-adventurer aura of intimidation that told you he'd knock your skull clear across the room if you tried any funny business in his establishment. On the other hand, they also claimed that he was kind and attentive to the kids under his watch, who all looked up to him as a sort of father figure.

All that sounded nice, but there was still the question of the place's finances, and as I'd suspected given how it looked from the outside, they were apparently running on a shoestring budget. In theory they were funded by both the lord of the region and the church, plus any direct donations they happened to receive. In practice, all three of those sources combined amounted to little more than a drop in the bucket compared to their total expenses.

From the lord's perspective, an orphanage would never be an especially high priority. Whether or not the place was doing well, it wouldn't be earning them anything, so they certainly wouldn't be generous with their financial support. The church, meanwhile, was running on charity itself and couldn't possibly have much to spare.

Donations, meanwhile, only came every once in a blue moon. Keeping a

financial safety net for yourself was a foreign concept in this world, and most people lived hand to mouth, so of course they wouldn't have money to spare. I'd heard from the director of Rosendahl's orphanage that orphanages all across the land were struggling, and seeing the worn-down building before me made it easy to appreciate the truth of his words. Looking at it made a feeling I couldn't quite put into words well up inside me.

How has that building not been condemned? That roof has *to be leaky—is the place really livable?* The info I'd obtained certainly suggested that it was a worthy cause to donate to, but I wouldn't be comfortable committing until I'd seen how things were on the inside for myself. It was time to take a closer look. Doing that would more or less obligate me to make a donation in some form or another, of course, but if I came to the conclusion that they wouldn't use the money well, I could always just toss them a few gold coins and leave it at that.

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"Excuse me?" I called, cracking open the gate that led into the orphanage's grounds. A moment later, somebody arrived to greet me.

"Who're you, gramps?" said a rabbit-eared girl. She looked like she was around five years old. I'd been treated like an old man plenty of times since I'd arrived in this world, but it hadn't stopped grating on my nerves.

"Umm, I'm not actually that old and I'm definitely not anybody's grandfather, so do you think you could just call me 'big brother' or 'sir' or something? Also, would you mind calling the director over for me?"

"Okaaay." She dashed off, and returned a few moments later holding the hand of an incredibly rugged-looking man.

"This old guy said to go get you!" said the rabbit-eared girl, who had apparently already forgotten my other request.

"Oh, did he...?" said the man who I assumed was the director, looking me up and down. "All right, then—c'mon in."

I took him up on his invitation and walked through the gate. My familiars followed behind me, and no sooner had we entered the grounds than a cluster of children gathered up around us. Unlike the adults outside, the kids were

absolutely fearless when it came to Fel and Dora-chan. Actually, they looked downright excited.

《**H-Hey, wait a—**》 said Fel, but it was too late.

"It's a huge wolf and a dragon!" shouted one of the kids. The rest of them squealed with glee.

《Wait, me too?!》 shouted Dora-chan. Their interest in Fel was a given, considering he was a massive furball in their eyes, but I guess Dora-chan hadn't expected to draw an equal measure of their interest. It didn't surprise me, though—you don't see tiny dragons every day, so of course the kids would be curious about him. My familiars were quickly surrounded by a crowd of kiddies, all intent on manhandling them as much as possible.

"Do *not* pull on that! Stop!" shouted Fel out loud.

《Hey, hands off, pal! No touching!》 screeched Dora-chan, though considering he did it through telepathy, I don't know what he thought he was going to achieve. Then again, considering how little effect Fel's scolding seemed to have, it might not've made a difference regardless.

"That thing's a Fenrir, huh?" commented the director.

"Yeah, technically," I replied. He'd thrown away his dignity as a legendary creature in front of me so many times that I was prone to forgetting he was supposed to be one in the first place.

I was impressed that the director figured it out that quickly, by the way. My understanding was that only fairly high-ranking adventurers would have the knowledge and experience to identify Fel's species. He must've seen through my surprise and chuckled.

"I used to be an A-rank adventurer, if that answers any questions," he explained. "I'd heard rumors about the guy who made a Fenrir his familiar, but I never figured they were true till I saw it in person." *Yeah, totally reasonable. Can't argue with that.* "What's the other one? A baby dragon?"

"No, it's actually a rare species called a pixie dragon. He's fully grown, believe it or not."

“Oh? You’ve got a full stock of rare familiars, eh? You must be quite the tamer.”

“Thanks. Oh, right—I also have a sort of special slime in my party,” I said, picking Sui up out of my bag to show the director, who burst out laughing at the sight of it.

“A slime?! You have a *slime* as a familiar?! You’re a one-of-a-kind tamer, that’s for sure!” *Common sense in this world says that slimes are the smallest of small fries, after all.*

“Whoa, a wolf and a dragon?! Coool!” shouted a boy who suddenly jumped out from the orphanage’s main building. He looked like he was about ten years old or so, and grinned ear to ear as he rushed out to get a closer look—only for the director to grab him by the back of his shirt’s collar as he ran past us.

“Not so fast, Cornet! Did you finish your chores already?”

“Geh, leggo of me, geezer!”

“Don’t you ‘geezer’ me, kid! I’ve told you a thousand times to call me director, or don’t talk to me at all! So, how ’bout those chores?”

“I, umm...”

“Not finished yet, eh?”

“I’m not...”

“Then you have to take care of those before you go out and play. Got it?”

“Aww, but I wanna go play with everyone! I wanna pet the wolf and the dragon too!”

“I’m not saying you can’t play with everyone, I’m saying you can do it *after* you finish your chores.”

“But—”

“No buts! And if you go out to play before you’re finished, you’ll be skipping dinner tonight.”

“Who cares?! I bet we’re having the same watery potato soup and stale bread we always do anyway!”

“Oh? Well, if you don’t want dinner, guess that’s one less meal we have to worry about preparing tonight.”

“I want it, I want it! All right, *fine!* I’ll do my stupid chores, okay?!” Cornet turned around and stomped back into the building.

“I swear, how’d I end up with so many cheeky brats who won’t listen to a word I say?” sighed the director. He had a point—I could already tell that a lot of his kids were on the naughty side of the spectrum. I sorta felt for the guy. “Anyway, what’s a stand-out tamer like you doing in a place like this? You need something?”

“Umm, well, I was actually thinking of making a small donation...”

Suddenly, the man was all smiles. He threw his arm around my shoulders. “You’re a good man, and you’ve come to the right place! As I’m sure you can tell, we’re poor as dirt here, and we take donations year round! Come on, let’s head inside and talk business!”

Okay, guy, your smile went from ‘welcoming’ to ‘terrifyingly overbearing’ in a split second! And what’s with the arm around my shoulders? Are you making sure I don’t run away?! In spite of my doubts, I could only let myself get dragged into the building.

《**H-Hey! Do you mean to leave us behind?!**》

“Y-Yeah, sorry, I have to talk with the director! You guys can play with the kids until I get back.”

《**We can what?! Absolutely not! I cannot bear to entertain all these whelps at once—**》 **“Hey, you! Stop pulling my fur! Stop that!”**

《Fel’s right, these brats’re demons! They’re gonna tear my wings off! Get ’em off me!》 The kids were brimming with energy, and Fel and Dora-chan were clearly going to have their hands full while I was away.

“You two’re a rare treat for these kids! Just put up with it for a little, you’ll survive.”

《Nooo!》 Fel and Dora-chan shouted telepathically in perfect unison. *Fight hard, you two. See you on the other side.*

《Hey, Master? Sui's gonna go to sleep,》 Sui said as it oozed its way back into my bag.

"Looks like the kids'll be occupied with their new playmates, so we can have a nice, long chat," said the director with a smirk. *Gah! This old dude would take any excuse to keep me here... Is this really the sort of person you want in charge of an orphanage?*

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"That's more or less the state of things," concluded the director. He'd just finished giving me a rundown on his orphanage's financial situation, and as expected, it was rough. They were just barely scraping by.

Their official policy was to send their kids out into the world at the age of fourteen to make their own way and learn to live independently, but on the whole there were still more kids entering the orphanage in the average year than there were kids aging out of it. There would always be kids who'd lost their parents, or parents who could no longer afford to take care of their kids for whatever reason and were forced to give them up. The societal factors driving the problem weren't going anywhere any time soon.

That was part of why the orphanage had a policy of giving the kids jobs starting around the age of eleven or twelve. The kids who aspired to become merchants, chefs, or artisans would start by helping out around the orphanage or the church, or even try their hand at going into business on their own early.

Those who wanted to become adventurers, meanwhile, were given a thorough course on the fundamentals of adventuring by their formerly A-ranked director. They'd also venture outside on occasion to collect medicinal herbs and do other low-risk odd jobs.

The outside world was dangerous, of course, so they were under strict instructions to stay within easy running distance of the town and were flat-out banned from going anywhere near the forest. The local Adventurer's guild had agreed to buy whatever they collected (at severely marked-down prices) even though they weren't technically adventurers yet, so they could even earn a little money in the process.

In any case, regardless of which career path the kids decided to prepare for,

half of their earnings were claimed by the orphanage to cover its operating costs while the remaining half were set aside, to be returned to the children when they came of age and set out on their own.

The nuns who came by to help also instructed the children on basic literacy and math at the director's request, which had apparently been a massive boon for them when they went out to make their fortunes. I'd never really thought about it before, but the director taught me that it was considered standard for people who worked in religious organizations to be relatively educated, so teaching the kids was within their capabilities.

"I'll have you know my kids tend to make pretty big names for themselves when they get out into the world," he bragged. Some of them had even shown so much promise, they left the facility to take on apprenticeships before they turned fourteen. "'Course, that reputation might be causing me problems in its own way. Sometimes I wonder if parents are leaving their kids here *because* they know I'll raise 'em right. We get more and more kids with each passing year, and just keeping all of them fed's taking everything I have."

He grumbled about how as the population of kids increased, their budget was almost entirely taken up by food expenses. Satisfying the appetites of a whole orphanage's worth of growing adolescents inevitably meant prioritizing quantity over quality, so the best he could scrape together that could feed all of them tended to consist of potatoes and tooth-breakingly hard bread. That sort of unsatisfying fare had become the children's everyday sustenance.

"Not much I can do about that, though. Filling their bellies comes first, even if it's not exactly pleasant. The kids may not like it, but we can't expect better unless something major changes."

I thought back to Cornet. He'd complained about the orphanage's soup being watery and the bread being stale, and from the sound of things he hadn't been exaggerating. Eating nothing but miserable food like that day in and day out must've been soul-crushing.

That's when it hit me: I had plenty of ingredients from the meat dungeon left over, so why not take the opportunity to treat them to something more palatable? I wasn't in a position to make anything really luxurious, but I could at

least do better than watery soup and stale bread. I actually still had a ton of the bread I'd bought from Rosendahl's orphanage, which had to be better than the stuff they'd been eating here.

It didn't feel right for kids to be living such a bland and joyless lifestyle when it came to food, so I thought that letting them have a decent meal would be a nice thing to do. I asked the director what he thought, and he replied with an enthusiastic "Are you serious?! The kids'll be ecstatic! Yes, absolutely, please do!" so that settled it.

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The director led me to the orphanage's kitchen. I could tell at a glance that it wasn't designed for ease of use, unfortunately, and the best it had for actual cooking was a wood-burning stove.

"Guess I can't expect better from a building this old," I said to myself. "Time to do things my way!"

I brought out my ever-faithful magic stove and opened up my Online Supermarket, like usual. I told the director that I'd be fine on my own and sent him on his way, so there was no need to worry about him seeing something I'd rather keep secret.

"What to make, what to make? I'm feeding kids here, so it's gotta be nutritious. I'll need a bunch of it too, so I should pick something I can make a lot of all at once." It's always important to keep your guests' needs in mind when you cook, and I spent a moment thinking about how I could satisfy both of those factors together. Finally, it hit me. "Oh, I know—pork and beans might be just the thing!"

