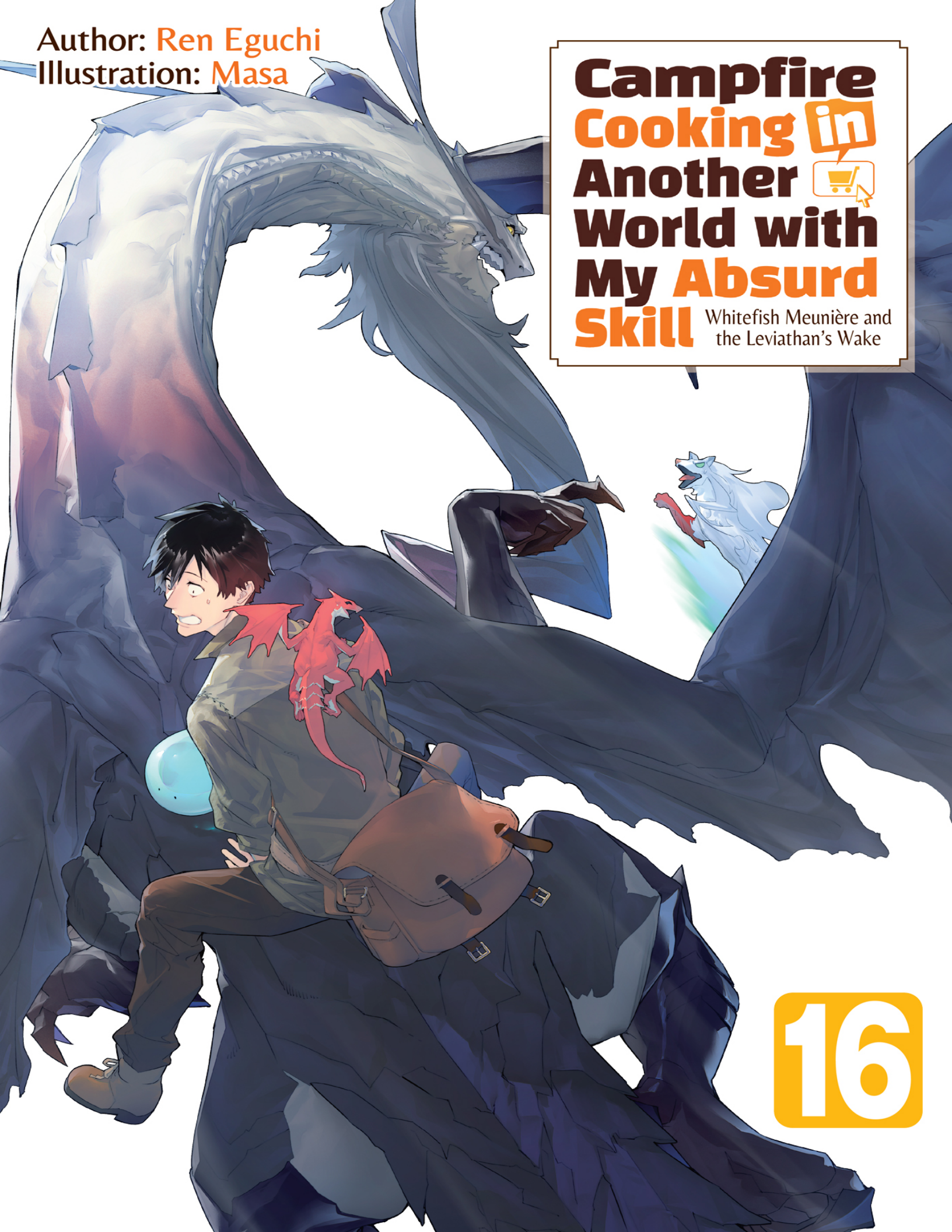
Author: Ren Eguchi
Illustration: Masa

Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill

Whitefish Meunière and the Leviathan's Wake

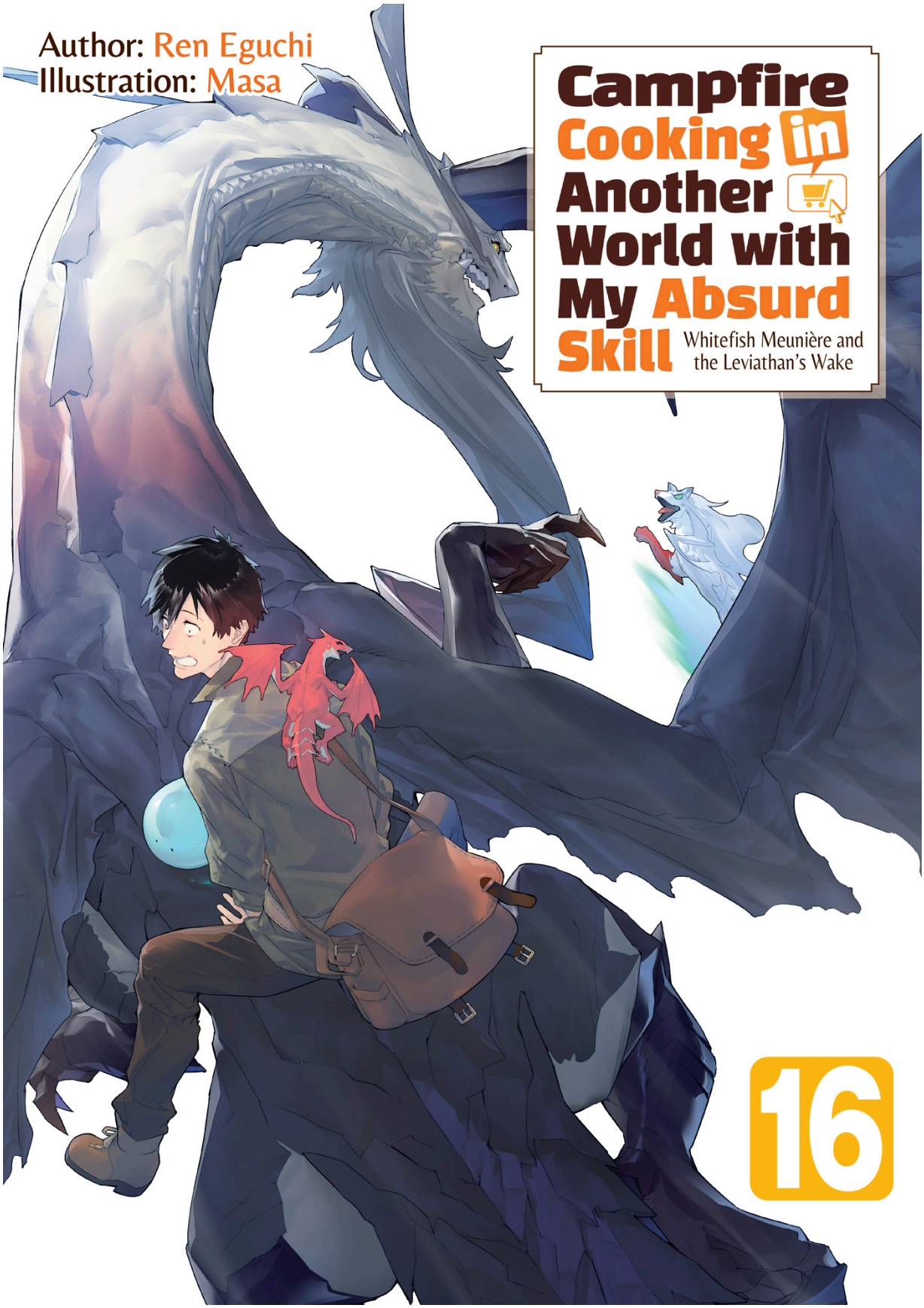


16

Author: Ren Eguchi
Illustration: Masa

Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill

Whitefish Meunière and the Leviathan's Wake



16

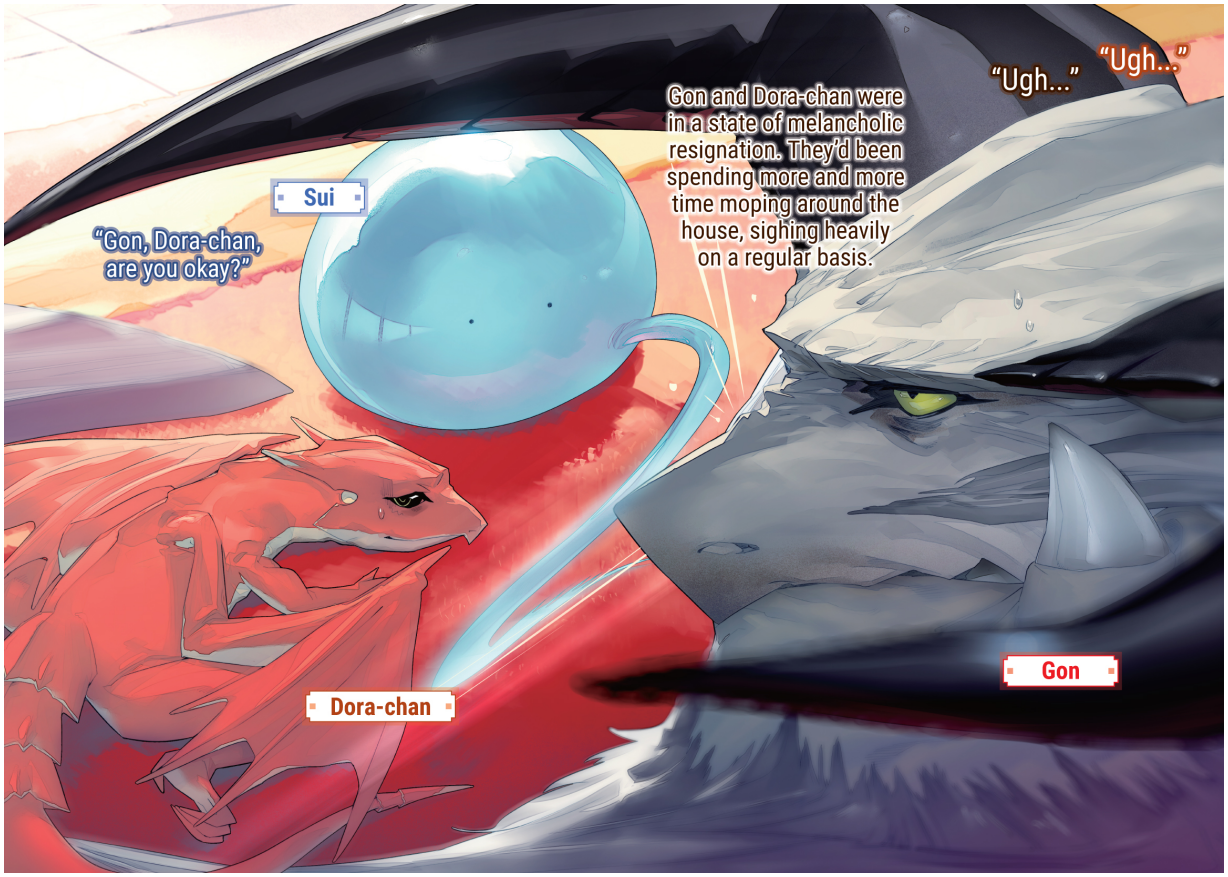
Author: Ren Eguchi
Illustration: Masa

16

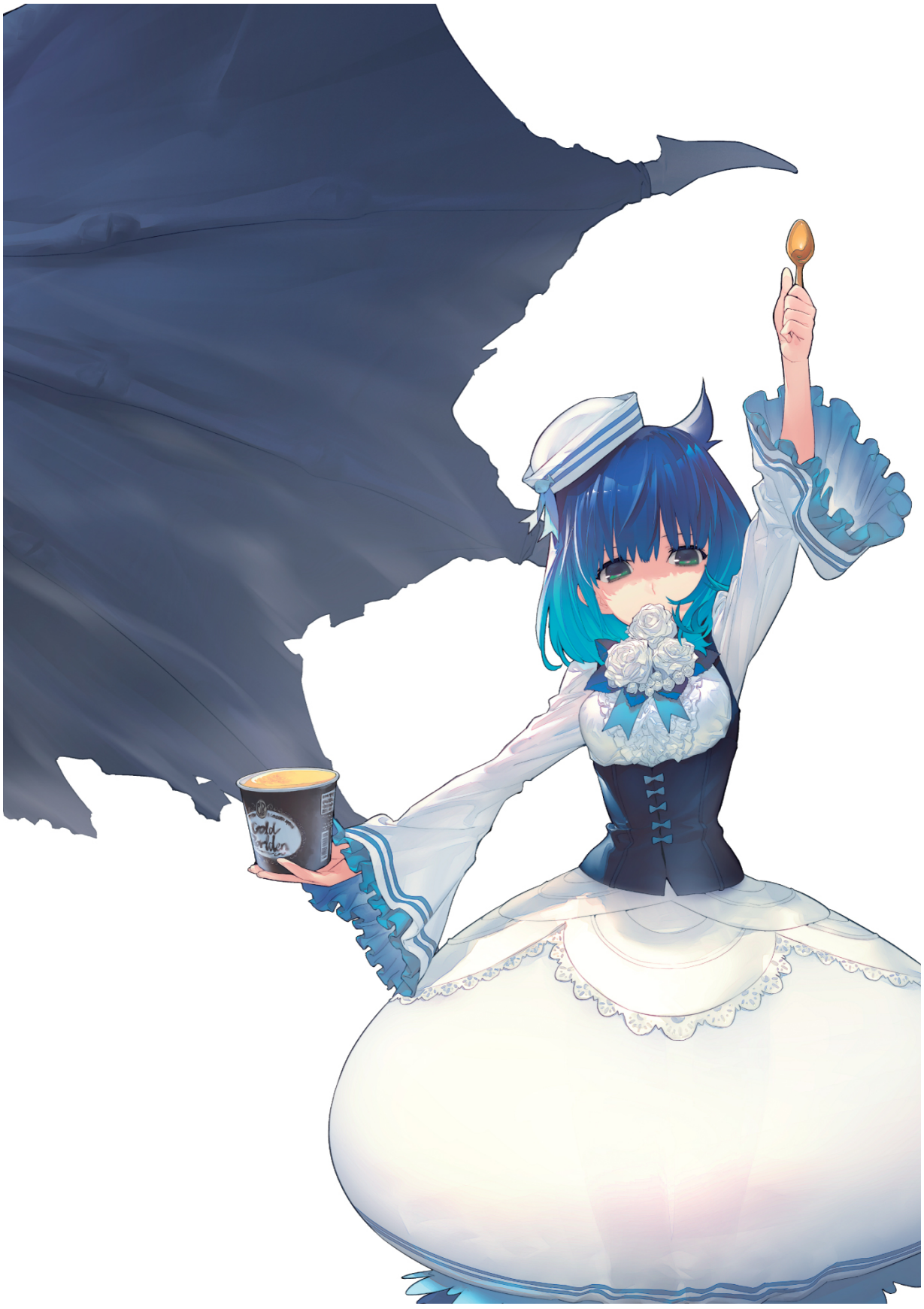


Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill

Whitefish Meunière and the Leviathan's Wake


Gon and Dora-chan were in a state of melancholic resignation. They'd been spending more and more time moping around the house, sighing heavily on a regular basis.
"Ugh..."
"Ugh..."
Sui
"Gon, Dora-chan, are you okay?"
Dora-chan
Gon


"That's where the king and queen'll be watching from."
"What's *that* all about?"
Willem
Mukohda



The Story Up Till Now

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

Mukohda's party braved the depths of an uncharted dungeon in the border regions along with the adventuring party Ark. Deep within, they found and defeated a leviathan, which granted them its own massive corpse in lieu of any item drops. But if Mukohda wanted to have the beast butchered, there was only one thing he could do: finally make that trip to the capital that he'd been putting off for so very long...



Mukohda

Human

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

Unique Skill
"Online Supermarket"

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

Character Introduction

Mukohda's Party



Old Man Gon

Familiar (for 300 years)

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



Dora-chan

Familiar

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



Sui

Familiar

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



Fel

Familiar

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

The Divine Realm



Rusalka

God

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



Kisharle

God

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



Agni

God

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



Ninrir

God

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

◀ Proceed

Table of Contents

Arrival at the Capital — Chapter 1

At the Earl's House — Chapter 2

Ten Days Later... — Chapter 3

My Condolences to the Dragon Turtles — Chapter 4

Woo-Hooooo! — Chapter 5

Leviathan Meat at Last! — Chapter 6

The Coolest Dinosaur Ever — Chapter 7

The Dreariest of Dinners — Chapter 8

Wintery Treats from Northwestern Japan — Extra

◀ Proceed

8 × Chapters

1 × Extra

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Jnovels
4. Chapter 1: Arrival at the Capital
5. Chapter 2: At the Earl's House
6. Chapter 3: Ten Days Later...
7. Chapter 4: My Condolences to the Dragon Turtles
8. Chapter 5: Woo-Hooooo!
9. Chapter 6: Leviathan Meat at Last!
10. Chapter 7: The Coolest Dinosaur Ever
11. Chapter 8: The Dreariest of Dinners
12. Extra: Wintry Treats from Northwestern Japan
13. Afterword
14. Bonus Textless Illustrations
15. About J-Novel Club
16. Copyright



Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

Zerobooks Universal

Zerobooks USA ONLY

Zerobooks IOS

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

Jnovels.com

Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with

Chapter 1: Arrival at the Capital

"Ooooh, so that's the capital city, huh?" I muttered as I looked down from Old Man Gon's back at a cityscape more expansive than anything I'd seen in this world so far.

《No kidding! It's huge!》 Dora-chan said, leaning over to take a look at the capital as well.

《It's sooo big!》 Sui agreed.

《I sense an innumerable quantity of humans…and a scant few of them have presences that may, perhaps, be worthy of some small note,》 said Fel, who was lying nearby, idly listening to our conversation.

Wait, what was that last part? "What do you mean, 'presences worthy of note'?" I asked.

《I meant what I said. I assume they are high-ranking adventurers, or inhabitants of the king's court.》

Oh, I see now. It *did* make sense that there would be a lot of high-rankers in the capital, and that the king would have some pretty tough customers guarding his place as well.

《More importantly, where should I land, my liege?》 Gon asked.

"Oh, uhh... Where *could* you even land around here? Maybe that grassland over there?"

《Very well, then!》 Gon said before beginning a slow and steady descent.

The grassland I'd directed him toward wasn't *super* far away from the city gates—close enough that I would've actually been a little worried, normally—but since Willem the guildmaster had told me that he'd given advance notice about our arrival, I figured it would probably work out well enough this time. Before I knew it, Gon had touched down on the grass, which was indeed big enough to contain his massive (though technically still not full-sized) form.

Oh, right! Better wake up Willem now. He'd spent the whole trip

blissfully unconscious.

"Hey, guildmaster? We made it! We're at the capital! Guildmaster?!" I said as I shook Willem by the shoulders with some difficulty. He was quite a bit older than me, but being a former high-ranking adventurer, he still had some real bulk to him.

"Hmnh... Mnhh... *Mngraaahhh*?!" Willem screamed, shooting to his feet in the blink of an eye. In his mind, apparently, no time at all had gone by between the moment he passed out and now. "L-Lemme down! I want off this creature, *right this instant*!" he bellowed.

"It's okay, guildmaster! Calm down! We've already landed!" I shouted back.