Pork and beans: a staple of United States home cooking that I'd seen in more movies than I could remember. It came up so often that I got really curious about how it tasted, and after a little research I decided to try making it myself. Long story short, it's a type of tomato stew. It has a ton of beans in it (as you'd probably expect, given the name), and a bunch of vegetables as well. It's packed with nutrients as a result, and seemed like the perfect dish to make for a bunch of kids.

I was sold: I'd be making pork and beans! "Time to put together a grocery

list...” I mumbled, paging through my Online Supermarket’s menu. I started by buying pre-cooked chickpeas. This world’s version of them, ‘chipeas,’ were very commonly used in cooking and I didn’t want to bother boiling dried ones, so they seemed like a solid choice. A soybean equivalent called ‘zoybeans’ were also pretty readily available, so this time I decided to add some of those as well. The recipe also calls for onions, carrots, potatoes, garlic, and a can of whole tomatoes.

“That does it for ingredients—let’s get cooking!”

I pulled a slab of dungeon pork out of my Item Box. Step one is to chop it into smallish chunks—about a centimeter and a half on each side—and season each piece with salt and pepper. Then you dice up your onions, carrots, and potatoes into slightly smaller chunks and mince the garlic. Briefly boil the chickpeas and soybeans, then drain them thoroughly. That’s all the recipe takes for prep work.

Next up: actually cooking the dish! Start by heating some olive oil in a pot and stir-frying the garlic in it just long enough for it to become noticeably fragrant. Then you add in the cubed dungeon pork and keep stir-frying until it’s browned on all sides. Next, you add in the onion, carrots, and potatoes, and stir-fry once again until the onions are starting to get just a little translucent.

Once the veggies have reached that partially-cooked stage, you dump in the can of tomatoes followed by a bouillon cube for some extra flavor. Add in the beans once the mixture comes to a simmer, and then you just have to keep it there until the veggies are soft and cooked through. You can season again with salt and pepper at the very end, if you think the dish needs some fine-tuning, and then it’s done!

All that was left was to give it a try. I took a bite and carefully considered the flavor. “Nice—this dish really brings out the natural sweetness of the vegetables! I’m sure the kids will appreciate it. The beans were a good idea too. They’re full of nutrients, and they’ll fill you up really well!”

《Masteeer, Sui wants to try it too!》 Sui had woken up at some point along the way. Its voice rang out hopefully in my mind.

“All right, I guess, but I made this for the kids who live here, so just a little! I’ll make a proper helping for you and the others when we get back to the house.”

《Okay!》

I set a slightly smaller serving of pork and beans than I'd usually spare down in front of Sui, who dug right into it.

"How is it?"

《It might be better with more meat, but it's tasty! Sui loves all the beans!》

"The beans, huh? That's good to hear!" I'd actually gone heavier on the meat than I usually would, but I also went heavy on the beans and veggies since I was trying to keep nutrition in mind. Sui gave it a solid endorsement in any case, so I figured I'd done a decent enough job.

I went over to the director's office to let him know that I was done cooking, and he gathered up the kids right away. We all moved over to a spacious (but obviously very old) dining hall. The director and I stood off to the side and watched as the kids filed in. They could hardly contain their excitement.

"All right," said the director, "We've got something special for you kids today! This young man here's fixed up a real feast for you, so you'd better say thank you!"

"Thank you!" the kids roared in unison as they crowded around the serving table. They made sure to form a proper line, though, presumably because of a certain strict old man who was watching over them. It was sorta cute, and made me reminisce for a moment about the school lunches I had back when I was a kid.

Two young, fresh-faced nuns were put in charge of setting the table. They were probably in their mid to late teens, by my best guess, and I was told that helping out at mealtimes was part of the usual duties of the nuns who came to help out. I hadn't seen the two of them around until that point, and when I asked about them, the director explained that they'd been busy teaching a lesson to the orphanage's aspiring merchants.



Somewhere along the way, Fel and Dora-chan plodded their way into the dining hall as well, both looking absolutely exhausted. Fel was definitely a little bit too big for the door, but somehow managed to squeeze his way through without damaging its frame.

《**That could hardly have been any worse...**》

《You said it...》

Both of them flopped down onto the ground the second they had the opportunity.

《**I need food, and I need it now!**》 Fel demanded. 《**I shall not wait another moment!**》

《Same over here, thanks,》 droned Dora-chan.

《Umm, sorry,》 I replied telepathically, 《but I made this for the kids, and I didn't make enough of it to serve you guys too.》

Fel and Dora-chan shot upright. 《You *what?!*》

《**Need I remind you that we only tolerated those noxious runtlings at *your* request?!**》

I sent back, 《Yeah, but I don't think you'd like this stuff, anyway. It's full of veggies, for your information.》

《**Grr—*vegetables*, you say...?**》

《I want *meat,* come on...》

《I know, I know. I promise I'll make another batch for you two and Sui when we get back, okay? I'll give you a little, so just be patient for now.》

《**You will make *meat* when we get back, and I shall not tolerate another second of this outrage should you say otherwise.**》

《Hell yeah! Meat or bust!》

《I get it, okay?》 Dealing with the kids must've really tired those two out. What kind of legendary beast throws a toddler-tier tantrum over a single meal?

I grumbled internally as I set a smallish serving of pork and beans out for each of them.

《**Hmm. It tastes decent enough, I suppose, but it does indeed lack the meat I crave.**》

《Yeah, you gotta have meat when you're worn out. Nothing else does the job.》 *Ha ha ha—those two really are meat-powered, huh?*

《Sui wants some too...》

《Oh, sorry—you already had some earlier, and that was the last of it. I'll make more when we get home, though! Can you hold out until then?》

《Yeah, Sui can wait! Sui'll be patient, so make something with lots and lots of meat, okay?》

《Ha ha ha, okay, okay.》 *Let me alter that statement—Fel, Dora-chan,* and *Sui's internal engines all run on meat.* Meanwhile, the table had been set and the kids were finally getting a taste of their helpings of pork and beans.

"Oh wow, there's so many vegetables in this!" one of them shouted. "It's not just potatoes!"

"There's *meat* in it!"

"This is so good!"

The children's happy shouts filled the dining hall. It was really nice to see them all so enthusiastic about digging into the food that I'd made. That went for the two apprentice nuns, as well—they were enjoying their meals just as much as the kids were, and were adorable in a different sort of way.

"Might wanna leer in a different direction, pal," said the director, who was glaring daggers at me from the next seat over. "Don't even *think* about it—hands off."

"Wh-What? Of course I wouldn't, I'd *never!*" I wasn't looking at them like *that!* It was a relaxing, stress-relieving eye candy thing, not a creepy one! I'd never even consider making a move on them! I mean, they were somewhere around high school aged, and by the ethical standards of *my* world a guy my age hitting on them would be completely out of line.

“Just keep it in mind,” said the director.

“A-Anyway, aren’t you going to eat?” I asked, changing the subject.

“I’ll eat last.”

“I’d be careful about that—wait too long, and it’ll all be gone!” I’d made two whole stockpots’ worth of pork and beans, but the kids’ appetites had outdone even my fairly high expectations. Most of them had already gone back for seconds.

“If there’s none left for me, there’s none left for me. Look how much they’re enjoying it—that’s all I could ask for,” he said with a gentle, nurturing smile. He might’ve had the face of a seasoned veteran, but he really was a plain old nice guy in the end.

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The children finished their lunch and left the cafeteria, though not before waving to me and saying “Thanks, old man!” or “The food was delicious, gramps!” or something along those lines. Every last one of them acted like I was a senior citizen, which kinda stung, but what can you do?

I took a glance in the pots after they were all gone, and as expected, they’d been completely emptied. There wasn’t so much as a single bean left in either of them, which meant the director wouldn’t be getting a portion after all. I collected my pots, then went over to let him know, but he was unperturbed. “Means the kids ate their fill, so it’s better this way,” according to him.

I wasn’t convinced, though. I knew for a fact he’d been eating the same lackluster meals of potato soup and stale bread as the kids. I decided to take the matter into my own hands, pulled out the final dish of pork and beans I’d stashed in my Item Box for myself, and presented it to him.

“You sure? Isn’t that yours?”

“I’m gonna have to make another meal after I get home regardless, so it’s fine. *They’d* never be satisfied by a single serving,” I replied as I glanced over my shoulder at my familiars. The director nodded, immediately convinced. I pulled out a few of the bread rolls I’d bought from the Rosendahl orphanage for him too, and he practically inhaled them with a vigor unbefitting his age.

“Oh, this is good stuff! No wonder the brats were squabbling for seconds.”

“Thanks, I’m glad you like it. I just threw together a bunch of stuff I happened to have on hand, though, so it wasn’t really anything special.”

“A meal with meat, vegetables and even *beans* in it is about as luxurious as we could ever imagine here. I can count the number of times we eat meat in the average year on one hand.”

“In a whole *year*...?” *Ugh—and here I am, eating the stuff every day. Practically every meal, even!* The sympathy I felt for the kids was slowly starting to morph into a sort of guilt. I had more than enough meat dungeon spoils to last me for ages, so I decided to share some of it with them.

“Umm, I actually made a trip to the meat dungeon recently. Would you like some of the meat that dropped there?”

“What?! Are you serious?!” He leaned in way, waaay too close for comfort. *Whoa there, simmer down, old man. Mind your blood pressure!*

“Okay, please, calm down! Finish your food, and then we can talk.”

“R-Right, sure.” He went back to his meal, once again shoveling it down faster than I’d ever seen from someone his age. “Okay, finished! Now then, you were saying...?”

“That was *fast!* Here, pass me your dish.”

“Forget the dishes! Let’s get to the point!”

“Okay, I get it—the meat, right? I’ve got dungeon pork and beef on hand, and you’re free to take some of both of them.”

“That’s a helluva favor you’re offering, and I’m not about to turn it down!”

“How much do you want? Too much and it’ll spoil, so be careful.” There was no way an impoverished orphanage would have a magical refrigerator like the one I had gotten my hands on recently. Maybe one of the kids had an Item Box they could keep it in, though?

“Yeah, most people would have to watch out for that,” the director replied, “but no worries—I’ve got a trick up my sleeve.”

“Huh? Why, does one of the kids have an Item Box?” *Was I actually right?*

“Hah, as if! A kid with an Item Box wouldn’t be here for a day before some relative took ’em in. They never even end up in orphanages in the first place, really.”

Oh, okay, yeah. That makes sense. I *had* heard about how having an Item Box meant you’d never have to worry about finding stable employment. “Okay, so then what *is* this trick of yours?”

“You’ll see—follow me for a sec.”

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The director led me back to his office. “Wait out here for just a bit,” he said before disappearing inside. A few minutes later I heard him call out, “Okay, c’mon in!” and I accepted the invitation.

Fel and Dora-chan were trailing along after me, by the way. Sui and Dora-chan weren’t an issue, considering the former was napping in my bag and the latter was tiny, but Fel’s presence made the room feel a lot more cramped than it otherwise would. Fel seemed to be feeling a little claustrophobic himself, and curled up into as small of a ball as he could manage.

《Hey, Fel, Dora-chan? It’s a pretty tight fit in here—think you guys could wait outside?》 I asked hopefully, but of course it wouldn’t be that easy.

《**Absolutely not!**》

《Same, no way, not happening!》

《Oh, come on! You guys can’t be comfortable like this, can you?》

《**It may be cramped in here, but it is a thousand times better than the alternative. I refuse to give those imps so much as a second more of my time.**》

《You said it! Those pint-sized demons would be on us again in seconds if we went out there, I just know it!》 They were both grimacing.

《Okay, I get it. Guess we’ll just have to put up with it, then. You can wait here till I’m done.》 Fel and Dora-chan both agreed and made themselves comfortable behind me. As far as they were concerned, it was no longer their problem.

“Sorry they’re so, y’know, big,” I said to the director.

“Hah, looks like the kids really took a toll on ’em! Guess not even a Fenrir can keep up with their energy. Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Ha ha, yeah, looks like it. You do seem to be keeping them happy and healthy.”

“It’s the least I can do—not to mention *all* I can do. But anyway, enough chitchat. This is the trick I was telling you about.” He showed me a slightly worn-out cloth bag, the likes of which I’d seen many times before.

“A bag...? I’m guessing it’s a magic bag, right?”

“Sure is. Had a hunch you’d know one when you saw it. I don’t take you for the loose-lipped type, but just for the record, I don’t want it getting out that I have this thing. That’s also why I couldn’t let you see where I keep it.”

Oooh. That would explain why he had me wait outside, I guess. I already had magic bags of my own, so I didn’t think of them as that big of a deal, but they were valuable enough to net you a small fortune if you sold one. I could appreciate where his caution was coming from.

According to the director, he’d found his bag in a dungeon during his adventuring years. Its storage capacity was somewhere around the middle of the usual spectrum, and time inside the bag passed at about one tenth the speed it did outside.

“I’m sure you can imagine how handy the thing was when I was an adventurer, and I’m still getting plenty of use out of it even now,” he said, giving his bag a gentle pat.

Potatoes and hard brown bread were more or less the orphanage’s staple foods. He could save money by buying them in bulk, but even though their shelf lives were remarkably long, they *would* still spoil eventually. That’s where the magic bag came into play. By buying massive amounts of food at wholesale prices and preserving them in his bag, he’d been able to just barely scrape by in spite of his budget shortcomings.

“In short, I’ll take as much meat as you can spare. The bag’s only half full right now, so there’s plenty of room.”

Can't argue with that. I started unloading chunk after chunk of dungeon pork and beef from my Item Box.

"H-Hey, whoa," he quickly shouted, "That's enough! Stop!"

"Huh? But this is barely any!"

"'Barely any'?! That's a mountain! My bag might only be half full, but it's not *that* big! Just how many of the damn things did you hunt...?" *Ask the shameless gluttons behind me—they hunted whole floors to extinction. Ha, ha, ha...*

"I still have way more than enough left over, though. Are you totally sure you don't want more?"

"Very sure. This is plenty."

Well, if you say so. In the end, I gave him about ten chunks of both dungeon beef and dungeon pork, each weighing in at around twenty kilograms or so. It was barely a drop in the bucket of my overall stock. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui had gone so far overboard hunting down those things, I wasn't sure I'd ever be rid of it all.

"You don't have to hold back for politeness' sake, just so you know!"

"I'm not being polite, I'm being sane. My magic bag might burst if I try to jam any more of that stuff in."

"Speaking of which, I've been curious this whole time—how did an adventurer good enough to have his own magic bag end up becoming an orphanage director?"

I'd obtained my magic bags thanks to my familiars, but I was an exception. It wouldn't have been nearly as easy for him. It takes a skilled adventure to get a hold of one, whether by saving up enough money to buy it or finding it on your own. He'd told me that he'd been A-ranked, but I hadn't really appreciated what that meant about his expertise until he brought the bag out.

"Well, y'know," he mumbled hesitantly. It suddenly struck me that I'd been so caught up in the conversation, I'd asked something really personal without even thinking about it. *Probably overstepped a little there. Whoops.*

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pry. Forget about it."

“Nah, it’s not a big deal. It’s all in the past—by a full thirty years, even.”

According to the director, it was a story you hear all too often in that line of work. It happened just a little while after he turned thirty. He’d gotten married young—a rarity for adventurers—and had a ten-year-old son. Unfortunately, adventuring is the sort of job that keeps you away from home a majority of the time. He was too busy to be with his family.

He’d been at the job for a good long while and had built up plenty of experience, finally rising to rank A. He wasn’t satisfied with stopping there, though. He still had work coming in from all sides—more than ever, even—and at the rate things were going, making it to rank S was totally plausible. He and his party members threw themselves into adventure after adventure, day after day.

“That’s when it all went wrong. I took on a quest that’d keep me away from home for three months...and while I was gone, my son passed away. A plague hit the town, and it took him before we knew it...”

His wife blamed him for their son’s death, and he believed that he deserved it. “I can’t tell you how many times I asked the same questions she did. Why wasn’t I there for him? Wasn’t there something I could’ve done...? Maybe if I’d been there, I could’ve scraped up the money to take him to the church and have them heal him with their magic. Maybe if I’d been there, I could’ve pulled some strings to get a high-grade potion for him. Maybe if I’d been there, he wouldn’t have had to die.”

But what-ifs wouldn’t change what had happened. His son was dead, and his relationship with his wife was irreparably damaged. It hadn’t been long before they had divorced and parted ways. His old adventuring party was more than willing to keep working with him, but he just couldn’t bring himself to return to his old way of life. Lost and heartbroken, he spent his days drowning his sorrow for the son he’d lost in booze—until, that is, the Church of the Goddess of Water came into his life to soothe his pain.

“I’d never been much of a believer in the Goddess, up until then. The temple was nearby, and I just happened to stumble into it one day. Total coincidence. But the priest I met there was a good man. He just listened to me—didn’t blame

me, didn’t try to comfort me. Just listened.”

That was the chance the director needed to get back on his feet. He started attending services at the temple regularly, and it wasn’t long before he became a fervent believer. The director of the orphanage associated with the church happened to retire shortly thereafter, and he immediately stepped up to volunteer for the position.

“My son was gone, but there were still plenty of other kids out there who were living through hard times. I wanted to do something for them. It was my way of trying to make up for my failings, I guess, though I wouldn’t blame you if you thought it was just doing it to feel good about myself.”

His story blew me away. Whether it was for the sake of atonement, or to make himself happy, or whatever, the fact that he’d felt so strongly about helping the children who needed it struck me as honestly incredible. It made me wonder: if I’d been put in that same situation, would I have done the same thing?

In any case, I felt an intense urge to help him keep it up. The kids too—I wanted to do something for them. I withdrew two sacks full of gold coins from my Item Box.

“Here’s the donation I mentioned. I want you to use it for the orphanage.”

“What in the—how much...?”

“I’m an S-ranked adventurer. My income’s nothing to sneeze at, so don’t worry about me. I can afford it.”

“Heh... Can you, now? In that case, I’ll gratefully accept.”

“You should do something about this building, first of all. The place is falling apart. I’m sure the roof leaks like hell, right?”

“Ha ha ha, you know it! Not proud to admit it, but the rain comes through like the roof isn’t even there!”

“Anyway, I should probably be heading home now. Good luck keeping things together here.”

“Thanks... And just so you know, I won’t be forgetting this any time soon. I

owe you one, Mukohda.” He saw me off with a deep bow.

Actually, wait a minute—did he know my name that whole time?

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The director was a good man with a noble spirit. It was obvious that the kids were his top priority, both while they lived at the orphanage and after they went out into the world, so I figured it’d be fine to leave the rest to him. Hopefully he’d start by fixing up that ruin of a building—the kids needed a more sanitary environment to live in.

That was the most that I could do for them, but I hoped it would be enough to improve their lifestyles. I wanted them to live long, fulfilling, self-sufficient lives—not that I had any right to talk about the last part, considering how habitually reliant I was on my familiars.

《**Are we returning home? I require meat the moment we get back.**》

《Sounds great to me! I’m gonna stuff myself sick and spend the rest of the day sleeping it off!》 Fel was walking beside me, and Dora-chan was riding in my usual place on the Fenrir’s back.

I shook my head. 《Sorry, guys, but we can’t head home yet. I still have to drop off my donations at the goddesses’ temples, remember?》

《**Mnh, yes, you did mention that. Indeed, we must not neglect Ninrir’s offering.**》

《Oh, come *on*, we’re seriously not done yet?! I wanna go home and eat meat!》

《**Not this time, Dora. Ninrir has granted me her blessing, and must be repaid in kind. Let us be off!**》 Fel abruptly picked up the pace.

《Okay, okay, fine! Let’s hurry up, get this over with, *then* eat meat till we burst!》 Dora-chan took off and flew alongside Fel.

《Hey, wait! What do you mean, ‘let us be off’?! You don’t even know where Ninrir’s temple is, do you?! Dora-chan, tell Fel to—oh, not you too! Ninrir’s isn’t even the only temple we’re visiting, for crying out loud!》 I dashed after my impatient companions.

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At Fel's insistence we visited Ninrir, the Goddess of Wind's temple first.

"I *think* this is the right building..."

《Whoa, *seriously*? I mean, c'mon, the place is a dump!》 *I mean, it's true, but that's not the sort of thing you're supposed to say out loud, Dora-chan! Take a hint!*

《**A-Are you absolutely certain this is the right temple?**》 asked Fel, bewildered and more than a little put off. The building before us was small for a church, made entirely out of wood, and had most certainly seen better days.

"Pretty positive, yeah..." I hesitantly replied. Isaac's information had been on the money so far, and he'd pointed me to this precise building. I still couldn't quite accept that it was really a temple, though, and ended up wandering awkwardly around its perimeter until a woman who looked just a little younger than me stepped outside. She was dressed in a white habit, so I assumed she was a nun.

"Umm, may I help you?" she said as she walked up to me.

"Ah, umm, I don't suppose this is the Goddess of Wind's temple?"

"The Goddess of Wind?! Are you a believer?!" Her attitude shifted wildly, and her gaze was suddenly full of hope.

"N-No, I wouldn't really say so, sorry," I replied. She sighed, openly disappointed, so I quickly continued. "Umm, I'm not a believer or anything, but I was thinking of making a small donation."

No sooner had the words left my mouth than the nun grabbed onto both of my hands. "You are?! Really?! Thank you so much! May the Goddess of Wind grant you her blessings! Please, come inside!"

Sorry, miss, but I actually already have the Goddess of Wind's blessing. Also, could you let go of my hands, please? She was really squeezing them—I guessed she didn't want to give me the chance to leave before I followed through. Then she noticed Fel and Dora-chan standing behind me and shrieked.

"Ah, the huge wolf and the tiny dragon are my familiars!" I quickly clarified.

“O-Oh, are they? W-Well then, come inside!” Her smile stiffened up, twitching slightly as she led us through the front door. She didn’t let go of my hand for so much as a moment, though. Girl had guts.

Meanwhile, I did an excellent job ignoring Fel’s《**I am no wolf!**》and Dora-chan’s《Don’t call me tiny!》*Pipe down for a minute, would you?*

The nun led us into a modestly-sized hall of worship. Enshrined in its very center was a wooden statue that I could only assume was meant to depict Ninrir. The statue had the kindly, benevolent expression one would expect from a goddess, but I couldn’t exactly describe it as having any sort of divine beauty. Ninrir always insisted that she was beautiful, but, well... I mean, I didn’t have any reason to believe that was actually what she looked like, so I couldn’t make any real judgment on the matter.

“Ahem! Well then, allow me to explain to you the current state of our faith,” said the nun. “You may already be aware, but in comparison to the Goddesses of Fire, Earth, and Water, the Goddess of Wind has considerably fewer followers. *But*, I’ll have you know that we make up for what we lack in numbers with sheer fervor! We express our zeal and dedication to each and every visitor who crosses our door, and...”

Her passionate sermon dragged on and on. She didn’t have to bother giving me the whole sales pitch, though. Isaac had already told me about each of the temples operating in Hirschfeld, so I’d heard most of what she had to say before.