Willem froze in place. "We've...what?"

"Like I said, we've reached the capital. We just touched down. See for yourself!"

Willem very timidly glanced downward and saw the vividly green grassy field beneath Gon. It took him a moment to process what he was looking at, but eventually, he let out a sigh of relief and flopped onto his backside.

"Okay, let's all climb down and head for the city! I have a funny feeling that getting past the gate might take a while, so the sooner the better," I said. The line at the capital's gate had been long enough that I'd been able to make it out from the air during our approach.

That's the capital for you, I guess. Who even knows how many people and goods flow in and out of there every single day?

"Y-Yes," Willem stuttered. "Good idea."

I made my way down from Gon's back, followed shortly by Willem, who immediately fell to his hands and knees and started muttering something or other about "sweet solid ground." *Yeah, buddy, I know the feeling*, I thought. And, while I waited for him to collect himself...

"Huh?" I grunted. "It looks like some people are coming our way. Wait... Oh, yikes! Hey, this might be bad! We've got a bunch of armored knights on our hands!"

"We what?" Willem asked. What appeared to be a whole battalion

of knights clad in very fancy-looking gear was making a beeline from the capital's front gates straight toward us. "That armor... Is that the Royal Guard?"

"Bwuh?!" *The* Royal Guard*?! Shouldn't they be busy guarding the king or protecting his palace or something?*

"Oh, of course!" Willem said. "It's because I sent word that we'd be traveling by dragon! That news must have already made its way to the palace."

Ahh... Yeah, I guess I am *the only person who rides a dragon around on the regular, so it'd be pretty easy to guess it was me when Gon showed up in the sky. But still, why send out the whole Royal Guard? Do they think I'm dangerous? Are they going to chew me out for bringing a fenrir and a couple dragons to the capital?*

I decided to hold position, waiting apprehensively for the guards to arrive...and the moment they did, they formed up in an extremely orderly line before me.

"We, the First Division of His Majesty the King's Royal Guard, have been dispatched to serve as escorts for the S-ranked adventurer Sir Mukohda!" one of the guards declared.

"*Hyeeek*..." I squealed before I could stop myself, but okay, seriously—you *cannot* blame me for that! You just can't! Who sends the *Royal friggin' Guard* to escort a single adventurer into town?!

"It begins," Willem commented.

"*What* begins?!" I replied.

"We all knew the king was itching to meet with you. The moment he learned that you'd be in the capital..."

He decided to send his guard out to bring me to him? Ugggh... I only just got here, and I already want to go home.

"We shall guide you on your way into the city!" said the guards' apparent leader. "Form up, men!"

"Yes sir!" the other guards bellowed in unison before spreading out to encircle us in a tight formation.

"Hey, uh, guildmaster?" I whispered to Willem. "Do you think they'd mind if we politely declined?"

"What do *you* think?"

"Figures..."

I didn't have much choice except to resign myself to my fate and head through the gates, surrounded by Royal Guardsmen the whole way. Now, at first, I *thought* that Fel and Gon had taken the hint and decided to behave themselves, but as we cleared the gate and headed into the city proper, Fel sent me a telepathic message.

《So we are going to the palace first? I had thought we would begin by seeing to the leviathan, but I suppose I shall be patient.》

《I mean, how was I supposed to say no?》 I replied. 《Let's just get all of our less pleasant business here out of the way nice and quick. That'll make the rest of our trip easier anyway.》

《True indeed. It has been quite some time since I have met with one of mankind's kings. The last king I knew was an impertinent fool who made the fatal error of ordering me to be slain. I wonder how *this* king will fare in comparison?》 Fel said with a malicious smirk.

《What? Okay, no, hold on, you are *not* going on a rampage here! Absolutely *not*!》

《We shall see.》

《No, we shan't!》

《It's been many a year since I last met a king as well, my liege, and my experience was much the same as Fel's. The king said something about butchering me for materials, and I gave him a hearty helping of dragon's breath for his trouble.》

Gah! A hearty helping of Gon's breath would put anyone six feet under! 《Don't you start too, Gon! No violence in the city!》

《We'll see.》

《Will *not*! Gaaah—I'm begging you guys, *please*, just don't do anything crazy!》

I could not possibly have been more worried about our upcoming meeting. Dora-chan and Sui, meanwhile, were riding on Fel's back, chattering about how 《That food stall looks awesome!》 and 《There're sooo many people here,》 so at least *some* of us were enjoying ourselves.

Is there any *chance that this will turn out well for me? I'll count myself lucky if I don't end up wanted throughout the whole country*

for besmirching its ruler's honor.

And so we marched onward through the capital's streets. With the Royal Guard surrounding us and drawing huge amounts of attention from the capital's populace, the trip was, in a word, agonizing.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

We soon arrived at the royal palace, and in almost shockingly short order, I found myself on my way to an audience with the king himself. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui were all acting exactly as unconcerned as ever, but the guildmaster and I were on pins and needles as we stood in front of the door to the audience chamber, waiting for our cue to enter.

"Wait. I never asked about what you settled on for your gifts for the king. You *are* sure you chose appropriately, right?" Willem asked.

While we were on our way into the palace, I'd been informed that I should present any gifts I'd brought with me to a handler prior to my audience. According to Willem, that was a perfectly normal security measure—they had to be checked to make sure I wasn't giving him anything dangerous, after all. That meant I didn't have my gifts on hand for Willem to look over.

"I thought that an in-person meeting called for something special, so I brought a little extra compared to what I sent him in the past. I *think* it should work out fine...?" I replied. The person to whom I'd handed over the gifts had asked if I was "*really* sure" about them in a kinda shrill tone of voice, and I was a little worried that meant I'd accidentally lowballed my offering, but it was too late to backpedal now.

I'll just have to deal with it as well as I can in the moment! I can always give him something extra-fancy as a bonus later on if he seems offended, I reassured myself.

For the time being, I had something much more important to worry about: the proper etiquette for an audience with a king. I'd done what I could to learn the basics at the last minute, and I desperately turned them over in my head in an attempt to make

sure I didn't forget anything when the cards were down. I could *not* let myself screw this up.

First, I would follow Willem into the chamber, stopping at the same time he did. Then I'd take a knee with my left hand held to my breast, and stay there—still bowing—until the king told me to rise. At that point, I'd be allowed to look up at him and let the guildmaster take the wheel, trusting him to navigate our way through the remainder of the meeting. I didn't know enough about royal manners to be trusted to actually *talk* with the king, so we'd decided that letting Willem handle the entire conversation would be the far safer option.

I'd told my familiars to stay behind me and be as quiet and unobtrusive as possible. I'd also very specifically instructed them *not* to make a show of their pride in front of the king, which hopefully would save us from any horrible slipups. *I believe in you, guys!*

Finally, it was time. The big, stately door to the audience chamber swung open.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

We stepped through the door onto a long, luxurious-looking red carpet. I walked behind the guildmaster, stopped when he did, and knelt on the spot, pressing my left hand to my chest and keeping my gaze glued to the floor.

All right! This is going well so far!

"Rise," a quiet and refined but very clear voice commanded, the words resounding throughout the chamber. I glanced up, just a little.

I guess that must be the king, huh? I thought. He looked like he was in his early forties, and had golden hair and a beard that gave him a rather impressive, dignified air. In my book, he looked a little more like a general than a king, honestly. The queen, who sat beside him, seemed younger, at a glance—I would've guessed she was in her twenties, judging by looks alone—and was an incredible beauty with features that I'd describe as vaguely Scandinavian.

Willem and the king began their conversation, and pretty much every word of it flew straight over my head. It wasn't that I couldn't

understand what they were talking about so much as that I just couldn't focus on what they were saying. I was *very* distracted by all the other people who were present in the room. Both sides of the audience chamber were filled with well-dressed onlookers who I assumed were the local nobility, all of whose gazes were trained right behind me—in other words, at Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui. They were staring *straight* at my familiars with looks of horror and indignation on their faces, and whispering to one another to boot.

Oh, for the—what are you guys doing *back there?!* I was *really* curious about what was happening behind me, and desperately wanted to turn around and look, but that was most certainly not on the table right now. *I made it super clear that they had to be on their best behavior, right? Surely they won't screw it up? I even told them that I'd break out the dragon meat for the first time in ages and make steak bowls for them if they kept quiet! They* said *they understood, and* seemed *so sincere at the time, so surely they're following through, right? Surely...?*

Gah! D-Don't tell me that when I said they should "keep quiet," they took it literally*? They don't think that just means "don't say anything," do they?! They're not lounging around or napping in the king's audience chamber, right?! I definitely made a point about how they needed to have good manners too! Please tell me we're still okay...*

Agggh, this is killing me! I'm so curious! I've got high expectations for you four this time, and you'd better be living up to them!

Interlude: The Gluttonous Quartet's Perspective

Meanwhile, as Mukohda was worrying himself sick, his worst nightmare was indeed playing out behind him: The gluttonous quartet had made themselves at home and were now nonchalantly lounging in the middle of the audience chamber. They seemed completely unperturbed by the fact that they were in the presence

of the king, not to mention most of the capital's local nobility. As far as Fel and Gon were concerned, the king of a single measly nation just wasn't worth paying any sort of deference to.

《Heeey, Uncle Fel?》 Sui whined. 《Are we almost done yet? Sui's huuungry!》

《Friggin' tell me about it! I wanna hit up the food stalls already!》 Dora-chan chimed in.

《Patience,》 Fel counseled. **《I am certain it will not take much longer, and if we keep quiet until it is over, we shall once again feast upon dragon meat tonight. He made a promise, and I will hold him to it, so we need simply wait a few moments longer.》**

《Okaaay,》 Sui said.

《Right, yeah, I forgot about that! We're having dragon steak bowls tonight! They're gonna be awesome!》 Dora-chan agreed.

《Indeed,》 Gon added, 《but if he takes much longer, perhaps I'll have to speak up and urge things along.》

《I as well. This king seems to have no intention of harming us, but we have no obligation to humor him for any longer than we already have. I would not be here at all were I not accompanying a human of my own.》

《Well said! If my liege hadn't requested it, I'd have no reason to bother lingering in a place like this.》

Judging by their attitudes, you'd think the gluttonous quartet owned the audience chamber—and if anyone had been able to hear their telepathic exchange, it most definitely wouldn't have done anything to dispel that impression.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

I really don't know how many times I almost gave in to temptation and turned to look behind me. I was in an audience with the literal king of the country I lived in, but I was so restless I couldn't even pay attention to a single word he said!

As I fidgeted away, the conversation seemed to have turned to the gifts that I'd brought for the king. A slender, rather high-strung-

looking man who appeared to be in his fifties or so—a chancellor or something, I assumed, considering how close he was standing to the king—spoke up, saying, "The adventurer Mukohda has offered you these gifts, Your Majesty." The man I presumed was a chancellor clapped his hands, and the items that I'd handed over earlier were brought to the king one after another.

As my gifts were carried in, the nobles gathered up on either side of the audience chamber fell silent. The whispers that I'd been hearing since the moment I entered the room were just gone with the wind.

Oh, great. Maybe this really wasn't enough after all? The attendant must've asked me if I was sure because they knew it wouldn't go over well. Agggh, my nerves are killing me! And I'm still *so curious about what the heck my familiars are doing behind me! I think I feel an ulcer coming on.*

I was starting to think that agreeing to this audience had been a bad idea from the outset. Sometimes it paid to know where your lane was and to *stay* in it, come hell or high water. I'd strayed from my lane by coming here, and I was really beginning to regret it. Meanwhile, the items I'd offered were being explained to the king.

"First, Your Majesty, is a tiara decorated with an assortment of pearls," an attendant said while presenting the tiara in question. The queen's eyes glimmered with a fervent light as she stared at it, so I had a feeling that the first gift, at least, had gone over well.

"Next, a short sword studded with sapphires."

The sword they brought out second was covered in a ridiculous number of gems. *I* thought it was pretty gaudy and impractical, but it was so conspicuously lavish that I had a hard time imagining it wouldn't pass muster as well...hopefully.

Maybe I should've given him a magical weapon, like my vampire knife? I couldn't actually give that *one up, though. I need it to drain the blood out of the monsters I butcher. And the other magic weapons I have are all way too ominous or over the top. Like, I can't exactly give a king something called a "poison knife," can I? Well, no point second-guessing myself, I suppose.*

The chancellor went on to explain all the other assorted items

that I'd brought as well, and my anxiety only grew. As I wondered whether or not I should've gone a bit bigger with the gifts, I noticed that Willem's bulky frame had started trembling conspicuously.

Huh? What's up with him?

"How could you think that gifts like *that* would 'work out fine'?" Willem asked me in a hissing whisper.

Yikes... Yeah, he's mad, all right. Maybe it really wasn't enough? "Sorry! I should've given him something nicer, right?" I whispered back.

"*No*! The opposite! You call that '*a little extra*'? What the *hell* were you thinking, giving him all *that*?!"

W-Wait, really?! It was too much*? Actually, I didn't even think that there was such a thing as too much in this sort of situation.*

Apparently, I'd been *very* wrong on that front. The king's eyes were as wide as dinner plates, and he seemed to have frozen solid. The queen's eyes, meanwhile, were sparkling with glee as a very satisfied smile spread across her face. I glanced to the sides to take stock of the assorted nobles as well, and found that most of their jaws were dangling open in dumbstruck astonishment. I really wanted to ask someone if it was a faux pas for nobility to make a face like that in public, but I quickly thought better of it.

Okay, so lemme get this straight. Did I screw up really *badly, here? O-Oh, crap,* I thought, as a stream of cold sweat began to flow down my back. *Wh-Wh-Wh-What now? What am I supposed to do?!*

Just as I was flying into a mini-panic, a voice rang out from behind me.

"Are you not yet satisfied, king of men? I came here at my liege's behest, but I have grown tired of these matters."

G-G-Goooooon! I told you not to say anything rude! I had faith in you, damn iiiiiit!

"Well said. Neither he nor we have time to spare. You would do well to not waste what little we are willing to offer you."

Not you too, Felllllll!

《Yeah, tell me about it! This place is a boring drag. Let's get

outta here and hit up the stalls!》

《Masteeer, Sui's huuungry!》

And *Dora-chan,* and *Sui on top of it?! Okay, so they can't hear you two since you're talking telepathically, but this still* really *isn't a good time!*

At that point, I couldn't hold myself back anymore and spun around on the spot. "Gon, Fel, shut *up*!" I snapped before twirling right back around again and bowing deeply to the king. "I am so, *so* sorry!"

My familiars' outburst had apparently snapped the gathered nobles out of their treasure-induced stupors. My blood ran cold as I heard them start muttering things along the lines of "Such insolence," "How dare mere beasts speak so rudely," and "They deserve death for besmirching His Majesty's honor!"

Nobody would blame me for passing out at this point, right? I think that's fair. Actually, a-am I about to get arrested? Agggh, damn it all, Fel and Gon! I told you a thousand *times, and you screwed it up anyway! What now?! What nooooooow?!*

I was already on the brink of lapsing into blissful unconsciousness from the sheer stress of it all, and as if that weren't enough, my familiars decided to salt the wound.

"Silence, foolish humans. Do you truly dare to compare a mighty fenrir to a mere *beast*?"

"And while we're at it, I'll have you know that *I* am an *ancient* dragon. If you think I'm anything like the petty dragons you're used to, you're sorely mistaken!"

"But of course, if you *do* wish to challenge me, I would be all too glad to accept."

"Indeed! Razing this kingdom to the ground would be the simplest of tasks for Fel and I. Just say the word!"

Fel and Gon went into full intimidation mode, projecting such high-density bloodlust toward the nobles in the room that a few of them fainted, soiled themselves, and even curled up in a ball on the spot. Others broke down in tears of fright and simply ran away. Before I knew it, basically no one was standing and capable of speech anymore.

"Oh. Oh god. Oh *god*," I muttered to myself. *Y-Yup. This is* definitely *capital offense-tier disrespect! We're* so screwed*! It's oveeeer!*

"King of men," Fel growled, **"I came here at this human's request, but my patience has worn thin. I will leave now, and you would do well not to hinder me."**

"Yes, indeed. There's nothing left for us to gain here but irritation," Gon added.

The king was in an absolute panic. Sweat poured down his brow as he raised his voice in a frantic shout. "W-Wait! I offer you my deepest apologies for my subjects' discourtesy!"

"Y-Your Majesty!" the chancellor yelped, apparently aghast at the fact that his king had just *apologized* to a visitor.

"*Silence*!" roared the king. "We are dealing with a *fenrir* and an *ancient dragon*! Are you *trying* to reduce my kingdom to dust?!"

"Hmph! Rest easy," Fel said. **"The human we travel with has taken a liking to your nation. We will not destroy it without good cause. I must admit that my lifestyle here has proven adequate as well."**

"And mine! But that will only remain the case so long as my liege remains unmolested. If you so much as think of doing him harm, you'll learn *very* quickly how fast the situation can change."

"Quite. That goes without saying. After all, if anything happened to him, we would be denied our one source of good food."

"I swear to you that we haven't the faintest intention of harming Sir Mukohda in any manner," the king said, his expression spasming with every word.

The queen spoke up next, and unlike her husband, she did so with a smile. "Yes, of course! We'd never dream of committing such a deed, nor would we allow anyone else to do so. I promise you, good fenrir, good ancient dragon, and Sir Mukohda, that we understand your desire to not be meddled with. Please allow me to assure you that so long as you remain within our fair nation, your privacy will be safeguarded by the authority of the crown itself. Feel free to reside here for as long as you like."

"What are—" the king began.

"Hush, you!" the queen scolded. "You must understand that the might of a fenrir and an ancient dragon far exceeds that of our army—no, of *any* army that *any* nation could muster? If so, then you'll appreciate that offering them our warmest of welcomes and ensuring their comfort is in all of our best interests! The more they appreciate our nation, the more our own safety is guaranteed."

"Oh?" Gon said. "I see at least *one* of you has some sense!"

"So it would seem. Know that if you are ever in need, you may send word to us by way of the human. I would not be unwilling to hear out a request, if only once."

"For that, you have my thanks," said the queen. "And Sir Mukohda? The gifts that you have brought us today were pleasing indeed. I offer you my most sincere thanks as well."

"Hmm...? Fel, look. His eyes may still be open, but I do believe my liege has passed out," Gon noted.

"C-Capital punishment... Dishonoring the crown..." Mukohda muttered, apparently unconsciously. That, plus a few twitches and spasms, was the closest he could offer to a response.

Fel sighed and shook his head. **"Truly, his cowardice knows no bounds,"** he grumbled. **"We will be taking this human and going on our way now. Lift him onto my back, Gon."**

"Certainly," Gon said, before grabbing Mukohda by his collar and plopping him onto Fel. "Come along, Dora, Sui! We're leaving."

《*Finally*! Thought we'd be stuck here forever. Time to find us some food stalls!》

《Yaaay! Sui's super hungry! Let's go!》

And so, Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui strode right on out of the audience chamber with Mukohda in tow. No one dared to so much as lift a finger to try and stop them.

Chapter 2: At the Earl's House

"Mnhh... Besmirch...honor... Execution... *Gah*!"

I shot upright to find myself, somehow, in the middle of town. I also found that the townspeople who were passing by were all giving me pretty odd looks, and when I glanced around to figure out what exactly was going on...

"Huh? Wait, why am I *riding* you, Fel?"

Somehow, I'd ended up on Fel's back. Gon was nearby, with Dora-chan and Sui riding on top of him.

"Weren't we in the king's palace a moment ago? Oooh, I get it—that was all just a dream, right?"

Fel heaved a sigh at my bewildered babbling. 《**Of course it was not,**》 he said. 《**We did indeed visit the palace. You simply passed out. Pathetically.**》

"Oh, put a sock in it!" I snapped. "Wait. I passed out...? *Agh*, that's right! You two ran your mouths at the *actual king*!"

I'd told them time and time again to be good and keep quiet, and what had Fel and Gon done in the end? Acted like a couple of pompous, stuck-up jerks who were doing the *king* a favor by sparing him *their* time!

《**Hmph! I may have agreed to play along with your request, but *not* to allow him to waste as much of my time as he pleased,**》 Fel said.

《Indeed, indeed! And frankly, my liege, there really was no particular reason for us to act obliged to a single measly king,》 Gon added.

"Wh-Wh-Whyyy?! Why are you two like this?! Why do you look down on literally *everyone*?!" I wailed.

Who talks to a king *with an attitude like that?! I'm not saying they should've sucked up to him, but they could've at least kept quiet until it was over!*

《I am a mighty fenrir. It is only natural for me to look down upon those who are weaker than myself—in other words, everyone,》 Fel said, making it sound like it was ridiculous that he had to explain something so obvious.

《I object to the implication that *no one* is mightier than Fel, but it's true that the strong have no reason to obey the weak. That simply isn't the way of this world,》 said Gon, who also sounded like he thought that was just common sense. 《And the mightiest beings in said world are, of course, us: the ancient dragons. It would be truly laughable for the ruler of a mere nation to think he could give *me* orders.》

"*Agggh*, you two, I swear!" I wailed. Dora-chan and Sui were one thing, but clearly, bringing Fel and Gon to the palace had been a terrible mistake.

Ugggh... Well, no point in beating myself up over it. What's done is done, and now I have to focus on what comes next. I don't know how we ended up making our way from the palace to the middle of the city, but one way or another, this works out perfectly for my next move.

"All right, everyone," I said. "No time to waste! We're fleeing the capital before they try to lock us up for insulting the king!"

Fel sighed. **《What in the name of decency are you talking about now?》**

《My liege...》 Gon muttered, sounding just as exasperated as Fel did.

"Oh, like *you two* have any right to give me that lip! It's your lousy attitudes that got us into this mess! Do you not realize that being my familiar means that any crimes *you* commit end up on *my* record?!" I shouted. I was so upset with Fel and Gon's attitude that I grabbed a clump of Fel's fur without even realizing what I was doing.

《Hey! Unhand me! Do *not* pull that!》 Fel yelped.

"This is all! Your! Fault!"

《Did you not hear me? Stop pulling my fur at once!》

"I'll tear your precious fur out strand by strand if I have to!"

《Do your worst! The only fur that *your* meager strength could dislodge from my pelt are the oldest hairs that have

practically been shed already!》

"Oh, it's *on* now!" I shouted. I was so pissed that I actually tried to follow through, giving Fel's fur the biggest yank I could manage.

《**Hm? How strange. I think I felt a breeze,**》 Fel said, glancing mockingly in my direction.

"Agggh, damn it all!" I growled as I pulled harder than ever...to no effect. Fel barely even seemed to notice. *This is the worst!*





《Heh heh heh! Now, now. Settle down, my liege,》 Gon said. 《You won't be imprisoned for any crimes. As it turns out, one of this nation's rulers is rather understanding.》

"*One* of its rulers?" I repeated. *Wait, who would that be?*

《It is as Gon says. The human woman who sat next to the king was indeed thoroughly sensible. She swore that we would not be harmed or interfered with, and given her place at the king's side, she was surely an individual who wields some degree of power.》

A woman sitting beside the king?

I took a few seconds to let that sink in.

"That was the *queen*, you guys!"

《Was she? She seemed mightier than the king himself, given how she chided him.》

"Oof..."

I was starting to get a sense for the balance of power in the kingdom's royal family. *Sounds like the queen's got the king pretty whipped, huh?*

《And since she was so unusually sensible, I told her I would consider doing her a favor in the future. She would not be so foolish as to allow a chance to have a fenrir hear out one of her requests to slip through her fingers.》

《Quite. And she also said we were free to stay in this kingdom for as long as we pleased! She'd know better than to go back on a promise like that with beings as mighty as us.》

W-Wait, really? Does that mean...?

"I'm...*not* under arrest?"

《As we already told you, no. You are in no danger.》

《You'd do well to listen to us a little more closely, my liege!》

Oh, don't you start! I wouldn't have had to worry this much if you two hadn't flown off the handle in the first place! But more importantly...

"Oh, thank *god*! I'm saaafe!" I said, letting out a *deep* sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, Dora-chan flew over and perched on my head. 《Hey, you guys done talking yet, or what?! We've got food stalls to visit!》

"We've *what*?!"

《Master, Sui's huuungry!》

《Indeed. Before anything else, we must sate our hunger.》

《The capital's food stalls *do* seem rather decent indeed.》

《Arright, I'll take point! And I already spotted the perfect place to start a while back. It's right over there!》 Dora-chan exclaimed before steering us onto a completely different course than we'd been taking before. Before I knew it, we'd ended up heading for the food stall that he'd apparently taken note of.

From that point onward, the gluttonous quartet was in complete control of our itinerary. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui let their noses take the lead, leading us from one stall to the next in a rambling tour of the capital's streets. I was dragged along for the ride, of course, and by the time everyone was finally satisfied, the sky was bright red and the sun had mostly set.

《Yup,》 Dora-chan said, 《the capital's stalls really are up to snuff!》

《It was all really, really yummy!》 Sui agreed.

《The food here is indeed of passable quality…though it did not compare to the stalls we found in the town by the meat dungeon,》 Fel noted.

《Right, *that* place! Yeah, the food there really was a cut above!》 Dora-chan said.

《Ooooh, the meat dungeon! Sui wants to go back there someday!》 Sui added.

《Oh? A meat dungeon?》 Gon repeated. 《I never knew there was such a thing! I'd love to see it, myself.》

Rosendahl, huh...? Yeah, that brings back some good memories. That dungeon was way *less lethal than the ones we usually end up in, and getting all that meat was a godsend. It'd be nice to see the kids at the orphanage again too. I'd like to see how things are going with that stall Maynard and Enzo said they were going to open, and I* did *promise everyone I'd come back to visit.*

"Let's try to stop by when the next Meat Dungeon Festival happens," I said.

《**Indeed!**》

《You know it!》

《Yaaay!》

《Gra ha ha ha! Now *that* is something to look forward to!》

I'd been terrified that we'd screwed up to a lifestyle-altering degree just a few hours earlier, but considering that nobody had shown up to arrest me during our whole shopping trip, it seemed safe to assume that I really had been acquitted of my familiars' crimes. *Phew! All's well that ends well. It sort of feels like I'm forgetting something, though. What could that be...?*

"Hmm... Wait. Oh. *Oh*. *The guildmaster*!" He'd *completely* slipped my mind over the course of our happy little stall tour, but Willem had come to the capital with us, and we'd left him behind in the palace! "H-Hey, we'd better head to the Adventurer's guild, pronto!"

I hurried us along toward the guild as quickly as I could, stopping from time to time to ask a local for directions. I eventually arrived at a noticeably larger and fancier building than any of those belonging to the local guilds that I'd visited in the past. I timidly stepped inside...and froze in my tracks as a demon straight out of my nightmares barred my path.

"Well. Well. *Well*. Now look who we have *here*!" Willem said.

"*Hyeeek*!"

"Here's a question for you: Just how much hell do you think I went through after you ran out on me, *huh*?!"

"I-I am *so* sorry!"

It seemed that after I'd left, Willem had been subjected to an endless barrage of questions from the king and queen. That, however, wasn't what had him *really* upset with me.

"Those damned lordlings! They just wouldn't *stop* with their snide remarks and snobby lectures!" Willem raged. Some of the local nobility had been extremely persistent during the conversation that had followed my departure, and had really grated on his nerves in the process. "If only you knew how many times I nearly lost control and threw one of those pompous bastards halfway across the hall!" he added with a *very* bitter scowl. "And *then* to top it all off, when I *finally* worked my way out of their clutches and got back to the

guild, where were *you*? Not *here*, that's for sure!"

Oooh, right. We did *say that we'd head to the guild after our audience was over, didn't we? I totally forgot about that.*

"But then I thought, 'Well, this *is* his first time in the capital. No surprise it would take him a little while to find his way there.' So I waited, and waited...but you just *wouldn't show up*!" Willem practically growled with a dangerously pointed glare.

Ugh... Y-Yeah, sorry about that. The truth was that I hadn't thought about him at all during our food stall tour, but I knew that if I admitted that, I'd be in for my longest lecture yet, so I decided to keep it to myself.

"So then I found a couple adventurers who weren't busy and asked them to go looking for you."

Agh! Seriously?!

"And *apparently* while I was wasting the day away, *you* were stuffing your face at the food stalls!"

W-Well, so much for keeping that secret. And, uh, Willem? You're kinda scaring me, here! I don't think that forehead veins are supposed to bulge like that!

"So I asked them to drag you to the guild, and you know what they said? 'You want guild grunts like us to deal with a fenrir and an ancient dragon? You're out of your mind,' that's what! Oh, and also 'Don't ask the impossible!' and 'Are you trying to get us killed?' They were acting like I was some sort of monster! I have *had it* with this!"

I wasn't too surprised he'd gotten reactions like that. It would have been one thing if he'd been talking to adventurers from Karelina, but this was the capital, and the local adventurers wouldn't be used to Fel and Gon's presence. Nobody would want to approach a fenrir or an ancient dragon, even knowing they were familiars. I *did* sort of wonder why Willem hadn't just gone out to fetch me himself, though. Maybe it would've felt like admitting defeat, so he'd gotten all stubborn about it? I wasn't about to ask and risk pissing him off all over again, of course.

"But all of *that*, I can deal with. That's nothing, really. Your gifts for the king, on the other hand? What were you *thinking*?!"

"I don't know what you want from me, honestly," I said. He'd

already gotten mad about that while the gifts were being presented, so I felt like he'd kind of made his point on that end.

"How many times have we had this conversation already?!" Willem bellowed. "And you *still* managed to mess it up anyway! Trusting you to have common sense was a mistake, and I won't be making it again!"

Whoa, okay! First off, mean! And second, he's making it sound like I went ridiculously far over the line, but really...?

"I mean, *personally*, I didn't think those gifts were anything *that* crazy," I said. Could he really blame me for not having the exact same perspective as he did?

"Even *you* should've realized that you were giving them way too many!" Willem barked. "But *expecting* you to know that was a blunder. I should've looked over your selection from top to bottom, or just picked something out on your behalf in the first place."

Okay, but I'm really not sure what you think you're accomplishing by saying all this after the fact.

"And it being too *many* gifts was only the start! *All* of them were completely outlandish! A pearled tiara? A sword covered in sapphires? You could search through the king's *entire* treasure trove and not find a single piece like those!"

Again, what do you want from me? How was I supposed to know that?

The conversation dragged on for a good long while past that point, and mostly consisted of Willem telling me to "learn some common sense" and "think before you act at least every once in a while." By the time he was finally finished, I was completely drained...and judging by the massive yawn that Fel let out—followed shortly by the same from Gon and Dora-chan—my familiars had had very relaxing naps. Sui, in fact, was still fast asleep.

"You guys have some real nerve to sleep while I'm getting lectured, you know that?" I grumbled as I glared at them.

"Hmph! I fail to see how that is any of my business," Fel said.

"Nor mine!" Gon agreed. "He wasn't speaking with *us*, after all."

《Hey, no point dwellin' on it, right? Cheer up!》 Dora-chan

added.

Grrr! For the hundredth time: You know this was your *fault, right?*

《But who cares about that?》 Dora-chan continued. 《If we're done here, it's time for something way more important!》

"Huh? What're you talking about?" I asked.

"The leviathan, my liege! The leviathan!" Gon said.

Oooh, that. Wait, back up—I *happen to care an awful lot about me getting lectured, dang it!*

Before I could make my exit, however, Willem spoke up once more. "Hold up," he said. "Pretty sure I just heard one of you say 'leviathan,' right? Well, think you could put that off till later? We've still gotta meet with Earl Langridge—and I mean *today*." Considering he'd directed that toward Fel and Gon, it seemed safe to say that he wanted my familiars there too.

"What?" Fel scoffed. **"A mere nobleman believes we would answer his call?"**

"How very conceited of him," Gon added. There was a dangerous glint in both of their eyes as they glared at the guildmaster. A distinct trail of sweat—actually, more like a waterfall—began to drip down Willem's forehead.

"Okay, nope! Quit with the glaring, you two!" I said. "Earl Langridge is the lord who rules over Karelina. As in, the city where we live! It's a nice place, and he's done a lot to accommodate us, right?"

"And? What of it?"

"I'll confess that I'm somewhat fond of that city, but I don't see what that has to do with him summoning us."

What will it take to make those two check their egos for just one, single conversation? "We can deal with the leviathan later! It's not like it's gonna disappear, right? And neither will the Adventurer's guild!"

Fel and Gon both broke eye contact with a huff. *Oh, you punks! You asked for it. Time to bring out my secret weapon!*

"Look, it is what it is, and that's final. And by the way, I was *going* to take dragon steak bowls off the menu for tonight's dinner since you *definitely* didn't keep quiet during our audience with the

king, but if you come along to the earl's place with me, I might just consider putting them back on again! Not my problem if you'd all rather eat something else, though. Works for me!"

Sui, surprisingly, was the first one to react to my threat. The slime shot awake and bounced high into the air with a cry of 《Dragon steeeak!》

Oh. Guess the words "dragon steak" woke it up, and it missed the rest of what I said. That slime's such a dedicated foodie, it's almost refreshing.

《Hold the hell up, you two!》 snapped Dora-chan, who'd clearly been listening a little more closely and had reacted instantly as well. 《I dunno what you're after, but *I* want those dragon steak bowls! If I don't get to have them because of you two, I'm gonna make you regret it!》 he insisted, flapping uncomfortably close to Fel and Gon.

"D-Do not be so hasty, Dora. I said nothing about us not going!" Fel said.

"Y-Yes, indeed! Nor did I!" Gon added. I wasn't totally sure if it was Dora-chan's threat or mine that had done the trick, but one way or another, they were suddenly feeling a lot more cooperative.

"I guess we're all going to the earl's house, then?" I asked.

"I-If you insist, then so be it," Fel conceded.

"Y-Yes, why not?" Gon agreed. The two of them still looked pretty reluctant, but that was good enough for me.

《Arright!》 Dora-chan declared. 《We're gettin' dragon steak bowls tonight for sure!》

"I know, I know," I said.

《Dragon steeeak!》 Sui squealed once again.

In the gluttonous quartet's eyes, Earl Langridge was clearly an afterthought while dragon steak was a matter of the highest priority. That was one fact that I didn't plan on *ever* sharing with anyone outside of our party.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

Willem led us straight to Earl Langridge's home in the capital. It seemed maybe a little smaller than my own home back in Karelina,

but considering how dense the capital was, a home of that size here was definitely quite the status symbol. We were welcomed inside by a somewhat foppish-looking butler, who led us straight to the earl.

The man who awaited us was almost unrecognizable compared to the sorry state I'd first seen him in when I had met him in Karelina. Earl Langridge practically exuded confidence now, and was elegantly handsome in a way that reminded me more than ever of the fifth actor who'd played Agent 007. He had that special something that made middle-aged men look dashing, and he had it in *spades*.

A woman was waiting for us alongside the earl. She had golden blonde hair and refined features that made her quite the beauty, on the whole, and I assumed that she was his wife. *Guess they're an even match for each other when it comes to looks, huh...? Peh!* I thought. The urge to compare the two of them to myself had me feeling a little spiteful.

Oh, and the Langridge couple weren't the only ones present. A pair of children were lined up alongside them as well: a girl with remarkably long, drill-shaped locks of curly hair who looked like she was in her early teens and who greatly took after the earl's wife, and a little boy with fluffy, curly hair and an almost angelic face who couldn't have been older than seven or eight. Apparently, beautiful couples had beautiful children. The power of genetics was mighty indeed.

While I was taking in his family, Earl Langridge himself spoke up. "Mukohda! It's very good to see you," he said.

"You as well. It's been a while," I nervously replied.

"I thought that I would take this opportunity to introduce you to my wife, Oriane; my daughter, Celeste; and my younger son, Bastian. My elder son, unfortunately, had pressing business that he couldn't be excused from. You should have seen how upset he was when he realized he couldn't make it! Hah hah hah!"

"I-It's a pleasure to meet all of you. My name is Mukohda," I said to the earl's family.

"Come now, no need to be so stiff!" the earl said. "You're among friends here, so spare us the formalities. Oh, and of course it's good to see you as well, Sir Fenrir."

“As it should be. Know that I came here only because I had no choice in the matter.”

Oh, knock it off! Enough with the attitude, please!

“*Fel!*” I snapped before frantically turning to the earl. “I-I apologize, Earl Langridge. I’ll give him a scolding later.”

The earl let out a chuckle. “Oh, no need! I’m not offended. Not even the king himself could stand up to a fenrir, after all. And while I’m at it...I believe this is our first meeting, Sir Ancient Dragon. My name is Edward Langridge, and I serve as one of this nation’s earls. It’s wonderful to finally meet you.”

“I’m told you’ve been very accommodating to my liege in the past,” Gon replied. “I hope you’ll continue to do so.”

“That is my intention, of course!”

《Peh! What are we, chopped liver?》 Dora-chan grumbled.

《Sui’s here too!》 Sui added.

《I mean, what do you expect him to do? The earl can’t talk with you telepathically, so how’s he supposed to have a conversation with you?》 I noted.

《Eh. Whatever, I guess. This is boring anyway, so I’m gonna sleep through it.》

《Sui’ll take a nap too.》

Dora-chan and Sui curled up on Fel’s back and were drifting off before I knew it. 《Sorry about this! I don’t think we’ll be here all that long,》 I told them.

The earl, of course, had been entirely unaware of that whole exchange. As I turned my attention back to him, I was surprised to find that he was grinning.

“I’m very much looking forward to our continued relationship, Mukohda,” the earl said. “Just to be sure, you *do* intend to continue basing your activities out of Karelina, I trust?”

“That’s the plan, yes,” I replied. “It’s a very nice town, and I have a home there, so I’m in no hurry to move. I’ll be traveling around from time to time, but I’m planning on keeping my primary residence there for the foreseeable future.”

Not only do I have a home there, but all my sla—employees *live there as well. I can’t just abandon them! Plus, the Karelina locals are*

all used to Fel and Gon, which makes life way easier.

"I see, I see! I'm very pleased to hear it," Earl Langridge said, his smile growing broader still as he gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Earl Langridge, please—you're putting Mukohda out of sorts. Let's call it there, all right?" said Willem, who was well acquainted with the earl.

P-Phew! Thanks, guildmaster.

"I hope you brought everything we picked out before?" Willem added to me in a whisper.

I'd actually almost forgotten, but now that my gifts for the earl had been brought to the forefront of my mind, I pulled them out of my Item Box. Willem had told me that I should make sure that the earl could see what I was giving him as soon as I handed it over, so I presented my gifts in a treasure chest with its lid wide open.