The Kingdom of Erman, the Kingdom of Leonhardt, and the Kingdom of Marveil were all known for allowing freedom of religion among their populaces. People weren’t limited to a single target of worship either—some chose to worship the Goddesses of Fire and Earth at once, for instance, while others chose to worship the Goddesses of Water and Wind. Nobody was under any obligation to practice a religion, so leaving a church was just as easy as joining one. From what I understood, those three countries were the only ones around to offer that degree of freedom.

It was easy to imagine what would become of a priest or nun who ran wild and exploited their followers in that liberated of a religious atmosphere. That

said, there'll always be idiots around, no matter where you go. Every once in a while someone would get it into their head to try and profit off their religion under the table, and without fail they'd be ostracized by their town and abandoned by their followers en masse. That was why the training for priests and nuns in those countries was known for being especially strict and rigorous.

That strictness extended to the way the temples presented themselves, even in the grandest of cathedrals situated in the capitals of the three nations. The buildings themselves were elaborately designed, certainly, and their high priests and priestesses wore clothing befitting their positions, but a conscious effort was always made to avoid displays of excessive opulence.

Thanks to all those efforts, incidents of abuse and illegal activity connected to religious institutions were all but unheard of in this day and age. The Holy Kingdom of Rubanov with its theologically-founded policy of human supremacy was a major exception, of course.

All the information I'd gleaned up until that point, plus Isaac's explanation, painted a pretty clear picture of the state of the local religions. His position had given him cause to meet with all of the local temples' authority figures at one point or another, and according to him none of them seemed problematic in any particular way.

"Umm, excuse me?" said the nun. *Whoops, sorry. Wasn't listening at all.* I didn't really feel obligated to—I'd already decided how much money I'd be donating, and also that I'd be donating the same amount to every temple.

I had a feeling there'd be hell to pay if I decided to prioritize one temple over the others. Who knew what the goddesses would say? I'd be giving thirty gold coins to each church, and that was that, so I wanted to just hand over the cash and head for the next temple as soon as possible. Fel and Dora-chan were getting impatient, after all.

So that's exactly what I did! I passed the nun a hefty sack containing thirty gold coins, and she smiled brightly as she accepted it. "Thank you! Really, thank you so much! May the Goddess of Wind grant you her blessings!" she called out behind me as I made my exit.

I happened to glance over my shoulder a moment later, only to see her peek

into the bag, literally jump for joy and shout "*Yes!* I can finally repair the temple! My dreams are finally coming true!" which was sorta nice to see.

I went on to visit the temples of the Goddesses of Earth, Water, and Fire, donating the same amount to each of them. All of them welcomed my act of charity with open arms and the utmost civility, which put me in a pretty good mood by the end of my excursion.

Incidentally, the temple of the Goddess of Earth—that is, Kisharle's temple—had the greatest number of worshipers present at the time I stopped by. The Goddess of Water, Ruka, was a close second, followed by the Goddess of Fire, Agni. Kisharle's really stood out—not only did she have the most followers, the actual temple itself was also noticeably fancier than the rest. *Ninrir should really stop thinking about sweets and start thinking about her followers one of these days.*

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"The time has come! Bring out the meat!"

《Hell yeah! Meat, meat, meat!》

"I know, I *know*, settle down!" The instant we got home, Fel and Dora-chan started kicking up a huge fuss. Meat this, meat that, they just wouldn't give it a rest.

《Are we eating meat? Sui wants some too!》 Sui sprung out of my bag. Fel and Dora-chan's tantrum must've woken it up.

"You left us to suffer with those horrible little monsters! You *owe* us this!"

《You said it! I'm telling you, those kids were demons! I could *feel* them draining the life outta me, I swear!》

"Okay, okay! You want tons of meat, you'll get it! I don't have time to make anything super complicated, though, so I'll be keeping it simple."

"Simple how? What will you make?"

"Hmm... How 'bout a stir-fry? That way we could have a nice balance of meat and veggies."

Fel scowled, bared his teeth, and growled, **"You will make *meat.*"** *Okay, jeez,*

you don't have to get that mad about it!

"Okay, then how about ginger-fried orc? Or maybe ginger-fried dungeon meat?" I used a store-bought sauce for that recipe, so it was easy enough to whip up in a hurry.

"Ginger-fried meat? Very well." Fel was already starting to drool. He must've been thinking back to the last time we had the dish. *Gross, dude.*

《Oh, yeah, that stuff's pretty tasty. Sounds good to me!》

《Sui likes it too!》 That brief exchange was all it took to put Dora-chan and Sui in the mood for ginger-fried meat.

"Okay, guess that's settled. Meat-wise, hmm...how about dungeon pork? I still have a ton of the stuff in stock, and I've got some fresh-cooked rice too. We can have ginger-fried pork bowls." They were going on and on about how they only wanted meat, but ginger-fried dishes are really strong, flavor-wise. You need something to eat them with, and rice is the best option in my book.

"Very well, but do not think to slip any vegetables into the dish. I expect to see nothing but meat atop my bowl of rice."

"Not even any cabbage? You sure? Means you won't get that nice crunch!"

"I am quite sure. Meat. Only. And lots of it."

《Same over here, thanks. I wanna really stuff myself with meat today.》

《Sui wants looots of meat too!》

Fine, fine. Sheesh, you three never change. I whipped up some ginger-fried pork bowls using store-bought sauce, piling my familiars' bowls high with meat and not bothering with the customary bed of shredded cabbage between the meat and the rice.

"More meat!"

"*More*? Are you serious? I've already piled up a mountain of the stuff!"

"That is not enough. More!" At Fel's urging, I piled his bowl even higher.

"That *has* to be enough, right?"

"More!" I kept building up the meat stack.

“Is *this* enough for you? I hope so, because it’s not getting any bigger than that. It’d fall over.” In the end, I’d constructed a towering pillar of ginger-fried pork.

“Yes, this will suffice.” Fel finally looked satisfied by his meat tower. It went without saying that Dora-chan and Sui demanded their own as well.

《Now *that’s* a meal I can sink my teeth into!》

《It looks so yummy!》

The trio set about bringing down their ginger-fried pork mountains. I thought it’d take them some time to work through it all, and could only chuckle when my expectations were betrayed and they polished them off in the blink of an eye. They weren’t *really* satisfied until several bowls later, each piled just as tall as the first ones were.

Fel and Dora-chan were drained after playing with the orphanage’s kids, and fell asleep right after finishing their meals. It was rare for Dora-chan to turn down an opportunity for a bath, which really drove in how exhausted he was. Sui and I weren’t nearly that tired, though, and took our time soaking in the tub. When we returned to our room, we were greeted by Fel and Dora-chan’s incredibly loud snores.

“Heh, can’t believe those two can sleep through their own racket.”

《They sound so funny!》

“Right?”

Sui and I snickered for a moment as we watched the two of them snore away, then retired to bed as well.

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The next morning I ate breakfast, then stopped by the Merchant’s guild to drop off the key to the house I’d rented. After that, I headed straight for the Adventurer’s guild with my familiars in tow.

《**Once we have concluded our business in this town, we shall head straight for the dungeon,**》 declared Fel. He and the others were in high spirits as we made our way through the city streets.

I entered the Adventurer's guild and stepped up to the counter, where a staff member immediately led me over to Isaac. I found him in the Guildmaster's office, his nose buried in a stack of paperwork.

"Ah, welcome back, Mukohda! Do excuse me—I'll be with you in just a moment!" He redoubled his pace, scribbling intensely onto a piece of parchment.

"Oh, it's fine, I can wait! Don't mind me." And wait I did, sipping a cup of tea that the receptionist from before prepared for me.

Not too long after that, Isaac looked up from his work once again. "All right, sorry for the wait! Now then—hmnh!" he grunted as he heaved four hefty sacks onto his desk. "Your reward for slaying the woodland tyrant python was 230 gold coins, with the materials you wished to sell adding on another 180. That brings your total payment to 410 gold coins."

He then stood up and walked over to what looked like some sort of massive rug that was leaning against the wall. He dragged it over and laid it down next to me. I'd noticed it the moment I walked into the room, and had a feeling I was looking at the python's skin.

"This is one third of the skin, as you requested." *Yup, knew it. How the hell did just a third of the thing end up being this big and heavy? I might've miscalculated this—maybe I should've asked for a fifth of the skin, or even a sixth.*

It was way bigger than I'd been counting on, but since it was a gift for Lambert, I figured that wouldn't be an enormous problem. If it looked like I was making him uncomfortable when I handed it over, I could always ask him to make me a couple bags or whatever out of it in exchange. Or maybe I could have him make some handy little trinkets for everyone back at home? I could work all that out with Lambert when the time came. For the moment, I stored the bags full of cash and the woodland tyrant python's skin in my magic bag.

"I'll be off, then," I said, my business already concluded.

"Yes, I suppose you have to," replied Isaac. "It's such a shame, though—you know you're welcome in this town for as long as you'd like to stay, right?"

Considering how gung ho my familiars were about the dungeon? Yeah, that wasn't happening. Not to mention that I had a feeling I'd have all sorts of unpleasant jobs shoved onto me if I hung out in this town for too long. I forced a smile and explained that I really had to be leaving right away. Isaac followed me downstairs as I left—according to him, seeing me off was the least he could do.

"Well, thanks for everything," I said with a wave.

"The pleasure was all mine, I assure you! You saved my skin by taking on that emergency quest, and I can't thank you enough. Do stop by Hirschfeld again some time! Maybe if we get lucky, the guild won't have shipped me off to another town yet! Ha ha ha..." His pain was absolutely palpable.

Oh, right, almost forgot! Maybe this'll pick up his spirits a little. I surreptitiously retrieved a bottle of Divine Medicine: Hair Growth Power from my item box.

"Here—I wanted to give you something as thanks for all your help," I said as I presented the bottle to him, along with a bottle of shampoo that was meant to stimulate hair growth. Considering the state of the poor man's head, he'd need all the help he could get.

"What are these?"

"Umm, I guess you could say it's medicine for your hair? You start by using this shampoo to wash your hair, rinse it all out carefully, and then rub a little bit of this tonic all over your scalp. Like, really massage it in there."

Isaac's eyes widened as he accepted the bottles. "C-Could this be the hair tonic that's thrown Leonhardt's nobility into an uproar...?"

Oh, he's heard of it? "I'm surprised the rumors have already spread all the way to Erman, but yeah. I just so happen to be acquainted with the merchant who's been selling the stuff, and he gave me a few samples a while back."

"*M-Mukohdaaaaaa!* You are truly, *truly* the fastest friend a man could ever ask for!" Then he broke down in a fit of sobbing, howling tears as he embraced me.

"O-Oh jeez, you're seriously crying?! Also, let go! Get off me, please!"

“Mukohdaaaaaa!”

“Okay, but seriously, I’d really like some personal space! Isaac?!” I was not enjoying the experience of getting hugged by a balding old man in the slightest. “F-Fel, help me out here!”

《**Help yourself,**》 grunted Fel as he turned his back to me. *Are you seriously still holding a grudge about the kids yesterday?!*

“D-Dora-chan!” I tried to appeal to the tiny dragon next, but his back was already turned to me as well. *Not you too! M-Maybe Sui can get me out of this?* My hopes were immediately dashed. Sui was in my bag, out like a light.

I tried as hard as I possibly could to pry him off me, but for a balding geezer, Isaac was astonishingly strong. I couldn’t budge the guy.

“Thank you! Thank youuu!” he wailed.

“Y-Yeah, okay, you’re welcome, just get off me!”

Regrettably, this was all transpiring in the early morning at an Adventurer’s guild. Needless to say, the place was absolutely full of adventurers, almost all of whom were watching our exchange with great interest. I definitely heard one of them mutter something about the guildmaster having a lovers’ quarrel, to top it all off. *No, he’s not! Balding old men are* not *my type! Absolutely* not*!*

“It’s not what you thiiiiiink!”