"I-I brought you these," I awkwardly stuttered as I held out the chest.

"Oh, really? Many thanks," the earl said.

"Oh my! How *very* lovely." Oriane—who'd been standing quietly to the side up until that point—rushed over to peer into the box so quickly, she very nearly sent the earl flying. Her daughter was just as fast, and I wasn't sure I liked the look in either of their eyes. "Shampoo, conditioner, *and* hair packs? Why, these are our favorites! Thank you ever so much!"

"Yes, thank you!" Celeste chimed in. "Oh! Mother, look! I've never even seen this one before!"

"Is that so? My oh my!"

Oriane and Celeste both turned to look in my direction.

"U-Umm, that's a type of lotion. It's meant for your face," I explained, withering under their gazes. They looked like a pair of predators about to leap in for the kill.

"Facial lotion? I've heard of this! It must be the lotion that's produced such wonderful results for Marie from the Lambert Trading Company!" Oriane said, her eyes wide with astonishment. Seeing a woman as beautiful as her make a face like that was downright terrifying.

"Y-Yes, I believe that's correct," I replied as I flinched away once more. Oriane's and Celeste's smiles were downright blinding, and the two of them spent a little while squealing with glee about how they "*knew* it," and had "finally gotten their hands on some."

"So, how should we go about using it?" Oriane asked.

"Umm, well..."

I took a moment to explain the lotion—which was all-in-one lotion, specifically—to Oriane and Celeste. The instructions on the box that it had come in recommended using a cherry-sized dollop of the stuff, but that explanation turned out not to be a great point of reference since neither of them had even heard of cherries before. Instead, I told them to use a roughly thumb-sized quantity of cream, which they would need to rub on their faces in the mornings and evenings after washing with soap.

"You can also use a little extra on days when your skin feels particularly dry," I concluded.

"I see! I'll do just that, then," Oriane replied.

"Let's try it right away, mother! Today, even!" Celeste said.

"Oh, naturally!"

The earl cleared his throat. "I don't suppose I could get a word in at some point, you two?"

"Oh, pardon me, dear! I suppose we *have* been rather monopolizing Sir Mukohda, haven't we?" Oriane said.

"I'm sorry, father," Celeste added.

The earl's intervention had finally gotten the two of them to calm down a little. It really did seem that women having a keen interest in cosmetics was a constant, no matter what world you ended up in.

"I apologize for my wife and daughter," the earl said. "They're both enormous fans of your beauty products. Though I suppose I hardly have any right to criticize, do I?"

Nope, you sure don't! And don't worry, I didn't forget to pack something for you in that box as well. "I brought bottles of hair tonic and shampoo as well," I said.

"Oh? Wonderful! Thank you for that. I'm afraid I'm quite the addict, at this point. I couldn't live without them!" the earl said as he ran a hand through his newly abundant hair. Willem nodded along in

understanding as well.

Oh, right. I almost forgot that Willem had a balding problem before too. You'd never know it, looking at him these days.

"You brought potions too, didn't you, Mukohda?" Willem prompted.

"Oh, right!" I said. "Yes, the guildmaster is correct. There are some potions in the box as well—three lower-grade, one mid-grade, and one high-grade."

"Oh, truly? That's generous of you indeed! I'm much obliged, Mukohda."

I was relieved to see that the earl was happy with his gifts...but it struck me that I'd given something to him, his wife, and his daughter, but hadn't brought anything for his son. In my defense, I hadn't even known he *had* a son until the moment I'd stepped into the room. I didn't think that the earl would hold it against me, but the idea of leaving the kid out just didn't sit right with me, somehow.

I paused for a moment to sort through my mental inventory of everything I had, trying to come up with something that a kid his age would like, but I ended up drawing a blank. As I pondered the matter, though, I noticed that Bastian was staring *very* intently in a particular direction. I followed his gaze...and found myself looking at Fel and Gon, both of whom were lazing about like they owned the place.

Ooooh, I get it. I guess kids his age do *go nuts over big animals.*

Just then, the earl seemed to notice his son's point of interest as well. "Are you curious about those two, Bastian?" he asked.

"Yes," Bastian replied in a quiet, slightly bashful tone.

"Would you like to try touching them?" I asked.

"Can I, really?!"

《Hey, Fel, Gon,》 I said telepathically. 《Mind letting Bastian touch you a bit?》

《You are referring to the smaller of the whelps?》

《Whatever for, my liege?》

《I'm pretty sure it'd make his day, that's all. Just think of it as fair trade for the dragon steaks I'll be making for you later.》

《Peh! If I must.》

《If you say so, I suppose.》

Neither of them sounded *happy* about it, but at least I'd gained their consent. "Go ahead," I said to Bastian.

Bastian walked up to Fel first.

"I advise a gentle touch, whelp."

"Okay!"

"*F-Fel!*" I yelped. *You're talking to an earl's son! You can't call him that!*

"Hah hah hah! No need to worry; I don't mind at all," the earl said. "After all, Bastian really is just a whelp compared to a mighty fenrir!"

"Oh, wooow! He's so fuzzy!" Bastian had a big ol' grin as he stroked Fel's fur. "Can I touch the dragon too?" he asked, turning his excited gaze to Gon next.

"That's fine. Right, Gon?"

"If you must, yes," Gon begrudgingly replied.

"You heard him! He's all yours."

Bastian stepped up to touch Gon next, a little more timidly this time. I wasn't surprised that he'd hesitated—Gon *was* a dragon, after all. Even a kid who was beside himself with curiosity would be at least a little scared of him.

"Whoooa! His scales are really hard and rough, father!" Bastian said as he carefully probed Gon's armored hide.

"This is your lucky day, Bastian. Most people go their whole lifetimes without ever having the chance to touch a fenrir *or* an ancient dragon!" the earl replied. He and Oriane watched over their son with smiles on their lips.

I'd been under the impression that most nobles were cold and uncaring toward their families, but at least in the earl's case, that hadn't turned out to be true at all. It was actually sort of heartwarming to watch them have their little moment.

Eventually, the earl spoke up again. "Oh, yes. Both of you are welcome to spend the night at my home, if you'd like," he said.

Ugh! "Yeah, I, umm, think that would be a little tough, considering all of them," I said, glancing over at my familiars.

"Hm?" The earl blinked. "Of course I wouldn't expect your familiars to stay elsewhere! They're as welcome in my home as you are."

It's really not as easy as you think it is, actually! "The thing is, they'll have to eat dinner, and they, umm...they eat a lot. I mean, really, a *lot*." *Trust me, I know better than anyone just how hard it is to feed these four!*

"Oh, that won't be a problem at all," the earl said. "What would their preference be? Raw meat?"

I think I spoiled them out of their raw meat phase a very long time ago, actually. They're only happy if they can eat the same food I do! And tonight in particular...

"We do *not* eat raw meat," Fel said. **"Tonight, we shall be feasting upon dragon steaks. Do *not* interfere."**

"Indeed! I can hardly wait to sink my teeth into them," Gon added.

There was an extended moment of silence.

"*D-Dragon steaks*?!" the earl shouted. His wife and daughter were frozen solid, and the guildmaster was pressing his face into his palm.

I felt a bead of sweat trickle down my brow. *Did you really have to say* that *one out loud, guys...?*

"Oh, wow, dragon meat? I wish I could try it too," said Bastian. He was taking the news better than anyone.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

A satisfying sizzle rang out as the indescribably delectable aroma of meat wafted through the extravagant kitchen I'd found myself in. I was holding my trusty frying pan over a burner, cooking up a hefty chunk of red dragon meat.

I hadn't seen any way I could simply say goodbye and make tracks after Fel and Gon had spilled the beans about our dragon meat dinner, unfortunately. That would've been excruciatingly awkward. I mean, imagine if a guest told you that they were about to go home and have a dinner that was way fancier than anything you'd ever eaten, all on their own! I was so uncomfortable with that

thought that in the end, I'd decided to offer to cook some dragon meat for the earl's family and Willem as well.

Fel and Gon, of course, had started complaining about how we shouldn't be sharing our food with *them* and how we only had so much dragon meat in stock, but they were the ones who'd gone and run their mouths in the first place, so they'd just have to deal. I had borrowed the kitchen in the earl's estate, which was where I was currently working.

I heard a very loud gulp from somewhere off to the side. *Yeah, fair enough. It sure smells good, all right...but do all of you* really *need to stand around and watch me cook?*

I was literally only cooking steaks in a frying pan, but every single one of the earl's cooks had elected to stick around and watch me do my thing. It was making it a little hard to cook like I usually would, honestly, but on the other hand, I *had* essentially invaded their kitchen. I wouldn't have been happy if some rando barged into my workplace and started using my tools.

Anyway, to start things off, I cooked up a huge quantity of red dragon meat. I still had a little earth dragon meat in stock as well, but my red dragon reserves were much more plentiful, so it seemed like the safer option this time. That's "much more plentiful" on a relative scale, of course. Dragons that we could hunt were few and far between, so it was really precious meat, no matter how much I had left. The moment one of the ultra-valuable steaks was cooked to my liking, I stored it in my Item Box so it'd stay nice and hot, then slapped another piece down to cook without missing a beat. I cooked steak after steak after steak...

"All right! That should hopefully be enough to last," I finally said before asking one of the maids to serve Earl Langridge's family and Willem their portions. I'd plated everything up onto flatware that I'd borrowed from the earl's supply, and seasoned their helpings with a very simple mix of salt and pepper. It was best to let the natural flavor of the meat take center stage when you served something this fancy, in my book.

My familiars, on the other hand, would be getting dragon steak bowls, just as promised. I pulled out an earthenware pot full of

freshly cooked rice and filled up everyone's personal bowls with it, then topped the rice with enough slices of dragon steak to completely conceal the grains. Finally, I dressed the meat with a bit of steak sauce that I'd transferred from its supermarket container into a simple sauce pot earlier. I was using a soy-based, garlic-flavored variety of sauce this time, which I knew for a fact that my familiars all loved.

Putting the sauce in another container was definitely the right call, I thought to myself. I'd made that decision the moment it became clear I'd be cooking at the earl's house. I couldn't exactly bring out a very modern steak sauce bottle in front of all his cooks, after all.

"Okay. Time for me to head over as well."

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

A chandelier lit up the earl's massive dining hall. He and his family, as well as Willem, were seated at the dining table, each with a hefty steak before them.

"So this is dragon meat," the earl said. The hall's acoustics made his voice seem to reverberate.

"Yes, it is," I replied. "I decided to cook red dragon meat this time."

A few seconds passed by.

Huh? Wait, why the awkward silence?

"Mukohda...?" The earl hesitated for a moment. "Did you just say that you *decided* to cook red dragon meat *this time*? Are you implying that you have *other* types of dragon meat as well?"

Hmm? Hold on. Did nobody ever tell him that we—or, well, Fel—killed two *dragons, one red and one earth?* I glanced at Willem, and found that he was wincing again. *Wait, seriously? It must've been* someone's *job to clue him in, right?!*

"I, umm, have some from an earth dragon too," I admitted.

"I never even considered the possibility," the earl muttered. The way he was looking at me practically screamed, *Why did I not already know about this?*

Yeah, umm... I don't know what to tell you, man. I don't even know how to react *to an earl being disappointed in me.*

"I really do envy you, Sir Mukohda," Oriane said. "Imagine having a fenrir and an ancient dragon supporting you! It's no surprise at all that you'd accomplish so many great feats."

Oh, thanks for the backup! Looks like Mrs. Langridge is the most put-together member of her family. Guess that's something she and the queen have in common.

"It seems you understand very well how mighty I am," Fel said. **"Hunting a dragon is the simplest of tasks for one such as I."**

"And I! Any dragon that crosses my path is doomed to be feasted upon!" Gon added. He and Fel had both spoken up without wasting a moment.

"O-Oh? I see," Oriane said.

"H-How about we get started? Eat up before it gets cold!" I cut in, turning everyone's attention to the meal before anyone could say anything awkward again.

"Y-Yes! A very good idea," the earl agreed. He nervously sliced a chunk off his dragon steak, then gracefully raised it to his mouth and took a bite, closing his eyes as he slowly, thoughtfully chewed. "So this is what dragon meat tastes like... It's even more of a delicacy than I imagined."

Oriane, Celeste, and Bastian quickly followed the earl's example and sampled their steaks as well.

"My! How wonderful!" Oriane exclaimed.

"It's delicious! I've never eaten meat this good before!" Celeste declared.

"Dragon meat really is as tasty as they say!" Bastian agreed.

I nodded with satisfaction. *Right? Tell me about it!*

"I didn't think that I'd end up being part of this too...not that I'll turn it down, of course," said Willem, who was sitting next to me. He dug into his steak too, his eyes widening with surprise after his first bite. "I've heard all about how high-class dragon meat is, but I've gotta say, I wasn't expecting it to live up to its reputation quite this well!"

Yup, I know the feeling. Dragon meat really is just that good.

"Yes, but what of our portions?"

"I'm terribly hungry, my liege!"

《Yeah, what they said! Bring it out already!》

《Sui's super hungry too!》

Right on cue, the gluttonous quartet started kicking up a fuss.

"Oh, right! My bad, guys." I quickly pulled out my familiars' dragon steak bowls as well, and they started scarfing them down so quickly, you'd think I'd kept them waiting for hours.

"Ahh, yes. Dragon is truly the most scrumptious of meats!"

"Yes, indeed! I'll have to make a point of seeking one out during our next hunt."

《I could eat this stuff every single day and never get sick of it!》

《It's really, really yummy!》

"*Seconds!*" all four of my familiars demanded in unison the instant they'd polished off their first helpings—which, by the way, had only taken an instant itself.

"Are you racing each other, or what?" I asked with a sigh. I was ready for them, though, and had their second servings ready in no time.

"Tell me, Mukohda, what are your familiars eating? It looks a little different from the dish you served us," the earl asked, glancing curiously at Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui as they ate.

"Oh, those?" I said. "That's a dish from my homeland. It's dragon steak on top of a type of grain called 'rice' that's a staple food where I come from. I wasn't sure if it would suit your tastes since it's not something people eat around here, so I made normal steaks for you instead."

"I see," the earl replied. "I do have to say, though, that what they are eating looks delectable as well."

Oriane, Celeste, and Bastian quickly chimed in to agree.

Well, in that case... "Would you like to try it?"

"Certainly, if you're willing!"

The earl's whole family was all too happy to try the dragon steak bowls. I borrowed a few more of his very fancy dishes, piled up

some rice—a relatively small amount, this time—on each of them, then topped it with sliced dragon steak and my usual garlic-flavored steak sauce. As I served everyone their dragon bowls, though, a thought crossed my mind: Could they really even eat that much? The earl was a grown man, so his stomach probably had room to spare, but would his wife and kids be able to finish their helpings?

As it turned out, it was silly of me to worry at all.

"The steak was delicious, of course," the earl said, "but this is remarkable in its own right!"

"It is!" Oriane agreed. "The grains—I believe you called them 'rice'?—pair wonderfully with the steak and its sauce."

"It really is delicious!" Celeste said.

"Yeah! It's great!" Bastian added.

Every one of them cleaned their plates, never letting their impeccable table manners slip for a second. I was pretty impressed with how much food they'd managed to put away, though I figured that they *had* to be stuffed now, at least. A single steak bowl had been plenty to fill me right up, personally. The gluttonous quartet, of course, hadn't stopped eating and wouldn't stop anytime soon. They demanded steak bowls using all four of the usual sauces—garlic, onion, grated daikon, and butter flavored—then asked for even more helpings of each of their favorites.

"I have to ask, Mukohda, do you always give dragon meat to your slime and your baby dragon as well?" the earl asked as he sipped a glass of wine. Dora-chan and Sui were still chowing down, which seemed to have piqued his curiosity.

"Of course," I replied. "They're my familiars too, after all. All of us always eat the same things. Oh, and by the way, he's not a baby dragon. He's a particular species called a pixie dragon, and he's actually fully grown."

"O-Oh, really?"

Yes, really. I can't go letting people think that Dora-chan's an infant. His dignity's on the line!

"May I ask Mr. Mukohda a question too, father?" Bastian asked.

The earl glanced at me. "Would that be all right with you, Mukohda?"

"Of course," I replied.

The earl gave Bastian a look, and Bastian turned to face me.

"Well, umm, the big dragon and the little dragons are both, well, *dragons*, aren't they? Is it okay for them to eat dragon meat?"

Ooooh, yup. That sure does raise some questions, doesn't it?

"Allow me to answer, if you would, my liege," Gon said. "Have you heard the phrase 'the strong prey upon the weak'? Well, it's very true, and in our world, the strong literally consume those beneath them. The same is true of your human society in a broader sense, I'm sure. That's all there is to it. The dragons that we hunted were weaker than us, and so we eat them. Nothing more, and nothing less."

Dora-chan nodded in vigorous agreement. 《Not to mention that we're not even the same species! It wouldn't be *real* cannibalism unless I ate a pixie dragon, or Gon ate another ancient dragon. You just don't survive in our world if you get hung up on junk like that.》

Oh, right. I remember Dora-chan saying something along those lines before. "So, umm, Dora-chan says that pixie dragons and ancient dragons aren't exactly the same species as normal dragons, and it's not taboo to eat other dragons as long as they're not the same exact type as you. It'd be tough to get by as a dragon if the definition of cannibalism was that broad, apparently," I relayed. Dora-chan couldn't speak out loud, so he needed me to interpret for him.

"Oh, huh! I didn't know," Bastian said.

"Fascinating. The natural world is harsh indeed, I suppose," said the earl, who'd been listening in to our exchange and seemed convinced by the dragons' explanation.

"Can I ask another one?" the young boy then asked.

"Go ahead," I said.

"This dragon meat tasted better than any other meat I've ever had before. Are there any other meats that are this good?" he asked. He seemed really keenly interested in the many meats I'd eaten.

"Other good meats, huh? Hmm... Maybe wyver—"

"We obtained a meat that could rival that of a dragon just

recently," Fel declared before I could even finish my sentence.

"Wha— *Fel!* What're you—" I yelped, but this time Gon jumped in to cut me off.

"Ah, yes, indeed! The leviathan!"

Why're you two making things more complicated again*?!*

"*Bwhaugh!*"

Agh, see?! The earl looked so elegant sipping his wine, and now he's gone and choked on it! Kinda impressive that he managed not to spew it across the table, actually. And look, his wife and daughter are petrified! And Willam's facepalming again—déjà vu! How do you expect me to pull us back from this?! I'm already *dripping with cold sweat over here!*

"A leviathan?! Oh, wooow! I wonder what *those* taste like?" Bastian said, cutting through the indescribably awkward atmosphere with pure, childish innocence.

You know, I think that kid might be going places in the future...

Chapter 3: Ten Days Later...

The moment I was led to our guest room in the earl's house, I dove straight into bed.

"Ahhh... I am *beat*," I groaned.

《Are you okay, Master?》 asked Sui, who was currently perched atop Fel's back. The slime hopped onto the bed as well and extended a little tendril to gently slap my cheek with, probing me for signs of life.

"I'm fine, Sui," I replied, reaching out to give it a pat. Sometimes it felt like the slime was my one and only source of comfort in this world. "I'm also exhausted, though, so how about we just go to sleep?"

《Okaaay,》 Sui said.