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“*Ugh*, that was the *worst*!” I somehow managed to explain away the horrific misunderstanding that I’d almost fallen victim to, then fled Hirschfeld as quickly as I could possibly manage.

《**Ha ha ha ha! And now, we are even!**》

《Yeah! Serves him right for not helping us yesterday!》

Grrr...

《**Now then, let us make for the dungeon at once!**》

“Dammit, I *really* don’t wanna agree with you two, but I agree with you two! Let’s get as far from this town as possible!”

And so we set off once more for the dungeon city of Brixt.

Chapter 8: Finally, Brixt!

"So that's Brixt, huh? I guess all dungeon cities must be pretty big."

《**Finally, we arrive! We could have made it here much sooner, had I had my way.**》

"I might not've made it here at all, if you'd had your way! Our only choice is for me to ride on your back, so we just have to live with it." *I know for a fact that I'd do something right on top of you that you'd be really unhappy about if you ran any faster with me aboard.*

For all Fel's griping about the trip taking an age, a typical carriage ride from Karelina to Brixt would take somewhere in the vicinity of two months. We'd made the trip in a total of three weeks, so as far as I was concerned we'd made excellent time.

《Oh, who friggin' cares?! Let's just hurry up! The dungeon's waiting for us!》

《**Yes, indeed. At long last, the dungeon stands before us! Though I am told that you humans consider them nigh insurmountable obstacles, *I* could hardly be more excited.**》 Fel and Dora-chan's eyes were blazing with anticipation as they proceeded toward the city gates, and I barely managed to stop them before disaster struck.

"*Whoa*, wait, wait!"

《**What?**》

《Yeah, what gives? We're finally at the dungeon! Let's go already!》

"No can do! You two were planning on ignoring the line and marching right into town, weren't you? That's totally out of the question!"

《**Grr...**》

《Peh! We have to wait in line after all?》

“Oh, so you *were* doing it on purpose.”

《**Why must we waste an age in line each and every time we enter a town? I shall consent to waiting for your sake, but do not allow yourself to forget: I am a Fenrir.**》

“So? What, you think that just because you’re a Fenrir, you can skip the line and walk straight into town?”

《**Yes, I can. It would be child’s play. Neither this gate nor any of the humans before it could stand in my way.**》 Fel snorted indignantly, his expression telling me that he thought his answer was obvious. I sighed.

“Are you planning on starting a war with this whole country, Fel? Brushing aside the gate guards and breaking into town’s the worst move you could possibly make. You’d cause a huge incident, and then you could kiss going into the dungeon goodbye.”

《**Hmmph!**》

‘Hmmph’ yourself! I knew that Fel wasn’t exaggerating and that he *could* smash his way into town without breaking a sweat, but he’d be in no position to go dungeoneering after pulling a move like that.

《Oh, so taking out the gate guards is the problem?》 said Dora-chan. 《In that case, we can just jump the walls! Sure, you told me not to in all the other towns we’ve hit up, but think about it—we’d just have to sneak around to a part of the wall you can’t see from the gates and hop right over! Nobody would even notice!》

I sighed again. Dora-chan was just as bad at anticipating the consequences of his actions as Fel was. “Do you have any idea how much you and Fel stick out in town? Even if we managed to sneak in, we’d get busted in no time and it’d turn into just as big a problem as Fel’s idea. Worst case, we could get banned from ever entering the town again! That’d mean kissing the dungeon goodbye for good.”

《Ugh...》

“When all’s said and done, the best plan’s to wait in line, go through the usual process and enter the town the proper way, even if it does take a little more

time. Then we won't have any problems with the authorities and can explore the dungeon for as long as you want."

Fel and Dora-chan looked really unhappy about my proposal, but they plodded over to the end of the line anyway. That almost caused a problem in and of itself, of course, but a little running around and a few frantic explanations that they were my familiars later, everyone calmed down again. We found ourselves with a surprising amount of space in front of us, even though we were at the back of the line, but I couldn't really blame people for keeping a healthy distance.

Some time later we made it through the line and finally entered Brixt proper. On our way in, a soldier who looked a bit higher on the chain of command than the rest of the gate guards nervously approached us and said, "Welcome to Brixt! I hope your time in our fair city is pleasant and fruitful!"

Apparently, the guards in this town had received the same orders from the monarchy I'd learned about at the border.

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《Masteeer, aren't we going to the dungeon?》 Sui, who had finally woken up, was practically quivering with anticipation for our long-awaited dungeon crawl.

"Nah, not yet. It's pretty late today, and I'll need at least a day to get our meals ready, so I'm thinking the day after tomorrow or so."

"What?! Today may be unworkable, I grant you that, but the day after tomorrow is too long to wait!"

《Yeah! It took ages getting here, screw more waiting! Let's go in tomorrow!》

The instant I answered Sui's question, Fel and Dora-chan jumped into the conversation to try and overrule my plan. I understood how they felt—they'd made it *very* clear how excited they were—but it had taken a pretty long time to choose a house to rent, and I still had a lot of preparations to get done before I'd be ready for the dungeon.

I'd stopped by the Merchant's guild to rent a house first thing after I got into town, as usual, but it had been a lot more time-consuming than I'd grown to expect. Brixt's dungeon was notorious for its difficulty, but the items and

treasures that dropped in it were proportionately more valuable than those you'd find in a typical dungeon. As a natural result, adventurers flocked to the city in droves.

The fact that the dungeon was so hard meant that a lot of the adventurers who came to the city were high-rankers, and high-ranking adventuring parties tended to have a fair sum of coin to throw around. Those who ended up staying in Brixt long-term would often choose to rent a house, like I always did. Perhaps thanks to that fact, there weren't any available houses of the sort I'd usually consider.

The houses I was shown were all either too small, too old, or just too unappealing for me or my familiars. It took an awful lot of searching before we finally found the right place for us: a fifteen-room mansion surrounded by a spacious garden. It was located in a very convenient residential district that offered easy access to both the shopping district and the Adventurer's guild, which was a prime location for my purposes.

The only downside and the only reason why it hadn't already been rented out was the fact that its rent was outrageously expensive. A week's stay cost over a hundred gold coins, so no wonder it was still available. Even I hesitated to pay that much for a single week, but Fel and Dora-chan took an immediate liking to it and insisted that it was perfect. Sui, meanwhile, was fast asleep and didn't get to contribute its opinion this time around.

I rented the place for two weeks, and the guild cut me a deal, rounding off the price to an even two hundred gold coins. I figured I could just tell myself I was doing my part to stimulate the local economy. It wasn't every day I got to feel like a real celebrity, so might as well savor it.

But anyway, the dungeon was a way more pressing matter at that moment than my housing situation. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were all so excited to dive in that they couldn't bear to wait a second longer, and were raising a massive fuss about how they wanted to go tomorrow.

"We go tomorrow! Tomorrow, I say! I have waited far too long for this, and I shall not wait a moment longer!"

《Yeah, me neither! I've been looking forward to this place ever since I heard

it’s supposed to be super hard! We finally made it here, the dungeon’s right in front of us! Why not jump in right away?!》

《Sui wants to hurry and go to the dungeon soon too!》

“Hmm... You know we’re going to be in that dungeon for a long time, though. We have to be careful about our food situation. If the place is as hard as they say it is, you’re gonna want good food to keep you going throughout the trip, right? I know for a fact that you’re all going to complain if whatever I serve you isn’t up to your standards.”

“Mnh, that may be so... B-But, of course, you can just cook within the dungeon! You have an ample supply of meat already, do you not?”

《Yeah, that’s the ticket! You’ve got that whatsit—ah, right, that magic stove, so you can cook anywhere, even in the middle of the dungeon!》

“Sure, but if I’m cooking in the dungeon I won’t be able to use anything I have to buy from my Online Supermarket. It’d be a disaster if one of the other adventurers caught me using it, you know! If you’re okay with me not using Online Supermarket ingredients, then sure, I guess that’d work! You’ll just have to live with the food tasting way, way worse.” Pretty much all of the secret flavor bombs I made regular use of—sauces, condiments, all that good stuff—came from my Online Supermarket.

《N-No way, nuh-uh! I wanna eat tasty food, even in the dungeon!》

《Sui too! Sui wants good food in the dungeon!》

“Well said, both of you! The flavor of our meals must not be compromised under any circumstances. But if the prying eyes of other adventurers pose a problem, we need only hide where they cannot find us! If this dungeon is as challenging as it is purported to be, it should offer ample space and plenty of corners to conceal ourselves in.”

《Yeah, Fel’s right! Worst case, I can fly out ahead and find a place like that for us!》

Fel and Dora-chan loomed over me, their faces pressed uncomfortably close to mine. Even Sui, who’d climbed up onto Fel’s head at some point in the conversation, said《Masteeer, Sui wants to go to the dungeon soon!》

“*Okay, okay*, I get it! We’ll go tomorrow! Are you happy?!”

“Indeed, I am satisfied.”

《Hell yeah!》

《Dungeon, dungeon! Yippee!》

Fel’s massive tail was wagging up a storm, Dora-chan was taking advantage of the room’s tall ceiling to do dramatic flips and spins in the air, and Sui was jumping for joy at an incredibly high speed.

“With that decided, all that is left is for you to treat us to something befitting the occasion for dinner tonight! We must be in the best shape possible for the task ahead. Ah, I know—feed us more of your otherworldly food! The ingredients from your world make us stronger, so they seem perfectly suited for our purposes.”

“No way, not happening.”

“Wh-Why not?!”

“Because if I feed you food from my world, you’ll be way too strong to deal with! Especially you, Fel—I can imagine you being so full of energy, you’d run off on your own to conquer the whole dungeon yourself.”

《Ha ha ha, yeah, I wouldn’t put it past him!》

“Cease your laughter, Dora! You would do the same! And Sui as well, I suspect—it has developed an appropriate taste for battle, as of late.”

《You got that right. The three of us were made for fighting!》

《Huuuh? Sui doesn’t get it, but Sui wants to fight lots of bad guys!》

《Hah, yup, there it goes!》 *Come on, Dora-chan, this isn’t a joke! Why’re you three so into killing stuff, anyway?*

They *did* have a point, though—if we were going into the dungeon the very next day, it made sense to cook something that’d help us give it our all. We’d be challenging the hardest dungeon out there, so we’d have to keep our energy levels high.

“Okay, here’s the deal: I won’t *only* use ingredients from my world, but I *will*

make something that'll help you guys fight your hardest," I compromised. Thankfully, our trip to the meat dungeon meant I had plenty of ingredients fit for the occasion without breaking out the Online Supermarket for the big stuff.

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My mission was to make food that'd let them keep their stamina up and take on the dungeon at full strength. A certain recipe immediately sprang to mind as the perfect stamina food: I could make a liver and chive stir-fry! Some fresh pork livers had dropped in the meat dungeon, so it'd be a quick, simple recipe that would give my familiars all the energy they could possibly ask for.

Plus, most importantly, it'd been a long time since I'd last had any and I was sorta craving it. Liver isn't exactly the sort of food I feel the need to eat on a daily basis, but every once in a while I get the urge to cook some up, and it's always hard to resist. My plan was pretty much set in stone at that point, though it *did* feel a little silly to make a low-class dish like that in what was far and away the most luxurious kitchen out of all the houses I'd rented up to that point.

Anyway, I started out by ordering some ingredients from my Online Supermarket. I got garlic chives, bean sprouts, and those little tubes of pre-grated ginger and garlic. I could've grated them myself, I guess, but I felt like cutting corners. I also got oyster sauce, some chicken bouillon powder, and milk, which I'd soak the liver in to take the edge off its natural bitterness.

I had all the seasonings I needed on hand, so that was all I had to buy for the moment. I ordered the ingredients and got right to cooking.

"All right, let's start by prepping the liver!" I muttered to myself. First, you have to clean the outer membranes off the dungeon pork livers, wash away any leftover blood, and chop them up into thin slices. Then you soak them in milk for about fifteen or twenty minutes. That helps get rid of any leftover clotted blood and majorly improves their flavor.

While the liver's soaking, you can chop the garlic chives into roughly five-centimeter-long pieces and prepare the marinade for the livers and the seasonings for the stir-fry. The liver marinade consists of sake, soy sauce, grated ginger, and grated garlic. The stir-fry seasonings, meanwhile, consist of oyster

sauce, soy sauce, sugar, and the chicken bouillon powder. I like to use a potato starch slurry to help blend the flavors together and thicken the whole thing into a sauce during the stir-fry stage, so I got some of that ready as well.

When the livers are done with their milk bath, you wash them clean again, blot them dry with paper towels, dump them into the marinade, give them a gentle mix, and let them sit for another five minutes or so. Then you coat each piece of liver with potato starch and pan-fry them in sesame oil, giving them a flip to make sure they're thoroughly browned on all sides.

After each piece of liver is heated through, transfer it from the pan to a plate lined with paper towels and let the excess oil drain off. Then you warm up some more sesame oil to cook the garlic chives and bean sprouts in. Once they're partially cooked, add the liver back in along with the remaining seasonings and stir-fry it all together. The potato starch slurry goes in at the very end of the cooking process—once the sauce has started to thicken up, it's finished!

"All right, it's done! And man, does it ever smell great! This stuff goes great with rice, so maybe I should put together some rice bowls for Fel and the others."

"Is it done? Hurry up and hand it over!"

《Yeah, hurry up!》

《Food, food!》 My familiars crowded into the kitchen, unable to wait a second longer.

"Oh, come on, guys! I *just* finished—I'll bring it out into the living room, so wait there! It'll just be a minute." They reluctantly obeyed, plodding out of the kitchen once more. I quickly plated up their food and carried it over to them.

"Here you go, the perfect stamina food: liver and chive stir-fry! I made it into rice bowls—trust me, it's really good this way."

"Liver and chives? Is that truly the source of this delectable aroma?" *Hey, c'mon, why do you look so upset about that?*

《It smells good, sure, but is this stuff even meat?》 said Dora-chan, who looked equally skeptical. Sui, meanwhile, was already cautiously tasting a small piece of its meal.

《It's good! Oh, wow, this is so yummy!》 it exclaimed. *Yeah, I know, right?* One taste was all it took to sell Sui on the dish, and it dug in without hesitation.

"See? Sui says it's good! And yes, Dora-chan, for your information it *is* meat. It's made out of dungeon pork organs—their livers, specifically. It's packed full of nutrients, so it's perfect for keeping your stamina up."

"Their organs? The organ meat you prepared before was indeed delicious, I must confess, but it seems to me that this dish contains far too many vegetables."

"Well, yeah, it's a liver and chive stir-fry. The chives are sorta important. Same for the bean sprouts, even if they aren't in the name."

"Nevertheless..."

Fel was obviously still displeased with the dish's veggie-heavy nature. *I know you're not happy about it, but I also know you'll eat it in the end regardless, so hurry up and cut to the chase.*

《Hey, Fel, this stuff's actually pretty good! The seasoning's really solid, and he was right about it going well with rice,》 said Dora-chan, backing me up. I hadn't even noticed, but at some point he'd started devouring his bowl.

《Master, Sui wants seconds! It really is good, Uncle Fel, honest!》 Sui was there to help me out too. Its request for seconds drove the point in even further.

"Hmph!"

"Don't 'hmph' me—just try it, okay? I've served you plenty of dishes with vegetables in them so far, and were any of them nasty enough that you couldn't eat them? This one's no exception; I promise it's not gross at all!"

Finally, Fel reluctantly took a bite. He chewed slowly, then took another bite, and another, gradually picking up speed until he was scarfing his dinner down at his usual pace. **"W-Well, it is not *entirely* intolerable. I would prefer it with more organ meat, of course,"** he said once he'd finished, casually acting like he'd never been reluctant to try it in the first place. I chuckled, then dug into my own bowl.

“I knew it—liver stir-fry and white rice are a match made in heaven!” As I took alternating bites of rice and stir-fry, I was suddenly struck by a craving for beer. I used to have one every time I made this dish. They’re another perfect match.

I popped another piece of liver into my mouth. “The sauce is perfect too,” I observed. “It’s definitely better when it’s a little thick like this! There’s nothing super special about any of the flavors here, but they all work together so well! Man, a beer would go *perfectly* with this stuff!”

On the one hand, I’d be heading into a dungeon the next day, but on the other, how much harm could a single beer possibly do? I pulled out one of the chilled cans I kept stocked in my item box, popped it open, and took a long swig.

“I *knew* it—*man*, that’s good! No liver stir-fry’s complete without a beer to go with it!”

“That is alcohol, is it not? Will it not impair you in the dungeon tomorrow?” Fel, sharp-sighted as ever, caught my little indulgence immediately.

“It’s fine, I’m just having one can.”

“Then I shall not complain, but do keep in mind: tomorrow is the day. We will make for the dungeon, whether you want to or not.”

“I know, I know!”

“Good. And with that settled, I require seconds.”

《Same here! This stuff gets better with every bite!》

《Sui wants seconds too!》

“What’d I tell you? Liver and chive stir-fries are great! I made tons, so you can have as much as you want.”

We all stuffed ourselves until we were thoroughly satisfied.



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Fel was already fast asleep by the time we finished our evening bath and retired to the living room. Dora-chan and Sui chugged down their post-bath bottles of fruit-flavored milk, then quickly followed his example. I guess they wanted to be in tip-top shape for the dungeon tomorrow.

I sighed. "*Tomorrow...* I'll have Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui there with me, and my Perfect Defense skill means I *should* be fine no matter what happens, but I still just can't stand dungeons. I don't know how *anyone* can look a monster right in the eye and not freeze up. Everyone's so excited about it, though—I can't go letting them down now. Guess I'll just have to tough it out!"

I drained the last sip of the can of coffee I'd been drinking, and was about to go get ready for bed when a thought struck me. "Oh, right, the offerings! It hasn't quite been a full month since last time, but going by the usual schedule, it's only a week away. I might end up missing it if I go into the dungeon first—actually, I'm *positive* I'll miss it. No chance of us making it back to the surface within a week, considering..."

That said, it was already locked in that we would enter the dungeon the very next day, so I didn't have the time to listen to all of the gods' detailed requests for a month's worth of stuff. I considered my options, and eventually settled on sending them two weeks' worth of offerings immediately to tide them over.

Considering how Dolan and Aveling's dungeons had gone, I couldn't imagine that the trip would take much more than two weeks, even if this dungeon *was* significantly harder than the other two. I also had the teleportation stone that the members of Ark had given me. If the trip wasn't going well, I could always return to the surface once we reached the thirtieth floor. And really, I'd only rented the house we were staying in for two weeks, so I had to be back within that period no matter what happened.

I carefully planned out my proposal. I decided to offer them a two-week advance delivery of offerings, plus the usual full month's worth as soon as I returned from the dungeon, even if I managed to make it back quicker than the two weeks I was planning on. They wouldn't lose anything by accepting my

offer, so I figured they'd be fine with it. The deal would actually be pretty lopsided in their favor, but since I was the one renegotiating on them, it didn't seem right to drive a super-hard bargain.

All right, seems like a good plan to me! Let's see what the gods think about it.

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"Umm, hello, everyone? Are you listening?"

The instant I called out to the gods, the sound of them stampeding over was beamed directly into my mind. ＜*Of course we are!*＞ shouted Ninrir. ＜*Cake, dorayaki, sweets! Gimme!*＞

＜*Oh?*＞ said Kisharle. ＜*Isn't it still a little early for the month's offerings?*＞

＜*Yeah, hasn't quite been a month yet since last time,*＞ agreed Agni. ＜*Not that I'm complaining!*＞ she quickly clarified.

＜*...Ice cream.*＞

＜*Woohoo, whiskey time!*＞

＜*I've been waiting for this! My whiskey stocks were just running low. Nice timing!*＞

Not that this is anything new, but they showed up the very second I called them, huh? A solid half of them are ridiculously hyped up about it too. Is it just me, or do the gods have surprisingly little to keep them busy?

＜*Not at all! I can't speak for the others, but I'll have you know I have very little free time.*＞

＜*Oh,* sure *you don't, Kisharle! C'mon, you're just as bored as the rest of us, and you know it.*＞

＜*Hee hee hee! I'll thank you for keeping your mouth* shut *when it comes to matters that don't concern you, Agni!*＞

＜*Yikes, don't blow a gasket, lady.*＞

It doesn't matter how friendly the words you use are when your tone of voice is that freaky, Kisharle. "Oh, right! I made donations to your temples the other day."

＜*We saw!*＞ replied Kisharle. ＜*Your piety is most appreciated!*＞

＜*Well done indeed!*＞ said Ninrir.

＜*Yeah, thanks!*＞ added Agni.

＜*Good work,*＞ concluded Ruka, several seconds after the others.

“I went around to all the goddesses’ temples, but, well...” There hadn’t been temples to Hephaestos or Vahagn in Hirschfeld, so I couldn’t donate to them. It was awkward to say out loud, but that didn’t stop the gods from hearing it.

＜*Of course they didn’t have temples; those two are a couple of small-fries!*＞ said Ninrir. ＜*They barely have any followers, and what few they have are just barely scraping by.*＞

＜*Ugh... Th-The dwarves are crazy about me, though! They’re my dedicated worshipers!*＞

＜*I may not have many followers on this continent, but I’ve got temples all over the place the next continent over!*＞

＜*Go on, bluff more, weaklings! Bwa ha ha ha!*＞ Ninrir was having a field day belittling Hephaestos and Vahagn, but she wasn’t really in any position to talk, as far as I could tell. Her temple had been so run-down, I was honestly shocked.

＜*H-Hey!*＞

Oh, whoops, guess she was still reading my mind. Still true, though.

＜*Gwa ha ha ha ha, the boy knows what he’s talking about! Who’d brag about a wreck of a temple like yours?!*＞

＜*Aha ha ha ha, you said it! I’d rather have no temple at all than a temple like* that*!*＞

＜*Grrr! I’ll get you for this, just you wait!*＞

＜*All right, that’s enough of that,*＞ interjected Kisharle. ＜*This is going nowhere, and we have more important matters to discuss.*＞

＜*But these jerks—*＞

＜*You were the one who started it, weren’t you, Ninrir?*＞

<Grrrrrr!>

<That's more than enough growling for one day, thank you very much. Let's get back on track—why is it that you've contacted us early this month?>

I could always count on Kisharle to get to the point, at least. "Umm, well, long story short," I began, going on to summarize my current circumstances and suggest my two-week holdover offering plan.

<I see, I see. I've no objections to this plan! It's certainly not a bad deal, on our end.>

<I'm in too!> shouted Ninrir. *<So hand over the sweets! I need cake and dorayaki, and I need it now!>*

<Oh, put a sock in it, Ninrir,> sighed Agni. *<But yeah, I'm fine with that too. You'll be in the dungeon for two weeks tops, and if you do get back early that just makes the deal even sweeter for us. No reason to turn it down.>*

<...I don't mind.>

<Long as I get whiskey out of the deal, I've got no problem with that!>

<Same! Agni's right, we've got nothing to lose here.>

All right! Glad they all went for it. "Okay then, I'll take your requests now! Keep it short, if you can. I'm hitting the dungeon tomorrow, so I want to get this finished and go to bed as soon as possible."