《Kinda sucks that we didn't get to take a bath, but I guess that'd be weird in someone else's house anyway,》 Dora-chan said. 《We can take one tomorrow, right?》

"Yeah, we should be able to. We'll say our goodbyes to the earl tomorrow and go rent a house, like we usually do."

I'll drop dead from stress before the trip is over if we don't! I'd met *way* too many bigwigs on the first day alone, and my mental stamina was already totally depleted. The fact that Fel and Gon had insisted on running their mouths from the very start to the very end certainly hadn't helped with that.

"Ready my bedding at once," Fel commanded.

"And mine as well, my liege!" Gon added.

I swear, those two have no clue how much trouble they cause me! Are all legendary beasts like this? I gave Fel and Gon a sullen glower, which Fel responded to by telling me to hurry up.

"Okay, okay! Just a second," I grumbled. I heaved my poor, worn-out body upright again, pulled Fel's and Gon's bedding out from my Item Box, laid it out on the floor, and watched as they happily

settled down for the night.

"I don't think I could sleep without this anymore," Gon said.

"Indeed. Remarkable, how bedding such as this is all it takes to provide a sound night's sleep," Fel agreed.

Look at them, chatting away without a care in the world. Those two, I swear... And the fact that they're not trying *to give me a hard time almost makes it worse.*

Just when we'd finished a nice dinner with the earl's family and I'd thought I was out of the woods, they *had* to go and start talking about the leviathan. The earl had latched on to the topic immediately and started questioning me about where I'd gotten my hands on a monster like that. It wasn't a full-blown interrogation or anything, but it also didn't feel like I'd be able to get away with being vague and deflecting the question, so I ended up telling him the entire, unvarnished truth.

I started by telling him how we'd gone to—and cleared—a dungeon in the cluster of small nations right across the border. Then I moved on to explaining how the leviathan was that dungeon's final boss, and how it had left its own massive corpse for us to collect as spoils in lieu of any drop items. I even told him about how we were hoping that we'd be able to get the thing butchered while we were in the capital, so by the time I was done, he knew pretty much the whole story.

When I'd finished with my explanation, the first thing the earl did was let out a *very* lengthy sigh. Thankfully, though, he set me loose for the night and had me guided to his guest room right afterward. I heard him muttering something about how he "had to report this to the king" as we parted, but I decided that I'd just go ahead and leave that to him. *Thanks for that, Earl Langridge!*

I already had a plan worked out for the leviathan corpse. Assuming I was able to get it successfully butchered, I'd decided that I would offer the materials that would be harvested from it—and maybe even a *little* of the meat—to the king and the earl. *For now, though, it's definitely time for bed. Nighty night!*

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

The next day, I once again found myself in the capital's Adventurer's guild. Willem was there, along with five of the guild's highest-ranking members in the nation. The way they were all looking at me sort of made it feel like they were judging me, which was awkward, to say the least...and of course, the familiar squad was as completely oblivious to my struggles as ever.

Fel and Gon were lounging around like they owned the place, as usual. Dora-chan and Sui had fallen back on their classic routine as well and were currently napping on Fel. They were all as easygoing as ever, while *I* was busy staring off into the middle distance, regretting the fact that I'd agreed to come to the capital in the first place.

Having a group of very important senior adventurers inspect me from head to foot made me feel like a deer staring into the headlights of an oncoming truck. If I'd known I was going to get that kind of attention, I would've seriously considered spending the rest of the trip at the earl's place. As I paused to reflect on the mistakes that had brought me here, my mind drifted back to the events of that morning.

I had woken up in the earl's house, was treated to breakfast, and went on my way soon afterward. He only treated *me* to breakfast, by the way—my familiars made a habit of starting their day out with ridiculously heavy portions of meat, so I served them cutlet sandwiches (sans cabbage) that I'd made for them in advance.

When the earl arrived in the dining room, I noticed that he had dark circles under his eyes. Oriane and Celeste, on the other hand, seemed to have gotten up on the right side of the bed. They were as cheerful and animated as could be, and Bastian was all smiles and enthusiasm as well.

It turned out that the ladies were in excellent moods thanks to the all-in-one cream that I'd given them the day before. According to Oriane, "My skin's so lush and glossy, it's like I've become a whole different person!" Celeste had given it rave reviews as well—in her words, "I had the most horrid pimple on my forehead, and it vanished overnight!" The two of them spent all breakfast extolling the virtues of the cream in exacting, long-form detail.

Oh, and as a sidenote...they'd also taken a moment to ask me in a hushed, *very* serious tone whether or not I'd given some of that cream to the queen as well. I hadn't even considered that possibility up until that very moment, and when I explained that I hadn't, they told me that was "unacceptable" and instructed me to present a bottle of it to her as soon as I was able. Going back to the palace myself felt pretty much out of the question after how it had turned out last time, but thankfully, the earl had to make a trip there to report about the leviathan anyway, and he agreed to deliver the cream on my behalf when he did so.

Talk about a lucky break! I thought that Fel and Gon letting info on the leviathan slip was a huge screwup at the time, but I guess it might've turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

I ended up giving the earl's family some more of the cream as well—I felt a need to show them my appreciation for Oriane and Celeste's advice, and for the earl's help with delivering my extra gift to the queen. Oriane told me that I should "feel free to rely on us anytime," in response, with an *extremely* serious look in her eye as she said it. Even the earl cracked a smile at just how insistent she seemed.

Through all of that, Bastian was watching my familiars eat their breakfasts with keen interest. I got the sense that he was incredibly curious about the cutlet sandwiches I'd served them, specifically. The breakfast that the earl served wasn't bad by any means, but to a boy of Bastian's age, a meal of bread, plain soup with lots of veggies, and scrambled eggs—all of them very lightly seasoned—probably wasn't the most exciting way to start the day.

I ended up offering him one of the sandwiches, and he devoured it eagerly, pausing to tell everyone how delicious it was as he ate. The earl, Oriane, and Celeste reacted about how you'd expect them to, and in the end, I served sandwiches to the whole family. They proved themselves to be heavy eaters once again, and all cleaned their plates with glee. Oh, and Willem did as well, by the way.

Anyway, once we'd finished our calm and quiet—relatively speaking, I mean—breakfast, the whole family saw me to the front door where I said my goodbyes. I went straight to the Adventurer's

guild afterward...and, well, that brings us back to the present moment.

Ugggh. I wish someone would at least say *something! Getting stared down in total silence is really uncomfortable!*

"Hmm," one of the guild higher-ups finally said. "I heard he was brought here by a hero summoning ritual, but I have to say, he hardly strikes me as the *heroic* sort. Seems a bit feeble for that."

"True," said another. "Not weak, mind you, but not anywhere close to unparalleled. There's no shortage of adventurers as capable as him."

"It makes one wonder just how in the world he managed to earn the service of a fenrir and an ancient dragon."

"Makes you wonder, yes, but it doesn't change the fact that he managed it."

"Quite. And supposedly, the pixie dragon and the slime are rather powerful as well."

I'd thought that this would be a conversation, and I hadn't exactly been *wrong* about that. It just turned out that I was the subject rather than a participant. They weren't exactly holding back with their opinions either, though considering I agreed with pretty much everything they said, I didn't take offense.

Actually, wait, since when did the guild know that I was brought to this world by a hero summoning? I guess their information network's not to be underestimated. But also, for the record, I was never a hero in the first place! I was collateral damage!

Also, if you really want to know why Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui became my familiars, you're going to have to accept that the answer is "for food." It's not like I battled them into submission or anything. They wanted better meals, and they signed up to get them. They're all nothing but huge gluttons, plain and simple!

I had plenty of thoughts that I was very tempted to share, but since butting into the bigwigs' discussion seemed like it would only make things more complicated than ever, I decided to keep quiet instead.

I wonder how much longer this is going to take? I'd really like to go find a place for us to stay tonight sometime soon.

“Have you not yet finished your discussion?” Fel finally cut in. Apparently, he’d also gotten frustrated that the guild folks still hadn’t gotten to the point yet.

“Oh, do excuse us,” one of them said. “Allow me to introduce myself, Sir Fenrir. I am the guildmaster of the capital branch of our organization, Bram Alders. A pleasure to make your acquaintance. As for my colleagues...”

Bram introduced the other big shots as Cyril, Leocadio, Vivian, and Noah. All four of them were rather elderly—probably around the same age as Bram himself—and all four of them served as joint sub-guildmaster of the Adventurer’s guild’s capital branch. According to Willem—who knew his stuff, being the guildmaster of the Karelina branch—the five of them were essentially the governing body of the whole guild, at least in the Kingdom of Leonhardt.

Cool! I’m terrified!

“Now then, Willem has informed us that you have a request you would like to make?” Bram prompted.

“Indeed. That is the purpose for which we came here,” Fel said.

“Quite, quite! We hunted a leviathan in a dungeon, and we would like you to butcher it for us,” Gon explained. He made it sound nice and simple, but I was very certain that cutting up something that enormous wasn’t going to be anywhere near that easy.

Silence fell, and stuck around for a good long while.

“Sir Ancient Dragon,” Bram eventually said, “I’d like to make sure that I didn’t just mishear you. Did you, in fact, say that you’ve felled a *leviathan*?”

“I certainly did,” Gon confirmed. “It was a dungeon drop, technically speaking, in that the whole corpse remained after the beast was slain. Leviathan meat is a rare delicacy, but my liege claims that he needs it to be processed before he can cook it for us.”

“*He*,” Fel said, indicating Willem, **“claimed that his guild was not up to the task. He told us that the capital, however, would be capable of it.”**

“Excuse me, Fel—*might*! I said that the capital *might* be able to manage it!” Willem urgently insisted as he wiped the sweat from his

brow. I got the sense that he didn't want the capital bigwigs to think that he was going around making claims about what they could and couldn't do.

"Have it your way," Fel grunted. **"So? Can you, or can you not?"**

"H-Hey, simmer down, Fel!" I cut in. *For crying out loud, we're trying to talk with these people, not coerce them! What if they* can't *handle it? How could they possibly admit it if you ask them like* that*?*

"I-I can't quite say for sure, at the present moment," Bram said, his expression taking on a rather strained twitch. "We'll have to see the monster in question before we can make that call."

"Then show it to them," Fel said as he turned to look at me.

Yeah, I don't think so. "That's definitely not happening *here*," I said. Its head alone would've blown out the ceiling.

"He's right, Fel. Think of its size!" Gon chimed in.

"Hmph. I suppose. You—is there a large, wide open space we can use?" Fel asked Bram.

"The storehouse should suffice," Bram replied.

He and the other bigwigs quickly led us toward the capital branch's storehouse.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

The storehouse turned out to be way bigger than any of the ones I'd seen at any of the other Adventurer's guilds we'd visited.

"I suppose this place should be large enough—so long as we only bring out the head, that is," Gon commented. He was very right about that caveat. The entire leviathan was truly enormous, so taking anything more than its head out of my Item Box would've been too much, even for a space this vast.

"All right, the whole thing would still be too big, so I'll just take out its head to start," I explained to the bigwigs. They seemed a little agitated by that claim. *It's true, I swear!* "Okay. Here goes!"

When I had put the leviathan into my Item Box, all I'd had to do was give it a little push, and the whole corpse had slid right in. Bringing items out was usually the same—I just grabbed them, gave

them a tug, and out they'd come. This time, however, I actually had to pull with a fair amount of force to extract the corpse. It took a bit of tugging, but I was able to pull out the leviathan's outlandishly massive head on its own.

Silence followed. A long, *long* period of deathly silence. The higher-ups and Willem had practically unhinged their jaws.

Oh, right. I guess Willem knew about the leviathan, but this is his first time actually seeing it, huh? As I studied the dumbstruck looks on their faces, a thought crossed my mind: *Boy, can I ever relate! Leviathans sure are stupidly huge!*

For quite some time, everyone just stood there, staring blankly at the gargantuan head.

"So? Can you butcher it?" Fel said, finally breaking the extended silence with a rather impatient question.

At that, the guild folks snapped back to reality in unison. Bram took a second longer to stare at the leviathan head, then turned to his colleagues. "The way I see it, turning down a chance like this would be a stain on our guild's good name. What are your thoughts?"

"I'm inclined to agree, though this will be the most daunting task that we'll have faced since we started managing this guild," Cyril said.

"True. The way I see it, butchering this beast is the Adventurer's guild's duty," Leocadio opined.

"Agreed. We should take the job," Vivian added.

"I'm in favor as well," Noah concurred.

Oh? It kinda feels like this might actually work out!

"Hmm. It sounds to me like they're up to the task," Gon muttered as he listened in on the conversation.

"Sir Fenrir, Sir Ancient Dragon," Bram said, "we would like to accept your request. Please allow us to butcher the leviathan."

Fel's and Gon's faces lit up in an instant.

"Excellent!" Gon exclaimed.

"Good. See to it," added Fel, whose tail was wagging furiously, presumably with glee. Gon's thick, scaly tail was actually wagging a little as well, and I had to step in and stop him before he knocked

over a table.

"There's one slight caveat, though," Bram continued. "We'll need you to wait for two weeks—no, ten days before we can facilitate the project."

Butchering something that huge required quite a lot of preparation, apparently. Ten days seemed like a reasonable span of time for them to lay all the groundwork they needed to get started. I couldn't blame them for that.

"This will be the greatest project in the guild's history!" Bram declared. "We'll tackle it piece by piece, little by little, and see it done!"

"Yeah!" the other four bigwigs shouted in unison.

"And when it's done, we'll have earned our names a place in the history books!"

"*Yeah!*"

I-Is it just me, or are those five really *worked up about this? Great. Now I'm getting nervous.*

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Ahhh," I sighed as I flopped down into the big, cushy chair that I found in the living room of the house I'd rented. *Now* this *is the luxury I'd expect from a mansion in the capital!*

The chair was made from a very soft sort of leather that had just the right amount of springiness to it and was tremendously comfortable. The house, meanwhile, had come at the recommendation of the Adventurer's guild bigwigs. They'd even covered the cost of renting it, which was pretty nice of them, though it did come with one slight drawback...

"Now *this* is really something! Do you always stay in fancy places like this when you travel around?" asked Willem, who'd come with the house as a package deal. As he'd put it, "There's no telling what sort of hell you'll raise if you're left unsupervised." In other words, he was both our roommate and our watchdog for the next week and change.

"Hmm. This house is acceptable, I suppose," Fel said. **"The**

leaders of your guild are adequately competent, it would seem. That they could provide such lodgings and butcher the leviathan speaks well of their capabilities."

"True," Gon agreed. "Perhaps we should consider ourselves in their debt."

The knowledge that we'd finally get to eat the leviathan ten days from now had the two of them in incredibly high spirits.

《Man, ten days, huh? That's the deal, right? Feels like ages, but boy, am I psyched!》 Dora-chan said.

《Sui's really excited too!》 Sui chimed in.

Neither of our party's smallest members had listened to our conversation at the guild—they'd both been fast asleep—but they had woken up while we'd been en route to the house, and I'd filled them in about how the guild had agreed to process the leviathan, but would need ten days to prepare first.

"Hold your horses," I said. "They're *starting* ten days from now, but that doesn't mean they'll *finish* ten days from now! Who knows how long it'll take? You know how huge that thing was."

"Ugh!" Fel grunted. **"P-Perhaps so, but surely they will have harvested enough meat for us to feast upon after the first day!"**

"Yes, indeed! Fel's exactly right!" Gon said.

《Yeah, what they said!》 Dora-chan agreed.

《Sui wants to eat yummy meat right away!》 Sui added.

Sheesh. You guys are way too impatient when food's on the line! Just how excited for this meat are you?

My familiars' attitudes were a hassle, but I could deal with them. What was *really* weighing on my mind was how much this whole endeavor seemed to have gotten blown out of proportion.

"Hey, guildmaster? I'm glad that they agreed to handle the leviathan and all, but the ten-day delay has me wondering about something. Is this turning into, like, a really large-scale sort of project?"

"Well, of course it is!" Willem said. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime undertaking, even for the capital branch."

"Ugggh... I really would've preferred to keep this quick and quiet,

honestly."

"You can't be serious. Were you really expecting to bring in a leviathan—let alone one *that* enormous—and not have it turn into a big deal? There's no way, right?"

Okay...yeah. I can't deny it. You've got me there.

"I've got plenty of other questions," I said. "For one thing, where do you suppose they're going to butcher something that big in the first place?"

That was a pretty major roadblock, right from the word go. The guild's massive storehouse had just barely been able to contain the monster's head alone.

"Outside, I figure. Can't think of anywhere else," Willem said.

"Outside?"

"Yeah—outside city limits, that is. Remember that big field we landed on when we first got here? I'd give it good odds that they'll set up there. It's the only place that makes sense."

Oh, yeah. I guess that would probably be a big enough working space.

"From the sound of it, the higher-ups are running themselves ragged bringing together the help they'll need right about now," Willem continued.

"They'll need help?" I asked.

"Oh, no doubt about it. The capital branch doesn't have nearly enough skilled butchers on staff to handle it alone. You can't just sic an amateur with a knife on the likes of a leviathan, after all. It's a top-class item that takes a master's skills to process properly. They'll be bringing in all the capable, highly reputed experts in the field they can find, I'd bet. I'm sure our own Johan will be showing up any day now."

I guess dealing with a monster that big means jumping through all sorts of hoops.

"I figure they'll call in some high-ranking adventurers too," Willem added.

"Adventures? Why?"

"Because it's a leviathan, and they'll be processing it out in the open, in plain view of anyone who decides to watch. There'll always

be someone trying to earn some quick coin off an undertaking like that, and we'll need the strictest security we can drum up."

Oh, yeah, I guess that does make sense, I thought, not seeing any reason to make a big deal out of that information. However...

"What?! You believe there are fools who would dare to lay hands on *our* leviathan?!"

"They'll rue the day they try it!"

...Fel and Gon were appalled by the mere thought. A very dangerous glint had begun to shine in their eyes.

Uh, guys? You're freaking me out a little!

"If there is truly a risk of that happening, then I shall raise as many barriers as I must to ensure it does not come to pass," Fel said.

"And I as well!" Gon chimed in. "The barriers of a fenrir and an ancient dragon are not so easily broken!"

"Then our plan is set. Gon and I will raise a two-layered barrier. No foe could be mighty enough to break it!"

"Good, good! Best to prioritize the barrier's strength above all else, this time. There's no telling who might decide to steal our prize!"

"We will also stand guard, to be safe."

"Yes, of course! That's for the best."

《I'm in for guard duty too! Pisses me off just thinking about someone stealing *our* leviathan meat!》

《Sui'll help! Sui'll help!》

A two-layer barrier courtesy of Fel and Gon, plus all four of them standing guard? Ha ha ha... Yeah, I don't think that leviathan's going anywhere anytime soon.

"Yes! Good! Do all that!" Willem exclaimed. "That'll be worth a hundred—no, a *thousand* normal guards! I'll go inform the guild at once!"

Willem really did sprint away on the spot, over the moon to tell the Adventurer's guild higher-ups that Fel and Gon would have the leviathan's security measures under control. I, on the other hand, sighed deeply.

It sure does feel like this is becoming a bigger and bigger deal by

the second... It'd be hopeless for me to even try controlling it at this point, wouldn't it?

《Hey, y'know what? I'm starving!》

《Sui's hungry too!》

"Yes, indeed. I hunger as well."