<A sound plan,> said Kisharle. *<I'm expecting you to give this dungeon everything you have. Your next Tenant's riding on your performance, after all! Go on, Ninrir, hurry up and tell him what you want.>*

<What do you mean, 'hurry up'?! You're not the boss of me!>

<Then I suppose you won't mind going last this time?>

<Wh-What're you talking about?! I never said I wouldn't *tell him! I have the right to be first!>*

<Then would you please *hurry up with your request?>*

<Grrrrrr!>

More growling, really? Come on—I just *asked them to make it quick.* "I'd really

like to get this done soon, Ninrir. Should I put you down as not wanting anything this time?”

＜*Graaah, of course I do! I want sweets, cake, and dorayaki! What else would I ask for?! I haven’t had a single otherworldly sweet since I ate my last dorayaki a week ago! Hurry up! Cake! Dorayaki! Hurryyyyyy!*＞

She ate her last one a week ago...? But I gave her tons of them—not to mention all that cake! She never changes, I swear. I opened up Fumiya’s menu and quickly filled my shopping cart up with her favorite sweets.

They happened to be running a special on cakes made with domestically-grown fruits, so I threw in all the special cakes that were tied to the event. Roll cakes and shortcakes with chunks of melon in them, a pineapple chiffon cake, a summer citrus tart, and on and on.

As usual, the cardboard box I placed her offerings in vanished the second I let go of it. A moment later I heard Ninrir squeal with glee, followed by pounding footsteps. *It’s almost painful to listen to...*

＜*Ninrir...*＞ sighed Kisharle.

“Umm, what exactly happened over there?”

＜*She sprinted off toward her quarters, clutching your offering like her life depended on it. I really can’t believe that girl sometimes. In any case, it’s my turn next! I know just what I want, thankfully...*＞

Kisharle, of course, requested her usual skin lotion. She also asked for several varieties of bath salts, soap, shampoos, and conditioners. I’d mentioned a while back that some people change up which beauty products they use on a day-to-day basis, depending on their mood, and she’d taken quite a liking to the concept.

Apparently the act of pondering which otherworldly shampoo or whatever would have the best fragrance for any given day was exciting for her, somehow, so she wanted a wider variety of options to choose from. She had three soaps, shampoos, and conditioners to choose from at the moment, and wanted at least five or so of each in total.

I know I’m the one who suggested this in the first place, but five of each? Isn’t

that going a little overboard? I wasn't about to second-guess her request, though. Looking through the menu, I got the impression that botanical products had been all the rage lately, and bought several of those for her. Most of the products I'd sent her up to that point had been floral-scented, so I figured something a little more herby might be nice.

I sent over her offering, which she accepted with a ＜*Thank you. I'm expecting great things from your next Tenant!*＞ However many expectations she piled on me, though, it wouldn't change the fact that I had no control over whether or not a drugstore would be an option. I *did* warn her about that, at least. Her absolute, relentless tenacity when it came to beauty products was almost a little scary.

＜*'Kay, I'm up next! I want beer, surprise surprise.*＞

Agni's request was the same as ever: a case of S-company's premium beer, Y-bisu's beer, and S-company's black beer. I picked out a few random six packs to top her order off with, then sent it out.

＜*Great, thanks! Time to head home and crack open a cold one! Oh, and good luck in the dungeon!*＞

The only thing I'll need luck with is not getting in my familiars' way, frankly.

＜*...Ice cream. And the same limited edition cakes as Ninrir.*＞

That'd be Ruka. Coming right up! I'd gotten the impression that she was fond of vanilla ice cream, so I started out by getting her a bunch of that. I picked up a few of the little ice cream cups that Fumiya sold, plus one of each of the family-sized cartons of vanilla that my standard Online Supermarket had. I threw in the same cakes I'd gotten for Ninrir, sent it off, and heard a very quiet ＜*Thank you*＞ in response. Ruka was so taciturn for the most part, it always felt especially nice to hear her thank me.

＜*Okay, we're next!*＞

＜*You can go ahead and handle our offerings together!*＞

Hephaestos and Vahagn decided to file a joint request this time around. They wanted just one bottle of their usual world's best whisky, plus as many different whiskeys that they had yet to try as I could possibly send along with it. That was

easy enough to accomplish—I just paged over to Liquor Shop Tanaka's whiskey ranking and shoved all of the reasonably priced ones into my cart.

The first one I picked out was a bourbon whiskey known for making up roughly forty percent of the global whiskey market. Considering its overwhelming popularity, it was hardly surprising that the stuff was on the cheap end of the spectrum. It was renowned for its flavor in spite of that, though—it was brewed from corn as its base, and had a mellow quality that made it go down exceptionally smoothly. It was the sort of whiskey you could drink on a daily basis, or even at dinner time.

Next up, I chose an Irish whiskey that was known for being priced very reasonably in spite of the fact that the brand had been around for generations and was brewed with an extremely precise, refined process. It had an appealing aroma and an almost velvety flavor, making it another notably smooth option.

After that, I picked out a whisky that was supposedly the first Japanese brand to be commercially brewed. Its age alone was enough to gain it a sizable fanbase, but its pleasant, refreshing flavor earned it new fans on a daily basis as well. I also grabbed a bunch of random bottles that cost less than two gold coins all together. I was pretty sure I'd sent at least a couple of them before, but they hadn't been *too* insistent about me not sending any repeats at all, so I figured they wouldn't mind.

I sent the box of whiskey over, and Hephaestos and Vahagn said a quick thank you before stomping off, laughing triumphantly and boasting about how they were going to drink the night away.

I sighed heavily. "That went well, I guess. Just gotta send over Demiurge's offering, and I'll be finished." I'd been sending him packages on a weekly basis even over the course of my trip, for the record. He was the God of All Creation, so I wasn't about to neglect him. Not to mention the fact that he never pestered me, and always seemed genuinely grateful for the stuff I offered up to him.

He'd really taken a liking to the umeshu I had sent a few weeks back, and after a little prodding had politely requested that I send more of it, if possible. I'd taken to adding in a few bottles of umeshu along with the snacks and sake as

part of his standard weekly offering.

He eventually admitted that not only had he liked the umeshu personally, he'd also shared some of it with his attendants, who'd gotten hooked on the stuff as well. Umeshu had become a powerful tool for enticing his people to work their hardest. He sounded both proud and a little mischievous as he described it all to me.

This time around, I decided to send him a three-bottle sake set. All of the bottles included in it had won first place in various sake competitions, so I thought comparing them would be fun for him. As far as the umeshu went, I chose a Japanese brand made with unripe plums that his followers had particularly enjoyed, plus a really deeply-flavored, full-bodied, almost syrupy brand that was made with a mixture of brandy, honey, and brown sugar.

I picked out a few bottles from the umeshu ranking page, as well—one was apparently made with both fresh plums as well as a plum jam, which gave it a really rich flavor. I also threw in one that was made with sweet potato shochu as its base liquor. Supposedly the natural sourness of the plums complemented the characteristic umami of the shochu incredibly well. Finally, I threw in his usual variety pack of canned snack foods.

With my preparations complete, I called out to him, "Demiurge? Your offering's ready, if you'd like it!"

＜*Oh, my! Thank you, as always... Hmm? I told you that you don't have to feel obligated to send me sake* and *umeshu all at once, didn't I?*＞

"Yeah, but it's really no problem! You've done a lot for me, so it only feels fair."

＜*Does it, now? Well, I appreciate the consideration!*＞

"Heh, and a little umeshu means you'll be able to motivate your helpers, right?"

＜*You're certainly not wrong about that! They'll complain until my ears fall off on a typical day, but the moment they catch a glimpse of one of your umeshu bottles, they get right to work! Ho ho ho!*＞

"Oh, while we're chatting, I should let you know that I'm going into the

dungeon tomorrow, so the next offering might end up being a little later than usual. I'll try to get it to you on time, of course."

＜*Oh, no need to concern yourself over it! More importantly, would the dungeon you're about to enter be the one in Brixt, by any chance?*＞

"Yeah, actually, it is."

＜*I thought as much...*＞

"Huh? Wait, what's that mean? Is there a problem?"

＜*Not precisely. It's been so well-behaved as of late I'd entirely forgotten about it, but a certain creature's taken up residence in that dungeon's lower reaches.*＞

"Huh? You mean, like, in the bottom floors?"

＜*In any case, knowing your associates, I'm sure it won't be a problem. On the off chance that it all goes to pieces, though, don't hesitate to give me a shout! Enjoy your trip!*＞

"Huh? Wait, what? You mean there's something nasty enough in there it might make things 'go to pieces' for *my* party? Wouldn't that have to be, like, something ridiculously terrifying? What the hell's down there?! Demiurge...? Hey, Demiurge! Demiuuuuuurge!"



Extra: Tea Season Has Arrived!

For the first time in ages, I found myself lounging about in my living room, enjoying an afternoon with nothing to do. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui had all pigged out like the gluttons they were at lunchtime, and were too busy napping to bother me.

I decided to take advantage of that rare and pleasant silence by sipping on a cup of my favorite brand of coffee and doing absolutely nothing productive whatsoever. I pulled the carton of coffee out from my Item Box—it was one of the types where each cup's worth came in its own little individual drip-bag, and it had a mild, pleasant flavor that I was quite taken with.

"Oh, huh," I muttered as I pulled a bag out of the package, "guess this is the last one." I set up the drip-bag over my favorite mug, poured boiling water over it, and took a moment to appreciate its aroma.

"Man, that smells great..." I waited for all the water to finish filtering through the grounds, then took a sip. "Yup, just as good as ever!" As I enjoyed my coffee, I opened up my Online Supermarket's menu for some casual browsing.

"Hmm? Another event?"

My menu's front page had "Tea Season Has Arrived! Green Tea Fair Now in Progress!" written at the top in big, eye-catching letters.

"Oooh, so the first tea harvests are coming in? Green tea actually sounds pretty nice, now that I think about it." I'd been drinking nothing but coffee and black tea, as of late. I certainly didn't dislike green tea, so why not give it a try every once in a while? The advertisements on my skill's screen were certainly putting me in the mood for it, so I decided to dig a bit deeper and see what all was on offer.

"Gotta give the stuff from Shizuoka a look first," I said as I selected a section from the menu. Shizuoka is a region of Japan that's very well-known for

producing high-quality tea leaves, by the way.

"Oh, huh, I was sort of expecting it to be all about actual *tea*-tea, but I guess they have a lot of matcha-flavored sweets and stuff too!" I observed. If anything, actually, the powdered tea leaf products seemed more like the focus of the event than the tea. The menu was packed full of all sorts of matcha sweets. *Matcha-flavored desserts are all the rage these days, I guess. Can't say I mind them, myself.* "Maybe I'll pick a few up to snack on."

They had matcha cookies dipped in matcha chocolate, matcha sponge *and* roll cakes, matcha pudding, matcha cheese cakes, matcha baumkuchen, a *different* type of matcha layer cake, matcha cream puffs, matcha mochi—the list seemed never-ending. I never even knew you could make that many sweets out of matcha, and started feeling grateful to all the cooks who'd come up with the recipes.

"Pretty hard to pick anything when you have *this* many options, though," I said as I scanned through the menu.

"I want this one." A fluffy white paw intruded into my line of sight to prod a matcha roll cake that was displayed on the screen. I glanced over to find Fel sitting beside me, peeking at my Online Supermarket's menu. *I thought he was napping! How long has he been there?*

"This one looks delicious too. Oh, and this one," he said, pointing out a matcha chiffon cake and a matcha baumkuchen.

I sighed. "You really don't let anything slip by you when it comes to food, huh?"

"But of course," he replied with a smirk that felt really unwarranted to me.

《Think I gotta go with this stuff, personally! The color's sorta weird, but this is pudding, right? Yeah, gotta be!》 said Dora-chan as he fluttered up to the menu and pointed out a vividly green matcha pudding. *What, you're awake too? Guess I should've figured once I realized Fel was up.*

"Yup, you called it, that's pudding. Matcha pudding, specifically."

《Knew it! I'm all about pudding, so I have to try that for sure!》 *Is it, like, a rule that all my familiars have to be obsessed with something and never, ever let it*

go under any circumstances? 《Oh, and I want this too! And one of these!》 he added, pointing out a matcha cream puff and a strawberry matcha daifuku. *Since when was it established that I'd be buying you whatever you wanted? C'mon, guys!*

《Sui wants, umm...all of them! Sui wants to try all of them!》 Sui said, bouncing excitedly in place. It had been staring at the bright-green menu for a while, deep in thought about which ones it wanted to pick, and had apparently decided not to bother picking at all in the end. *That's my slime! Ha, ha, ugh... It sounds like a joke, but knowing Sui, it probably* could *eat through the whole menu if I gave it the chance. That's a big "if," though.*

"Sorry, Sui, but all of them's way too much. Don't be greedy! How about picking out three?"

《Awww, but Sui wants all of theeem!》

"You saw Uncle Fel and Dora-chan pick out three each, though, right? Wouldn't it be unfair for them to get three and you to get everything?"

Sui's incessant hopping came to an abrupt stop. It looked over at Fel and Dora-chan, then spent a moment jiggling in deep thought.

《Mhh... Okay! Sui'll pick three!》

"Good choice," I said, giving the slime an affectionate pat. It was learning to think things through and be considerate of others, and I was happy to see how it was growing up a little. "So, which do you want?"

《Hmm...》 Sui stared intently at the menu, hemming and hawing as it pondered its options. Sui's love of sweets couldn't be understated, so it must've considered this a really important decision. Finally, its careful deliberation came to an end. 《Masteeer!》

"Yeah? Figured out what you want?"

《Yeah! Sui decided!》

《Sheesh, it took you long enough! You gotta go with your first impression for this sorta stuff—just pick whatever jumps out at you!》

"Indeed, Dora's advice is sound. So long as you trust in your instincts, they

will never steer you wrong. That is the secret to tracking down the most delicious foods."

"C'mon, guys, don't be like that," I scolded. *Sui's the sort to think really carefully about the things it loves—nothing wrong with that.* "So, what'll it be?"

《Umm, Sui wants this, this, and this!》 After all that careful thought, it had chosen a matcha roll cake, a matcha mille crepe, and a strawberry-matcha daifuku.

"Okay, sounds good! How about we have all these for a snack now?"

《Yay!》

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

We all taste-tested the matcha sweets we'd chosen.

"Yes, this is rather delectable indeed!" Fel declared enthusiastically as he munched on his roll cake. He scarfed the entire thing down in a matter of seconds, and I definitely judged him a little for it.

There was more than one type of matcha roll cake available, incidentally, and the variety that Fel chose wasn't sold in single slices. I was forced to buy him a whole roll, and this made the speed with which he inhaled it even more horrifying. The cake he'd picked had matcha powder incorporated into the sponge cake, while the filling was a particularly fruity strawberry cream. Its presentation was top notch, and it looked delicious—it was easy to guess why Fel had picked it out.

"And this is rather pleasing as well," he said as he moved on to the matcha chiffon cake he'd chosen. There weren't individual slices of that one available, so I was forced to buy a...whole...

Wait a second. Didn't the baumkuchen he picked turn out to only be available full-sized too?

"Hmm, another fine choice," he declared as he devoured said baumkuchen. It was made from rice flour, which apparently gave it a pleasantly chewy texture. It was only at that point that I realized he'd deliberately gone out of his way to ask for sweets that didn't come individually packaged.

“Trust in your instincts and they won’t steer you wrong” my ass! You’re the most calculating out of all of us! I shook my head with exasperation, only to notice that Dora-chan had a kinda conflicted look on his tiny little dragon face.

“What’s wrong, Dora-chan?” I asked.

《Nothing’s *wrong*, exactly, but this pudding... It’s not that it’s *bad*, but it’s pretty bitter, and it sorta tastes like grass.》

I stifled a laugh. *L-Like grass... I mean, it’s technically made from leaves so I guess he’s not* that *far off?*

I cleared my throat. “It’s bitter because it has matcha in it—that’s the stuff that makes it so green. Matcha’s made from leaves.”

《So that’s why... I like my usual pudding better.》

Guess Dora-chan doesn’t have a taste for matcha, then. I guess there are plenty of other people out there who aren’t big fans of its bitterness. He didn’t seem super excited about the matcha cream puff and strawberry-matcha daifuku he’d asked for either, grimacing as he bit into both of them. *W-Well, I mean, everyone has foods they’re just not that into. It happens.*

I looked over at Sui, who’d been unusually quiet considering it was eating the sweets it loved so much. It was usually the most outspoken of all of us on the subject, actually, but this time it was slowly engulfing the roll cake it’d picked out in dead silence. *Ah, whoops. Guess Sui’s not a big matcha fan either...*

The cake it’d chosen didn’t even seem like the sort of thing that would have that strong of a matcha flavor to begin with. The sponge cake itself didn’t have any in it at all—the filling inside was the only matcha part about it, and given its pale coloration it couldn’t have contained all that much. Apparently, though, Sui had reacted just as poorly to its natural bitterness as Dora-chan did. I could practically feel its skepticism as it looked over at the matcha mille crepe and strawberry-matcha daifuku it had ordered.

“Do you not like the matcha sweets, Sui?” I asked, just to be sure.

《They’re bitter! Sui doesn’t like them at all.》

“O-Oh, okay.” *Guess Sui’s a little too young to appreciate food like this.* I

bought a bottle of soda to wash the matcha taste out of Sui and Dora-chan's mouths.

《Now *that's* the good stuff!》

《This is sooo yummy!》

They happily gulped down their drinks, and by "they" I mean all three of my familiars, in spite of the fact that Fel hadn't been bothered by the matcha in the first place.

"Another!"

Really? I mean, really*?* Dora-chan and Sui asked for refills too, so I begrudgingly gave in and filled their glasses again. As a side note, I'd gone with the vanilla option (as it were) and chosen a matcha sponge cake for myself, along with some freshly stocked and harvested green tea that was straight from Shizuoka.

I took a long sip of the tea I'd brewed. I feel like a taste for green tea is ingrained in the Japanese cultural identity, somehow. Something about the flavor always calms me down in an instant. I took a bite of the dark-green matcha sponge cake, and it was just as delicious as the tea. It had a slight, subtle sweetness that was just present enough to perfectly enhance and complement the bitterness of the matcha.

I enjoy a regular sponge cake as much as the next person, but I'm usually satisfied after a single slice of the stuff. The matcha cake I'd bought was different—I could gorge myself on it and not get sick of the taste. Maybe that was the bitter accent of the tea at work? I pondered the matter as I enjoyed it along with my cup of freshly-brewed green tea.

＜*Ahem!*＞ Suddenly, a pointed cough resounded in my mind, like someone was clearing their throat. ＜*Just so you know, I'm rather fond of matcha sweets myself! I mean...if you were curious.*＞

And hello to you too, Ninrir. I know how much of a sweet tooth you have, but I just *sent you an offering the other day, you know?*

＜*Ugh... Th-That's irrelevant! How am I supposed to restrain myself when you're devouring delicious sweets right in front of me?!*＞

You could at least try. Actually, for my sake, please *try. And by the way, I'm pretty sure that goddesses aren't supposed to casually contact mortals anywhere near this often.*

＜Grrr!＞

"So yeah, stop talking to me like this, thanks. Bye!"

＜W-W-Wait! Umm, I, err, r-right, of course! Maybe you could just happen to order too many matcha sweets, and just happen to be stricken by the urge to offer some of them to me of your own free will! Why, can you just imagine *how happy I'd be about such generous and voluntary tribute?!＞*

I couldn't actually see her, but I had a funny feeling that Ninrir was carefully observing my reactions as she tried to prod me into sharing. *Just how much does she want to eat this stuff?*

"Look, I'm sorry, but I can't. I *just* sent you an offering the other day." Like, really, it hadn't even been a week yet. She'd had me send a massive box filled with nothing but desserts, as usual.

＜Gaaah! Like I said, that's irrelevant! Those *sweets and* matcha *sweets taste* entirely *different! The ever so slight bitterness of matcha is what makes it so incredible!＞*

Getting all emphatic about it isn't helping your case, you know?

＜Ugh, I wanna eat matcha sweets! I wanna, I wanna, I wanna!＞

The—and I cannot emphasize this next word enough—*goddess* started throwing a full-on temper tantrum in my mind. I could only imagine how much stress she must put Demiurge through. I sighed, and finally caved. "Okay, *fine*, but I'm not sending much!"

＜Woohoo! Yes! In that case...＞

Then she made me scroll through the Green Tea Fair's menu over and over, nagging me to send her more and more stuff. I got pressured into buying five items for her in total. It took her an eternity to decide, and in the end she went with the same tactic as Fel, picking out a matcha roll cake, chiffon cake, and baumkuchen, none of which were available in individual servings. She also

chose her old standby, dorayaki (filled with matcha cream), plus a matcha cream puff.

I ordered her stuff and sent it off immediately, and Ninrir went on her way just as quickly, barely remembering to pause and say, “thank you.” I really have to worry about the future of this world, considering it has deities like her running the show.

“And now I’m exhausted...” I grumbled. I’d bought a few other desserts for myself, but I wasn’t really feeling it anymore. Too tired for sweets. My tea had gone totally cold too, so I brewed myself a new cup in the hopes it’d drive away a bit of my fatigue.

A few days later, I learned that Demiurge had caught wind of the incident and had given Ninrir a tongue-lashing she’d never forget. *Not my problem, though.*

Afterword

Hello! Eguchi Ren speaking. Thank you very much for purchasing *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill volume 10: Beef Cutlets and the Bandit King's Treasure*!

We finally made it! Ten volumes! Two digits! *Two*! When the good people at Overlap first approved this series for publication, I never dreamed that I'd be able to keep it up for this long. I owe it all to you, the readers who've stuck with me all this time. Thank you so much!

This tenth volume opens with the story of a Japanese man who was brought over to the other world long before the beginning of the story, and goes on to detail Mukohda's departure for a brand-new dungeon. From an author's perspective, writing Kazuki's story was a blast, and I'm quite fond of the orphanage visit that occurs en-route to the next dungeon. It's a nice, fluffy digression, and I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I did!

As it so happens, the publication of this volume coincides with the publication of the seventh volume of the comic adaptation of this story, as well as the fifth volume of *Sui's Great Adventure*, a spin-off comic in which Sui takes the starring role! Both the adaptation of my novels and the spin-off have received high praise, and as the original author I couldn't be happier. If you haven't read any of the comic versions yet, trust me—they're really good! If you get the chance, please give them a try!

To Masa-sensei, who illustrated this story, Akagishi K-sensei, who's drawing the main comic adaptation, Futaba Momo-sensei, who's handling the spin-off comic, my editor "I," and all the other good people at Overlap: I can't thank you enough for all your help and support!

Finally, allow me to thank you, my readers, one last time. I hope you'll continue enjoying the laid-back, heartwarming adventures of *Campfire Cooking*

in Another World with My Absurd Skill in all the formats it's available in. I hope to see you again in volume eleven!

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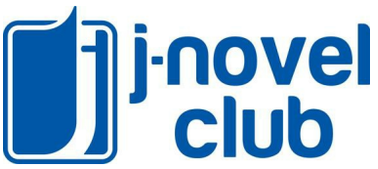
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Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill: Volume 10

by Ren Eguchi

Translated by Tristan K. Hill Edited by Adam Fogle

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