"I'm rather famished too, my liege."

And right on cue, the gluttonous quartet sings their usual tune. Who needs a watch when you have familiars like them around?

"Okay, okay! I'll make something right away!"

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

It was that time yet again: time to figure out what to feed my ever-starving familiars.

I guess I can't be too hard on them, really. Their meals are the one thing that those four always look forward to, after all. Might as well make something that'll live up to their expectations...but what?

I mulled over my options as I looked around the mansion's kitchen, which was just as over-the-top lavish as the rest of the house. Making a meat dish was a given, but the question was, what sort of meat? I decided to take a look through my Item Box in the hopes that something would inspire me.

Hmm... Oh! I think I can work with this!

I was sort of in the mood for poultry, so I ended up going with cockatrice meat as my protein of choice. With my main ingredient decided on, now I just had to choose a recipe.

What to make with cockatrice meat? Hmm... Poultry... Ah, got it! I'll cook it like chicken and serve it with a demi-glace sauce! That'll go great with some bread!

I opened my Online Supermarket to pick up some ingredients I'd need. I bought onions, carrots, garlic, mushrooms—both white and shimeji—and a can of premade demi-glace sauce. Oh, and a carton of heavy cream as well, which I almost forgot! Garnishing the dish with a little cream right at the end both looked nice and would also round out the flavors really well.

"What else, what else...? Oh, butter! I almost forgot I was out," I

said to myself, adding a pack of butter to my cart and then checking out. As usual, all my purchases materialized out of thin air in a cardboard box. I unpacked my ingredients, then started cooking!

I halved the onions, then cut them into slices that were about half a centimeter thick. Next, I sliced the carrots into fairly thin half rounds. I kept the carrots on the thin side so they wouldn't take forever to cook through—I wanted the dish to be ready relatively quickly. I minced the garlic, broke apart the shimeji mushrooms, and halved the white mushrooms. Finally, I chopped the main ingredient—the cockatrice meat—into pieces that were on the slightly larger end of bite-sized.

That was all the knife work that I had to do, so next, I brought out my usual frying pan. I melted a pat of butter in it, then threw in the minced garlic, which I stirred around until it was fragrant. The cockatrice chunks went in next, skin-side down, and I let them cook until the bottom part was nicely browned. Then I flipped the pieces over to give their opposite sides a little color as well, though since they didn't need to be fully cooked through at that stage, I moved along pretty quickly. The onions and carrots went in next, at which point I gave everything a quick stir and added some red wine too.

"Oh! Guess I'll have to stock up on this too," I said. I'd used the last of the cheap wine that I'd bought to cook with. The dish would've worked fine without it, but I'd always felt that a little red wine in Western-style stewed meat dishes gave them a certain depth they really benefited from.

Once the alcohol had cooked out of the wine, I added the canned demi-glace sauce and some water, along with a squirt of ketchup and a bouillon cube. I let all the ingredients stew together a little, then threw in all the mushrooms—which would cook through in no time—right at the very end of the process. Once the mushrooms were done, I tasted the dish, fine-tuned its flavor profile with some salt and pepper, and finally decided that it was ready!

Now I just have to plate this up, then sprinkle on a little cream...

"All right, that looks great!" I said to myself. It was one of my better efforts in recent memory, and I was taking a moment to admire my handiwork when I heard a noise from the entryway.

"Hey! I'm back!" Willem called out.

"Just in time," I said to myself. "Okay, let's have dinner!"

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Hmm. Yes, this does taste thoroughly decent."

"It's so strongly flavored, yet so well balanced! You truly do have a talent for cooking, my liege."

《Yeah, seriously! This stuff's great! Think it might be one of my favorites!》

《Sui loves it too!》

The demi-glace was a hit. I'd been worried that it might've been a little *too* strong, flavor-wise, but it seemed it had matched my familiars' tastes perfectly. They gobbled it down without wasting a moment.

"Seconds, now!"

"For me as well, my liege!"

《Same here!》

《Seconds for Sui too!》

"Okay, okay," I replied. I refilled their dishes as quickly as I could with extra-large helpings, and they started inhaling them just as quickly as they'd gone through their first servings.

"Even having seen them eat before, it's still hard to believe the appetites your familiars have," Willem commented.

"Ha ha! Yeah, they more or less live for this," I replied. "It feels kind of nice to cook for people who never leave leftovers, though. Makes it feel worth the effort, you know?"

"I'm still getting over my shock that they eat food that's meant for humans, actually."

"They're a bunch of gourmands, all right." *By which I mean they're super picky foodies.*

"And I *still* can't believe they eat dragon meat on the regular. Do you have any idea how absurd that is?"

"I mean, they're the ones who hunted the dragons in the first place, so who am I to complain?" *Though actually, I guess Gon wasn't around yet when we ran into the red dragon.*

"Not to say that this dish isn't incredible as well. You're eating a hell of a lot better than I do, that's for sure," Willem said, deflating ever so slightly as he compared his lifestyle to mine.

W-Well, we're sort of a special case in a bunch of ways, you know? I really wouldn't let it get to you!

"Here, have some bread, guildmaster," I said, holding out a basket with slices of Theresa's signature sourdough in it. "It's *really* good if you use it to soak up the sauce, like this! See?"

"Oh?" Willem said. He took a slice of the bread, dipped it in the demi-glace, and took a bite. "No kidding! That's great!"

"Right?"

Willem must have liked the bread and demi-glace combo even more than he let on. He went back for a second slice of bread before I knew it.

"Oh, right," Willem said a moment later. "About the plan to have those two put up a barrier and stand guard."

"Yes?" I said. I hadn't heard what the guild had said in response to the message he'd delivered to them, now that he mentioned it.

"To make a long story short, they're all for it."

Willem explained that the guild had indeed sent out a request for high-ranking adventurers to gather in the capital, but that since so many of the adventurers who would qualify were out on missions, the odds of them being able to gather a sufficient security detail had actually been looking pretty dicey. That was understandable, considering how last-minute the whole plan was.

"That said, the guild can't just let the two of them handle the *whole* thing on their own," Willem continued. "They'll be keeping the request for high-ranking adventurer guards as is, and put everyone who turns up on guard duty as well."

"This whole project's going to be under some really strict security, huh?" I said.

"As if it could ever be any other way. You know exactly what we'll be working with, so of course it will."

Hmm. Is it really that obvious? I guess it is *a leviathan.* Monsters like that tended to be valuable from top to bottom—even their blood, guts, fangs, and bones would all probably be prized materials.

Though my party, of course, was only interested in the meat.

"And again, considering what we're working with, it sounds like they decided they had no choice but to call in an expert in the field to help direct the processing effort. I bet you know who that means."

"No, actually. Who?"

"The dragon-freak of Dolan, that's who."

"*Ugh*! They called *him* in?! Seriously?!"

Gon and Dora-chan's archenemy cometh! I know he's not a bad guy—or, well, not a bad elf—but he just can't be trusted to be reasonable when dragons are in the picture!

"I mean, it's a leviathan," Willem said with a shrug. "I'm sure you remember how he skipped out on his guild to sneak over to your place a while back, right? Seems they came down on him pretty hard over it, and he's got a full-time chaperone keeping an eye on him these days. Even after all that, though, they decided that they couldn't do without his expertise for this."

"Oh, no. Oooh, no no *no*..."

If he's *coming, that can only mean one thing...*

"And rumor has it that the second he got word, he literally burst into tears of joy. Left Dolan the very same day too. Seems he and his guardian are making their merry little way toward the capital as we speak."

"Don't! Stop! Stay home, Elrand! Stay hooooooome!"

Chapter 4: My Condolences to the Dragon Turtles

This was the worst-case scenario. The most consistently over-the-top dragon lover in the nation, the one and only Elrand, was on his way here. Willem had dropped that bombshell of a revelation on me at dinnertime, but the gluttonous quartet had been too focused on their food to actually hear it, so the responsibility fell to me to break the news to them after we'd all finished eating.

Now that Elrand had entered the picture, I recalled something that he'd said to me back when I told him that we were going to the oceanside town of Berléand. I'd offered to catch a sea serpent for him, and he'd responded that he'd rather I bring him a leviathan, noting that he'd be over the moon to butcher one of them. In retrospect, it wasn't surprising at all that he'd flown out the door the second he heard that I'd actually gotten my hands on one.

Fel and Sui more or less brushed the news off, which wasn't surprising since Elrand had never done anything in particular to offend the two of them. Gon and Dora-chan, on the other hand, scowled like they'd never scowled before, and Dora-chan actually let out a shriek of horror. They really, really, *really* didn't like that guy, which, to be clear, was totally reasonable on their part.

Unfortunately for them, I could also understand why we'd need him if we wanted to get that leviathan butchered. It was technically a type of dragon, after all, and while his dragon obsession *did* border on the brink of perversion, he was also almost obnoxiously good at his job. He would've been an incredible asset if it weren't for the fact that he only ever applied his talents to work that he was personally invested in. He could butcher a whole normal-sized dragon on his own, and I could personally attest that he had all the expertise of a true professional...which actually made him *more* obnoxious, in a

backward sort of way.

"You must resign yourselves to what is to come. Your suffering is the price that must be paid for the leviathan's meat," Fel said to Gon and Dora-chan. He seemed to have reached the same conclusion about Elrand's undeniable skill as I had. Gon and Dora-chan weren't happy to hear it, and spent a good while moaning and groaning, but in the end, the thought of eating leviathan meat won out against the thought of having to deal with Elrand's antics again, if only by a narrow margin.

"It's a cruel choice we've been forced to make, but I see no other path forward," Gon admitted with a look of resignation.

《I really, really, *really* hate to say it, but it's for the leviathan. No other choice,》 Dora-chan admitted as well, hanging his head as he said it. 《Oh, but don't let him anywhere near me,》 he added.

That's gonna be a tall order... "I'll do my best, but the guy's like a cockroach. There's just no getting rid of him sometimes."

Especially when dragons are involved. It's honestly unbelievable how stubborn he gets when one of them enters the picture. I've never met an elf that was harder to handle, seriously. Just knowing that he'll be here soon is making me worry all over again.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

Three days after we learned that Elrand was on his way to the capital, Gon and Dora-chan were in a state of melancholic resignation. They'd been spending more and more time moping around the house, heaving heavy sighs on a regular basis.

"I wish you two would stop that," I said after a particularly loud synchronized set of sighs. "You're making *me* depressed, at this point."

"How very easy that must be for you to say, my liege," Gon muttered.

《Right?》 Dora-chan agreed. 《It's hard *not* to sigh when you know you're gonna have to see *that* guy soon...》

Those two really do despise Elrand, don't they...? I guess it'd be hard to not *hate someone who was that obnoxious about loving your*

whole species. I'd been doing my best to cheer the two of them up—or at least, I thought I had, anyway—but to the two of them, this was apparently a big enough issue that no amount of cheering up would make up for it.

《Gon, Dora-chan, are you okay?》 Sui asked, reaching out with a pair of tentacles to pat the dragons' forelegs.

Aww, you're always so nice, Sui! For just a moment, it felt like the scene was turning into a heartwarming one.

"The human is right. I am used to Gon being a shameless braggart and Dora being ceaselessly loud. It feels unnatural when your behavior changes."

Seriously, Fel?! You could've picked literally any other way to say that!

"Who are you calling a braggart?! You're far more shameless than I could ever be!"

Honestly, I've gotta agree with that. Fel had been with me the longest of any of my familiars, and I was very used to his attitude by now, so I could say with confidence that he was the most shameless by far, both in our group and out of all the people I'd met in general.

"Hey. Why are you nodding?"

A very large paw came to rest on the top of my head. My gesture, it seemed, hadn't escaped Fel's notice.

"Wha— Hey!" I yelped. "My head isn't a footrest, thank you very much!" *And sheesh, of all the times for you to actually pay attention to me!*

Fel did not move.

"Uhhh... Hey, are you listening?! Kinda feels like you're pushing harder!" *And you're strong enough that I might end up a few inches shorter if you keep that up!*

"Hmph!" Fel grunted as he turned his head away from me.

Dora-chan, who'd been glaring at Fel for some time now, let out another lengthy sigh. 《Well, excuse me for being loud! Friggin' sheesh,》 he grumbled listlessly.





They really would do almost anything to get out of meeting with Elrand, huh? He definitely earned that reaction, though, I thought as my mind drifted back to all the mischief he'd gotten up to when he barged into my house in Karelina. *Ugggh... I remember the way he chased Dora-chan around trying to touch him, and the time when he asked Gon to give him samples of blood and spit, among other things. Calling that "groan-worthy" doesn't even begin to do it justice.* So *many crossed lines. I'd be sighing too, if I were in their shoes.*

But then again...they've all been waiting for so long to try their precious leviathan meat, and I think they know that we really do need him if we want that to happen. I bet they're just conflicted since their desire to eat the leviathan's fighting with their desire to not be anywhere near Elrand.

Gon and Dora-chan heaved another set of sighs.

"Enough of this!" Fel boomed. **"I tire of your doom and gloom! We shall hunt! Hunting is the best salve to soothe your wounds at times such as these!"**

《Yaaay! Sui'll pew-pew a bunch of monsters!》 Sui chimed in.

"Oh, I don't think so!" I said. "I'm not falling for that—you just want to go hunting, don't you? Also, stop encouraging him, Sui."

"To the contrary, my liege, Fel *does* have a point," Gon said. "Staying here and moping certainly won't make us feel better, at any rate."

《Yeah, you said it! Getting out there and running wild for a bit sounds like a great way to take my mind off all this junk,》 Dora-chan agreed.

"N-Now hold on a second! This isn't a done deal! I get a say too!"

"What else would you suggest? We have nothing else to do until the leviathan is ready to be butchered, no?" Fel said with a self-satisfied smirk.

This was his plan all along, dang it! It was all one big scheme to drag me out hunting!

"I mean, you're not *wrong*, but—"

"But what?"

"But, umm, well..."

《Hey, c'mon, Fel! Hurry up!》 Dora-chan called out.

"Yes, indeed! Let us go on the hunt, and take our minds off what awaits us afterward!" Gon said.

《Sui'll beat up sooo many baddies!》 Sui added.

Y-You guuuys!

"Enough with your dawdling. Let us be off," Fel said before lifting me by the collar of my shirt and tossing me into the air.

"*Gah*!"

I landed with a thump right on Fel's back, and the instant I was stable, he set off at a sprint. "W-Wait, no, stop! At least let me leave a note behind before we go!" I frantically shouted.

Willem had left the house early that morning to get some work done at the Adventurer's guild. We'd be back in time for dinner, in all likelihood, but if he got home before that and realized that we'd gone missing, it would probably turn into another huge, nightmarish ordeal. He'd actually taken to interrogating me about my plans for the day every morning—apparently, I "have a record" when it comes to vanishing on him—and I'd told him that we'd be taking it easy at home today, so he'd have more reason than ever to assume the worst.

"Tch! Make it quick," Fel begrudgingly acquiesced.

My familiars were all so intent on hurrying me along that in the end, I only had time to write "We went hunting" on a very rough piece of paper (that I'd obtained from this world, by the way), which I left on the living room table.

"Good. Now, away!"

"But not *far* away! We're keeping this trip close to the capital, got it?!"

"I am well aware."

"You'd better be, because I'm serious! Not too far! I really mean it, you hear me?!"

We set off through the city streets, making our way out of the capital.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

Fel sprinted straight out of the capital with me on his back. Then, the moment we'd cleared the walls and made it out into the open field beyond...

"Good. The time has come for *you* to play your part."

"Indeed it has! Climb aboard my back, all of you!"

...Dora-chan and Sui happily transferred from Fel's back to Gon's.

"Whoa, whoa, wait a second!" I shouted. "Why do we have to fly to get where we're going?! How far are you planning on taking us?!"

"As far as I must. Settle down."

"That's not an answer, and *no*, I *won't*!"

《Masteeer, hurry!》 Sui urged.

《Yeah, what Sui said! Get on, already!》 Dora-chan shouted.

"I'm not hurrying to do *anything* until I get some answers!"

"Enough of this. We are climbing aboard, now."

The next thing I knew, Fel had picked me up by the collar once again and hurled me onto Gon's back.

"*Gaaah!*"

Come on, guys! What are you even doing, and why'd you have to do that twice in a row?!

"Good, everyone is ready. Take flight, Gon."

"Very well! I know just the place, considering our current whereabouts."

"And where's that?!" I shouted. "It'd better not be somewhere far away!"

"No need to worry, my liege. It isn't far at all."

"If it isn't far, then why do we have to fly there in the first place?! That's a dead giveaway that we're going somewhere super remote!"

"Enough of your screeching. Be silent," Fel said as he covered my mouth—well, my whole face, really—with one of the pads on his paw.

"Mmmnggf?! Mmph, mmnfff!" I battered away at Fel's paw with my fists. It didn't do much.

《Hey, uhh, Fel? You think he can breathe like that?》 Dora-chan asked.

No! No, I can't! You figured out the problem! He's blocking all my airways, and I can barely breathe at all, actually! I thought as I kept

flailing away.

"Hm? Oh," Fel grunted before finally releasing me.

I took a moment to gasp for breath. "*Felll!* Are you trying to kill me, or what?!"

"Your anger is unwarranted. It was but a slight mishap."

"Mishap, my foot!"

《Masteeer, are you okay?》

"Oh, Sui! You're the only one who ever worries about me!" I said as I swept the slime up in a hug.

"Let us be off, Gon."

"Indeed!"

And with that, Gon flapped into the sky.

"Hey, wait! This conversation's not over yet!" *And seriously, where are we even* going*?!*

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

Gon kept flying for about an hour before he finally touched down. I climbed off his back to find myself in a desolate, rugged stretch of arid land full of big rocks and not much else.

I paused and looked around.

"So...where are we?" I asked. A harsh, cold gust of wind blew, almost as if nature itself was punctuating my question. It hadn't felt cold at all in the capital, but it was so frigid here, I could feel myself breaking out in goose bumps. "Brr!" I said with a shiver before quickly pulling the sweater I'd bought from my Online Supermarket out of my Item Box and slipping it on.

"It irks me to ask the same question as *him*, but yes—where *is* this place, Gon?" Fel said.

"You might call it something of a well-kept secret, as far as hunting grounds go," Gon replied.

《A secret hunting ground?》 Dora-chan repeated. 《What could possibly be worth hunting in a place like this?》

"Oh, very worthwhile prey indeed! Long, *long* ago, I went through a phase where the thought of creatures that weren't dragons having 'dragon' in their names irked me terribly. I decided to

hunt them all to extinction, but over the course of that quest, I happened across a kind with meat that was quite delicious indeed," Gon explained, his eyes narrowing as he reminisced about the supposedly delectable flavor. "And so I abandoned my plan and left the rest of them to their own devices. I'm certain there should still be some around."

You gave up on hunting a species to extinction because they tasted *good? Where do I even start...?*

"It was even more delicious after I fine-tuned my dragon's breath to grill it more carefully," Gon added, a stream of drool dribbling out of the corner of his mouth.

"Gon! Drool! Drool!"

"Oh! Pardon me."

Fel, who'd seemed to be deep in thought as he listened to Gon's explanation, jerked his head up. He seemed to have remembered something. **"Beasts with 'dragon' in their name that are not dragons themselves, with unexpectedly delicious meat? Of course! They could only be dragon turtles!"**

《Dragon turtles?》 Dora-chan and Sui repeated in unison.

"Assuming nothing really weird's going on here, I'm guessing those are a type of turtle monster?" I said.

"Correct," Fel replied with a nod.

"And although 'dragon' is in their name, they're of an entirely different set of creatures than true dragons such as Dora and I," Gon said before launching into a more detailed explanation. According to him, "Their fangs are sharp and their jaws are powerful like a dragon's, yes, but they are still mere turtles incapable of breathing so much as a spark, let alone a flame."

At that point, Fel chimed in to mention that **"They are pathetically slow, and hold not even a fraction of a true dragon's power."** He also explained that **"Their hide, however, is rather tough, and their shells more formidable still. Breaking through them can be a nuisance."**

"Indeed," Gon said, nodding in agreement.

"Not even I could pierce one of their shells in a single blow," Fel added.

"They're troublesome when they hide within their shells, yes," Gon continued. "And to make matters worse, their shells boast remarkable resistance to magic as well! Defeating them through nonmagical means would take many an attack, even from the likes of us."

Wait, really? Considering how tough those two are, doesn't that mean that these turtles are really *hard to hurt? I've never heard of anything that could take more than a couple hits from those two and stay standing!*

《Oh, *really*? These turtles are tough enough to make you two admit it? Sounds like taking one of 'em down is gonna be worth the effort!》 Dora-chan said.

《Sui'll pew-pew the big turtles and melt them away!》 Sui said as well. The two of them seemed downright fired up by the idea that the turtles' shells were tough enough to impress Fel and Gon.

《Magic resistance sounds like a pain, though,》 Dora-chan continued. 《Magic's my whole thing, so they might be a bad matchup for me.》

Oh, yeah, that's true. A magic specialist like Dora-chan would probably have a hard time with a monster like that.

《Oh, duh!》 Dora-chan exclaimed a second later. 《Hey, Sui, let's work together on this one! We can take a dragon turtle down if we tag-team it!》

Not a bad plan! If the two of them took on one of those turtles together, I bet they could deal with it no problem.

《How 'bout it?》 Dora-chan asked.

For a moment, Sui just bounced in place.

Hm? What's going on?

《Umm, well... What's 'tag-team' mean?》 Sui asked completely nonchalantly. I almost cracked up on the spot, and Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan all smirked as well.

Oh, I get it! Guess nobody's taught that phrase to Sui yet, huh?

《Tag-teaming something means you fight it together!》 Dora-chan explained. 《I'm saying that the two of us should fight a single dragon turtle at the same time, and bring it down as a team. How's that sound?》

《Oh, okay! Sui thinks that sounds fun!》

《Hell yeah! In that case, let's get out there and find ourselves a dragon turtle already!》 Dora-chan excitedly shouted.

"Indeed. And I have already determined where one may be found, broadly," Fel said. **"We should start by moving closer to its location. Ride upon my back with Sui,"** he added, glancing at me.

"Okay, okay," I replied. Sui and I climbed onto Fel's back.

"We'll take to the skies, Dora!" Gon said.

《Arright!》

A few minutes after we set off, Fel arrived near the foot of a massive hill.

"That is a dragon turtle."

I...didn't know what to say. As it turned out, the turtle had been in plain sight for quite some time. I'd just assumed it was a *geological feature*, not a monster! Looking closer, though, its rough, craggy slopes *did* have a tortoiseshell-like pattern to them.

Welp. Only one thing I can think to say about this...

"Holy *crap*, that's huge!"

It's tall as hell, for one thing, and it must be thirty meters from one end to the other—maybe forty, actually?

"Yes, that *is* a reasonably large one," Gon casually observed.

"It would seem it sensed our approach, and has already withdrawn into its shell," Fel noted.

Nooope, nope nope nope! You're making this sound nice and easy, but you're telling me you're planning on fighting something that *big, with a stupidly tough shell on top of it? How in the world are you planning on fighting* that*?* I wondered, as I gazed up at the massive, thickly armored mound that was apparently the dragon turtle's shell.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

Somehow, I'd found myself standing before a mountain-like giant turtle monster. *I* was preoccupied by a very pressing question—that being, "How the hell are we supposed to take this thing down?"—but

my familiars were all brimming with enthusiasm for the task ahead.

Why is it that whenever we go out hunting or end up in a dungeon, those four instantly turn into battle-crazed killing machines?

《Okay, Sui and I get the first one! You two are good with that, right?》 Dora-chan asked.

"Hmph. Very well," Fel said.

"Yes, I don't see why not!" Gon agreed.

《Then let's do this, Sui!》

《Yeah!》

Dora-chan and Sui took off in the direction of the turtle.

《Let's see how you like this!》 Dora-chan shouted as he let loose one of his signature ice magic spells. Thick, keen-pointed pillars of ice—more of them than I could count—materialized in the air and flew straight toward the dragon turtle...but they all simply bounced off its shell with a series of sharp, earsplitting *clangs*. Dora-chan clicked his tongue with irritation and scowled.

《Sui's next! Taaake this!》

Pew! Pew! Pew!

Sui shot off a series of Acid Bullets. It seemed to be trying to melt through a large chunk of the turtle's shell all at once using projectiles that looked like they were pretty sizable. They slammed into their target, and I could see the shell begin to dissolve with a sizzling noise...

《Huuuh?》

...but only its surface. Sui had barely damaged the turtle at all, in the end.

《Damn it, seriously? Sui can't get through either?》 Dora-chan grumbled as he flew circles around the turtle. 《Guess Fel and Gon were right. Those shells are some serious business.》

It really is impressive that it managed to shrug off multiple attacks from those two, yeah. Just how tough is *that shell?* The fact that the turtle hadn't so much as budged, even after weathering their attacks, told me that it must have had absolute confidence in its shell's ability to keep it safe. It was under the impression that as long as it was hidden inside, it was invincible.

《Boo! Why isn't it melting?》 Sui huffed, irritated by its failure. 《Take this!》

Pew! Pew! Pew!

It doubled down, launching even bigger Acid Bullets than last time. The shell withstood the assault, though—once again, the acid only melted through a tiny amount of its surface.

At that point, Dora-chan landed next to Sui. 《Hey, Sui, let's switch up our game plan,》 he said. 《I don't think we're gonna blow through that shell anytime soon, so we'd better try something else.》

《Awww! But Sui's so strong!》

《Yeah, yeah, I know. You're super strong, but sometimes even people like us run into something tough enough that our best attacks just don't work on 'em. You gotta accept that, or you'll never find a way to beat 'em,》 Dora-chan said as he flashed Sui an ominous grin. 《See, that thing's shell is crazy hard, but what about the *rest* of it? Watch this!》

That very instant, the ground directly beneath the dragon turtle began to swell. An immense column of earth shot up with a massive *fwoom*, lifting the dragon turtle up and flipping it over on its back! Suddenly, its impenetrable shell was facing the ground and its underbelly was left completely exposed. Even then, however, the monster kept its head and legs firmly ensconced within its shell.

《All right! The top of its shell was way too hard for me to break through, but let's see if its belly's got that sorta resilience too! Heh heh heh!》 Dora-chan said, laughing like a genuine TV villain before unleashing a merciless burst of ice magic, launching a spear-like pillar of ice straight at the monster's underbelly.

"*Graaahhhhhh*!"

A booming but muffled roar of pain rang out from within the turtle's shell as Dora-chan's ice pillar sunk about halfway into it.

《Don't think that's gonna finish it off, but at least we're getting somewhere now! Let's see if it can take another one!》 Dora-chan said before immediately unleashing another spell. A second ice pillar joined the first, and the dragon turtle howled once more.

《Wooow! You're amazing, Dora-chan!》 Sui cooed with an

excited bounce.

"He *is* putting on an impressive showing," Fel admitted.

"True indeed," Gon said. "Flipping it over to target the softer portion of its shell was a shrewd maneuver."

I mean, sure...but am I the only one who thinks that the way he's going after its weak point without a hint of mercy is making Dora-chan look downright devilish? He looks so cute when he's not killing things too.

《Oh, hey! I think it's coming out!》 Dora-chan shouted. The dragon turtle had had enough, apparently, and had extended its head and limbs, which it was now flailing wildly in an effort to right itself. 《Now's your chance, Sui! Aim for its neck!》

《Okaaay!》

Sui fired a concentrated stream of water this time. It sliced into the turtle with a mighty *shwick*...

"*Graaaugh*!"

...and after one brief, final scream, the monster fell silent.

《Huuuh? Sui thought its head was gonna fall all the way off!》

《Meh, whatever. You beat it, and that's what matters! It's our win!》

《Yaaay! We won, we won!》

Dora-chan and Sui gleefully celebrated their victory over the dragon turtle. *I*, on the other hand, wasn't quite as enthused.

"Oh, jeez. Its head's hanging on by a literal flap of skin." *Talk about nasty...*

"Now then, I shall fight the next one! And I have already located it!" Fel excitedly declared.

"Really? Isn't one enough?" I asked. *I mean, look at the size of that thing! Just how long do you think it'd take to eat it? One should be plenty!*

"What precisely do you believe we came here for?" Fel asked. **"We are here to *hunt*. Are you truly telling me not to *hunt* on a *hunt*?"**

"That's not really the angle I'm coming at this from at all, actually."

"Dragon turtle meat is not as delectable as that of a

leviathan, but it is pleasing in its own right nevertheless. It will not hurt to have it available."

"Okay, okay, I get the picture! We're done after you take one down, though."

"I'm afraid not, my liege! I'll be hunting one as well."

"Wait, you too, Gon? Seriously?"

"Indeed. I brought us to this hunting ground, did I not? How could I leave without partaking?"

Is that really how this works? And more importantly... "Okay, but there *are* still enough dragon turtles left, right? I really don't want to be responsible for a species' extinction!"

Considering how big the monsters were, I found it very hard to believe that there were all that many of them out there. They'd already escaped extinction thanks to Gon deciding to spare them once, and I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if they ended up getting wiped out anyway just so he could feel satisfied after a hunting trip.

"There is no cause for concern. There are still more of them," Fel said.

"Quite! I sense younger ones in the vicinity as well," Gon noted.

"Well, good. But you still only get one each, okay?" I insisted. Gon and Fel somewhat begrudgingly agreed.

I put the dragon turtle that Dora-chan and Sui had taken down into my Item Box, and then we headed off toward the prey that Fel had located for himself. Spotting our next enormous target did not take long.

"That's another big one, all right," I marveled. It was a little smaller than the first dragon turtle we'd come across, but ginormous was ginormous no matter how you sliced it. Just like that first turtle, it had apparently sensed that Fel and Gon were way too dangerous to take on and had already withdrawn into its shell.

"My turn has come!"

A trio of *booms* rang out, followed by the crackling of electricity, as three lightning bolts struck the turtle's shell one after another.

"*Holy*—" I yelped. Between the flash of light and the booming roar, it felt like I'd just been flashbanged. I clamped my eyes shut,

covered my ears with my hands, and curled up in a ball on the ground to brace myself for the next impact.

"What are you doing? It is already over," Fel grunted.

I timidly opened up my eyes...and saw that the dragon turtle's shell had been split clean in half.

"You broke a shell that was *that* hard wide open with only a couple hits?" I muttered, dumbstruck by what I was seeing.

Fel smirked proudly. **"This is but a taste of my true capabilities,"** he boasted.

Oh. Good for you...

《Tch! I hate to admit it, but you're really something else, Fel,》 Dora-chan said.

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

"It is a given, really," Fel replied. I could tell that he was eating their praise right up.

"And that makes it my turn now!"

Oh, right! That was so crazy, I almost forgot that Gon was still planning on hunting one. I'd had more than enough hunting for a good long time after the first two, and part of me wished he'd be willing to just call it a day after all...but in the end, I stored Fel's dragon turtle in my Item Box and followed along as Gon sought out his own prey.

"I'll be claiming that one, I believe," Gon said, gesturing toward our third hill of the day. This one looked about as big as Fel's had been. "And with that, the hunt is on!"

Gon's size began to shift. He grew larger and larger until he finally reached his true size. He grabbed onto the dragon turtle with his razor-sharp claws and took off, pulling it up, up, up into the air.

"Whoa, hold on! What does he think he's doing?" I said. He'd flown up so high that I could barely see him. He was nothing more than a tiny speck in the wide-open sky...and then, suddenly, two specks. "Huh?"

As best as I could tell, Gon had just dropped something.

"Wait. What did...? Oh—"

BOOOOOOOOOM!

"*Aaaugh!*"

《Whoa!》

《Yiiikes!》

A burst of wind nearly strong enough to knock me off my feet slammed into us, followed a moment later by a cloud of dust so thick I couldn't see a thing through it. Since I was still riding on Fel's back, I clung to his fur for dear life, with Dora-chan and Sui hanging on right next to me.

Eventually, the wind died down. Fel made his way deeper into the cloud of dust, coming to a stop in front of a massive indentation in the ground. **"Tch! Choose your methods with more discretion, old one. That was barbaric,"** he said.

A moment later, Gon—once again in his smaller form—appeared from within the still lingering dust cloud. "You hardly have a right to criticize, Fel!" he said. "And besides, this is a tried-and-true method of dealing with hard-shelled foes."

I could feel my expression spasming as I peered into the crater. As the dust settled, the form of the fallen dragon turtle gradually came to view, its legs splayed out motionlessly and its shell shattered into an uncountable number of tiny pieces. I was...speechless. Just speechless.

"Hey...Gon?" I finally said.

"Yes, my liege?"

"What the *hell* was *that*?! You call that *hunting*?!"

《Woo, nice one! I can't believe I didn't think of dropping ours! Now *that's* how dragons go hunting! I wanna try it too!》 Dora-chan exclaimed.

《Uncle Gon, you're amazing!》 Sui said.

"Hah hah! Aren't I just?"

"Oh, yeah! Super amazing! What an innovative hunting style...*not*! Stop celebrating, guys!"

"Hmph! I wholeheartedly agree. I, after all, was far more impressive."

"That is *not* the point! That was just...just *way* too much..." *Way to make me feel sorry for a dragon turtle, Gon!* "We are never, *ever* coming back here again!"

"What? Why not?"

"Yes, why? We can't hunt any more dragon turtles unless we return here, my liege!"

《Yeah, what they said! We finally found something to hunt that's actually a challenge! Sui and I were working so well together!》

《Sui wants to try beating one of them on Sui's own next time!》

"Shut *up*, you four! Never again! We are *never* hunting dragon turtles *ever again*!"

"I fail to understand your reasoning."

"Indeed! Dragon turtles are delicious. Why ever not?"

Oh, for the—we already got three! That should be enough to last us forever! I just saw you jab one with spears before nearly decapitating it, blast another three times with lightning, then blow another into a billion pieces with a multikilometer drop! You expect me to watch all that again*?!*

"Nope! My foot is *down*! No more dragon turtles!"

Forgive me, dragon turtles! I am so, so *sorry! I know that every time Gon's turned up, he's put your species at risk of extinction, but I swear I'm never letting him or the others come here again! You can enjoy the rest of your lives in peace and quiet!*

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Ugggh, I'm *exhausted*," I groaned as I stepped back into the house I'd rented.

"Exhausted? From what? You did nothing at all."

"Which is exhausting sometimes, thank you very much!" I snapped at Fel. *Sitting back and watching you four go to town on whatever poor creature you decide to hunt is really mentally tiring. Not that I'd expect* you *to understand that!*

《We gotta hit that place up again sometime, right?》 Dora-chan said.

《Yeah!》 Sui agreed. 《Sui's gonna beat one up alone next time!》

《Same!》

"No! I already told you guys, we are *not* going back there again!"

《Booo,》 Dora-chan and Sui griped in unison.

"If you're concerned about the dragon turtles' extinction, my liege, then there's no need for you to worry," Gon chimed in. "There were considerably more of them around than there were the last time I visited their territory, after all."

"Gon speaks the truth. I sensed reasonably ample quantities of them remaining."

"That's not the problem! I mean, okay, that's *part* of the problem, but the bigger issue's that I can't stand watching you guys one-sidedly slaughter them like that! Don't you feel bad for the dragon turtles at all?"

《Hey, if it's one-sided, that's just 'cause of how awesome we are. Right, Sui?》 Dora-chan said with a very smug grin.

《Yeah! Sui's super strong!》 Sui proudly agreed.

"Indeed. We cannot help the fact that we are far mightier than our foes," Fel said with a nod.

"Such is the fate of the strong, I'm afraid. Frankly, Fel and I in particular would be very hard-pressed to find *anything* capable of fighting on even footing with us. Such foes are so rare that they might as well not even exist," Gon noted.

He had a point. Dora-chan and Sui were ridiculously powerful, but they still couldn't hold a candle to Fel and Gon. There was just no matching a fenrir and an ancient dragon. I was painfully aware of that fact, but it didn't make their hunts any less unsettling.

"That said, my liege, have our hunts not *always* been one-sided?" Gon added.

"You're not wrong, but this was sort of different. It wasn't like the dragon turtles were itching for a fight, were they? They knew they stood no chance against you and went into full-defense mode," I said. Every single one of the turtles we'd encountered had already withdrawn fully into their shells by the time we found them. "But you guys just went ahead and brutalized them anyway! Of course I feel sorry for them."

《I mean, that's hunting for you. The strong eat the weak—pretty sure we've made that clear by now! You just get all emotional and overthink stuff for the weirdest reasons. You gotta work on that!》 Dora-chan said, flapping up next to my face and grinding his little

fist into my cheek as he lectured me.

"Indeed. Dora has the right of it."

"I quite agree!"

Of course *the two of you would be with him on this. Also...*

"Would you cut that out?! Leave my cheek alone!" *You may be tiny, but you're way too strong for this, Dora-chan!*

《Heh heh heh! My bad, my bad,》 Dora-chan said.





I rubbed my smarting cheek as I stepped into the living room...and found Willem seated within, his arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

Eeek! S-Someone sure looks like they're in a really, really bad mood, huh?

"Uhh, h-hey! We're back," I said.

"Seems you had an awfully fun day today, didn't you?" Willem replied in a voice so low and rumbling, it almost felt like an earthquake had struck.

"Well, we, umm, just popped out for a quick hunt, that's all," I stammered. *I* did *leave a note for him and everything, didn't I...?*

"Oh, I'm *well* aware," Willem said. "I read your note! I *also* happen to remember the part where you promised you were going to stay here all day. That ring any bells?"

"Yeah, umm, the thing is, my familiars..." I began. I hadn't *wanted* to go out hunting in the first place, and I'd *told* them no, but it was no use. I looked behind me, hoping that they'd take responsibility for the idea...

Huh? Wait, where'd they go? They were right behind me just a second ago!

I glanced around the room and quickly spotted all four of my familiars lounging over in a corner. They'd wasted *no* time abandoning me to deal with the guildmaster's lecture on my own. *For crying out loud, guys!*

"I hope you're not about to blame your familiars, are you?" Willem said. "You know that curbing their impulses is your whole job, right?"

Ugh! He was right, and I knew it—except for the part where he made it sound like that would be easy. *Curbing a fenrir's and an ancient dragon's impulses is actually a pretty tall order! How exactly do you expect me to stop them when they refuse to see reason?* I really *wanted* to defend myself, but I knew that trying would only extend the lecture, so I held my tongue.

"I swear, I take my eyes off of you for a *second* and you up and vanish on me, every single time," Willem grumbled.

Please don't give me that look. You're making it seem like I'm *the*

troublemaker here! Glare at my familiars instead!

"And let's not forget about what's going on with the leviathan! Do you have any idea how much work is going into butchering that thing? Is it too much to ask that you sit quietly and not cause trouble at *least* until the preparations are all done?"

I couldn't agree more. I would've loved to spend that whole time taking it easy, honestly...

"Listen up, Mukohda. You might not be what people expect when they picture an S-ranked adventurer, but you *are* as high up in the ranks as you can get in the guild, and it's about time you started acting like it! That means..."

And then Willem lectured me for a literal hour.

"Got it? I'm *begging* you, Mukohda, please don't cause any more trouble for a while!"

"Okaaay," I weakly droned. I'd already been exhausted from the hunting trip, and now I was practically ready to pass out on the spot.

"I guess I should ask, though—what exactly did you hunt?" Willem added as an afterthought.

"Oh! Uhhh, dragon turtles," I said.

Willem looked like he'd just bitten directly into a lemon. He raised a hand to his face, rubbing his temples. "Run that by me again?"

"I said dragon turtles."

Willem let out a very long, very deep sigh. "It's always *something* with you, isn't it?" he groaned. "I'm sure even you would know better, but just in case—you weren't planning on bringing those to the Adventurer's guild here, were you?"

"Huh? Wait, would that be a bad idea?"

My familiars had been talking about how they were *almost* as excited about sampling the dragon turtles as they were about eating the leviathan, so I'd been planning on asking if the guild could butcher the turtles right away. Turtle meat wasn't exactly an all-purpose cut that I could serve every single day, but I'd been looking forward to having a big stock of surplus meat that I wouldn't have to worry about running out of anytime soon.

"A bad idea? *A bad idea*?! It's the *worst idea I've ever heard*!"

Willem bellowed. "You have the whole guild working overtime to butcher a leviathan, and now you're planning on dumping a *dragon turtle* on them before they're even done preparing?! Are you trying to work the whole capital branch to death?!"

I flinched back in the face of Willem's fury. "Are, umm, are dragon turtles...?"

"*S-ranked monsters*! It's been *fifteen years* since anyone's killed one!"

Yup. S-ranked. Kinda saw that coming, considering how big they were and how Fel and Gon were talking about them. "Fifteen years? Really?" I asked.

"Really," Willem confirmed. "I'd know, seeing as I was in the party that took it down."

"Wait, you were?"

"Better believe it. That's how I ended up getting promoted to guildmaster in the first place. Me and the rest of my party all used the windfall we got from that thing to retire from active duty."

Willem explained that the toughness of a dragon turtle's shell made it a very valuable material. They could be fashioned into swords, spears, shields, and armor as well, and that versatility meant that they sold for a high price. That wasn't hard to believe, after I had seen how hard they were with my own eyes. It was easy to imagine a shell like that being a dream material—but I wasn't sure if we'd be able to take advantage of its impressive properties.

"So, what if the turtle's shell ends up pretty badly damaged? Because ours got kinda beat up. I'm guessing that means they wouldn't be worth as much?" I asked. Generally speaking, the more damaged such materials were, the less useful and valuable they would be.

"Wait, wait— You damaged a *dragon turtle shell*? How is that even possible?" Willem asked. "We fought ours head-on, and we couldn't even put a dent in its shell!"

It seemed that the conventional strategy for dealing with a dragon turtle was to use magic—fire magic being particularly effective—to heat the areas of the shell that the turtle tucked its limbs into. Eventually, the turtle would get fed up with enduring the

heat and emerge from its shell to go on the attack, allowing a party to get a few hits in as well. Repeating that process over and over would allow you to gradually whittle the dragon turtle down. Supposedly, his party had taken a full two days to finish theirs off.

Huh! I guess that would be how a normal party would have to handle it, considering how crazy tough those shells were. A normal party...

"Yeah, but the thing is, my familiars were the ones doing the fighting," I explained.

Willem hung his head. "I don't even know why I bothered explaining *conventional* tactics to you," he muttered.

You're not wrong, but it's still not my fault! There's nothing conventional about us, period.

"Anyway," Willem said after yet another sigh, "we'll take it off your hands once you get back to Karelina. Just be patient until then."

"Understood," I replied. "Oh, but you should know that I actually have three of them. That's not an issue, is it?"

"Wait. Y-You hunted *three* dragon turtles?!"

"Yeah. One of their shells got split open, though, and another was pretty much totally shattered."

"Split open...? *Shattered...?*" Willem mumbled as he clutched his head. "Agggh, no! I'm not thinking about this right now! It can wait till we're back in Karelina! We'll talk once I've seen them for myself!"

"A-All right, then."

"*Anyway!* As long as you're in the capital, you have to be on your *best* behavior! No more trouble! *Please*, Mukohda!" Willem begged, grabbing me by the shoulders as he spoke. I nodded frantically.

From that point on, we did as Willem asked and behaved ourselves...more or less. All sorts of rare and interesting goods flowed through the capital, and since we were here anyway, it would've felt like a waste to *not* do some shopping, so I ended up spending several days wandering around the markets and checking out anything and everything that caught my attention.

My familiars griped the whole time, but *I* actually had a blast! The capital was everything it was hyped up to be, especially when it

came to tea. I was able to find a ton of varieties that you couldn't get in Karelina. I picked a few up, naturally, and got a kick out of taste testing all the interesting new types I'd found.

In one of the stores I visited while I was going around sampling new tea varieties, I discovered that their signature product was honey from Opatrný, a region that had recently managed to start producing the stuff on a commercial scale. The shopkeeper put some real effort into selling me on the honey, and I figured I'd probably be able to use it in my cooking at some point, so I ended up buying some on impulse. It was pretty expensive as far as impulse purchases go, but sometimes you just have to splurge.

I immediately took the honey back to the mansion and whipped up some pancakes for everyone to try it on. It ended up being incredibly delicious—as good as honey could get, in terms of both flavor and aroma. I came out of that meal a huge fan of the stuff, and my familiars liked it quite a bit as well. Sui, who adored sweets, was particularly entranced, and before I knew it, I'd used up the whole jar. I couldn't let that be a onetime experience, so I went right back to the store the next day and really stocked up. It cost a small fortune, but considering how good the honey was, I knew that it'd be worth every coin I spent on it.

I also bought a few other things while I was in the capital, including souvenirs for everyone back home in Karelina. I whiled away the days in commercial bliss, until finally...

"The time has finally come. Tomorrow is the day."

"Indeed! At long last, the hour draws near!"

《Just a little longer, and we'll *finally* get to chow down on leviathan meat!》

《Leviathaaan!》

This was it. Tomorrow would mark ten days since the preparations began.

"The guild's already reached out, and said they'll be counting on you for your barriers and security," I reported.

"But of course. It shall be done," Fel said.

"Yes, indeed!" Gon agreed.

Tomorrow, the leviathan would finally be butchered. There was

just one little problem that we still had to deal with...

"Sounds like *he's* already somewhere in the capital too," I sighed, staring off into the distance as thoughts of the most obnoxious dragon lover in the whole country drifted through my mind.

Chapter 5: Woo-Hooooo!

At long last, it was time for the leviathan to be processed. The guild informed me where the project would be carried out shortly before it was set to begin, and as expected, they'd ended up choosing the plains outside the capital. Willem's prediction had been spot on. What I found when I arrived at the plain, however, was something I was a little less prepared for.

"Oh, wow. Now *that's* a crowd..."

A veritable army of Adventurer's guild members and associates were already hard at work by the time we got there. Much to my astonishment, there was even a seating area set up nearby featuring some very fancy-looking chairs.

What am I even looking at...? I thought, stunned by how much *bigger* this endeavor had turned out to be compared to what I'd been imagining. All I'd wanted was for them to butcher the thing, and I seriously couldn't understand how it had all gotten so blown out of proportion. I spent a good long while staring around in utter bewilderment...

"Oh! You finally made it, huh?"

...until Willem, who'd gone off on his own earlier that morning, caught sight of me and came over to say hello.

"Guildmaster..." I muttered.

"What's got you looking so perturbed, Mukohda?" Willem asked.

"Well, I mean...what's *that* all about?" I asked, pointing at the lavish seating section.

"Oh, that?" Willem casually replied. "That's where the king and queen'll be watching from."

"It's *whaaaaaat*?!"

"Come on, don't give me that! An opportunity to see a leviathan in person is a once-in-a-lifetime event, and that's only if you get *very* lucky! It'd be a miracle if people *didn't* take an interest in the

butchering of a monster like that."

"Okay, but the king and queen? Don't they have something more important to be doing...?"

"You can't be serious. You know they're here for *you* as much as they're here for the leviathan, right? If a fenrir, an ancient dragon, and the adventurer they serve are taking part in something like this, then there's no way the king could ignore it. And that's not even starting on the gifts you gave them! You got their attention after that, no question about it."

Ugggh! I really should've *toned those gifts down after all!*

"Seems a lot of the local nobles asked to watch as well. Hence, well, all *that*," Willem added, gesturing at the seating again. Apparently, that was why the seats were so over-the-top fancy.

Oh, no. A whole crowd of nobles is gonna be here? Seriously...? I sighed deeply.

"Suck it up and deal with it. This is what you get for dropping a damn leviathan on our doorstep," Willem said as he patted me on the shoulder.

You're not wrong, but if I had it my way, we never would've done this at all. Don't blame me, blame the people who insisted that we had *to eat the stupid thing, no matter how much trouble it would take to make it happen.*

I shot Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui a glare and got a flat **"What?"** from Fel in response. They had *no* idea what I was mad about.

Just then, I spotted a figure off in the distance. Whoever it was, they were sprinting in my direction at full speed, waving their arms in the air like a maniac.

"*Mukohdaaaaaa!*"

"Oh, boy. Here we go... That's Elrand, all right," I groaned as I confirmed that the figure was exactly who I'd feared it would be. I felt my eye twitch involuntarily.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Mukohda! It's been far, *far* too long! I just arrived in the capital a

moment ago, and here you are, exactly where I was hoping I'd find you! I can't believe I ran into you this quickly! It really *must* be destiny at work!" Elrand declared with a beaming smile.

"First, please stop talking like that—it's weirding me out—and second, we both know that isn't true. You were looking forward to seeing Gon and Dora-chan, not me," I countered.

《Oh no. The freak's finally found us!》 Dora-chan bitterly moaned. He said it telepathically, of course, so Elrand couldn't hear him, but if the elf *had* been able to hear it, I had a feeling he would've broken down in tears.

《*Ugh*. I see his penchant for incessant blather hasn't changed at all,》 Gon groaned. He spoke telepathically as well, presumably since he was afraid that speaking out loud would mean that Elrand would talk to him next.

Elrand, completely oblivious to the dragon duo's telepathic ribbing, was as hyped as I'd ever seen him. He looked like he might start dancing a jig at any second.

"Oh, well, I guess I can't deny it! Heh heh heh. I nearly succumbed to despair at the thought that I wouldn't get to see them for the *longest* time, but then fortune fell upon me like a bolt from the blue! And to think that opportunity came in the form of a *leviathan*! You actually remembered what I told you, didn't you, Mukohda?!" Elrand said, grinning from ear to ear as he grabbed my hand and shook it altogether too vigorously.

You have no idea how lucky you are to not *hear what those dragons are saying about you right now. If only you knew how much they hated you.* "I mean, not to burst your bubble, but it's *really* not like we went out and found a leviathan specifically for you. Also, can you let go of my hand now?" I asked, uncomfortably aware of how strained my own expression was starting to look.

Elrand ignored me. "Oh, *you*, ever the jokester!" he said. "Of *course* you remembered! You can't possibly expect me to believe you stumbled across a leviathan and slew it by chance, now, can you?"

"No, seriously, that's actually what happened! You're totally off base!" *How many times do I have to repeat myself before you*

believe that I didn't do this for you?! We decided to go into a dungeon on a whim and just happened to find one that Gon finished off for me!

"Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure!" Elrand said, still smiling as brightly as ever, even in the face of my complete and unambiguous denial.

Nope. It's hopeless. His brain is protected by an impenetrable shell of positivity.

Then, as I shook my head with exasperation...

"Stop! Right! *Theeere!* Don't you *dare* run off on me *ever* again!"

...an old woman came bursting onto the scene, bellowing at full volume and charging in our direction with a look of pure fury on her face!

"Ahhh!" Elrand yelped. His grin and his boundless reserves of manic energy vanished in the blink of an eye.

The old woman rushed over to us, then paused to gasp and heave for a few seconds. I could see now that she was also an elf, and that she'd probably been quite the beauty when she was younger. "You... You *imbecile*! *Why* would you sprint off to who knows where without a word of warning?!" the elven woman raged. "You've got some nerve to try to slip away from your supervisor!"

"N-No, that wasn't my intention in the slightest!" Elrand frantically stammered.

"Hmph! I don't believe a word of it—and conveniently enough, the guild authorities who dispatched me to watch over you are all within arm's reach at this very moment. I'm sure they'll be *very* interested in hearing all about this little stunt of yours! In fact, they might even be so *impressed* by your behavior that they'll ask me to keep you company for even *longer*!"

"N-Noooooooooo!" Elrand wailed, falling to his knees on the spot.

"Hmph! A punishment well earned," the elven woman said as she shot him a *very* chilly glare.

Okay, I think I'm getting the picture. She must be the person who Ugohl said got sent to watch over Elrand. I think he said her name was Moira?

"I take it you would be Mukohda?" the elven woman asked.

"Y-Yes, I am," I replied.

"Then you have my apologies for the trouble that this feckless idiot has caused you. My name is Moira, and I've been entrusted with the task of supervising him. If he ever does anything untoward again, please don't hesitate to reach out to me."

"Understood. I'll do that, thanks," I said. It seemed I'd gained a powerful ally in the battle against Elrand's worst impulses. I'd most definitely be taking her up on her offer the next time he pulled some stupid stunt or another.

"Wait—Mukohda?!" Elrand yelped.

"Quiet, *you*," Moira snapped, punctuating her order with a sharp slap to Elrand's head.

Yup! Moira's a toughie, all right!

"I can't believe it! You *hit* me," Elrand whined.

"Hmph!" Moira indignantly snorted. "You've no one but yourself to blame! You should have long since learned how to behave in a way that *doesn't* earn you that sort of punishment. Have you forgotten why you're here in the first place?"

"Of course I haven't! I'm here to butcher the leviathan and to see Gon and Dora-chan, of course!"

I winced. The look on Elrand's face made it pretty clear he thought that was the obvious answer, and I had a feeling he was about to regret not giving it just a little more consideration.

"You're here for the leviathan and *only* the leviathan, you dullard!" Moira shouted, slapping Elrand upside the head once again.

"Ow! Stop hitting me, please!"

"I'll be glad to, as soon as you stop spouting your idiocy! Come along—we have somewhere to be!"

"Wait, where?"

"Surely you can guess. You don't think you could cause that much trouble for the guild's administration and *not* pay its leaders a visit when you find yourself in the capital?"

"Huh? No, I, err—"

"No excuses! Go on, move!"

Moira grabbed Elrand by one of his lengthy ears and dragged him off into the distance. "O-Ow! That hurts! Moira, stooop!" he wailed.

Goodbye, and good luck with that! I thought, waving as I

watched Elrand get carted off to who knew where.

《Looks like we'll be fine leaving *him* to that old elf lady,》 Dora-chan commented. He was clearly relieved to see the dynamic that had developed between Elrand and his new keeper.

"Indeed. A relief, truly," Gon agreed.

"Is the butchering of the leviathan not ready to begin yet?" asked Fel, who'd been sitting quietly off to the side, scowling.

"I guess not? I haven't heard anything, anyway," I replied. I'd have to take the corpse out of my Item Box before they could butcher it, needless to say, and nobody had asked me to do that yet.

《Sui wants to try the leviathan meat soon!》 Sui commented. Apparently, everyone was beside themselves with excitement.

"I'll go ask the people from the capital's guild about the schedule," I said.

Checking with one of the people responsible for directing the flow of work seemed like the quickest and easiest way to get brought up to speed on the schedule. I was looking around for a likely candidate when suddenly, a voice rang out.

"Is that you, Mukohda? It's been ages!"

"Wait—Rita?!" I exclaimed as I turned around. Rita, a member of the adventuring party Iron Will, was standing behind me with a smile on her face. She wasn't alone either—a whole assortment of familiar figures who I hadn't seen since we ran into each other in Dolan's dungeon were gathered up alongside her. "All of you! It really has been forever!"

Werner, Ramon, Vincent, Rita, and Franka—Iron Will's whole lineup—were present. I felt a smile spread across my face as well.

"Oh! Did the guild call you in to help?" I asked. *I'd almost forgotten that they sent out a summons for high-ranking adventurers.*

"That's right," Werner said with a nod. "We happened to already be in the capital, so we were actually the first party they asked."

"We knew we had to lend a hand the second they mentioned your name," Ramon added, flashing me a grin. That struck me as awfully nice of them.

"By the way, Mukohda, I see you've picked up another crazy

familiar," Werner added as he glanced behind me. Ramon, Vincent, Rita, and Franka all nodded in agreement.

I didn't even need to ask to know they were talking about Gon. "Yeah, well, y'know. It kinda just happened," I said.

"You're the only person in the world who could 'just happen' to get an ancient dragon as a familiar. That's incredible! Downright absurd, actually!" Vincent said. Once again, the other members of Iron Will nodded vigorously.

"I guess, but he joined up for the same reason Fel did," I explained, doing my best to keep smiling. *In the end, all it really means is that I've got one more extremely hungry mouth to feed.*

"You mean he got lured in by your cooking?" Rita asked.

"Indeed. The food that my liege cooks is like nothing else, and is a reward worthy of my service."

"*Gah!* It *talked*!" Rita yelped. Gon had jumped in to answer her question for me.

"Yeah, uhh, I guess I should introduce you! This is my party's newest member, Old Man Gon," I said. Iron Will's members responded by breaking eye contact with me. Their shoulders were slightly quivering. *What? No, seriously,* what*?*

"Oh, gods, my sides," Vincent muttered. "But anyway, didn't Fel say something about how he picked a fight with an ancient dragon at one point? Don't tell me *Old Man Gon* is the same one from that story?" he asked. I was a little surprised that he still remembered.

"Hardly," Fel grunted. **"*He* chose to provoke *me*. For the time being, however, we have agreed to a truce. We are allies, for now."**

"Indeed we are!" Gon agreed.

"Oooh?" Vincent said. He seemed weirdly excited by the news. "A fenrir and an ancient dragon, fighting together? Just imagine the possibilities! It's the ultimate team up! I bet you're *unbeatable*!"

《Okay, hold up a sec, pal! Don't go forgetting that we're on the team!》 Dora-chan chimed in.

《Hmmmph! Sui's here too!》 Sui added as well.

The two of them leaped in front of Vincent, more or less shoving themselves in his face.

"Whoa!" Vincent yelped. "Oh, right! I almost forgot you had a tiny dragon and a slime working with you too."

"I know Fel and Gon kinda overshadow everyone, but Dora-chan and Sui are plenty powerful in their own right," I noted. *Powerful enough to take down S-ranked monsters, anyway!*

"And the two of them joined up with you for your food as well?" Rita asked.

"I mean, yeah," I admitted.

"Well, if that's what it takes to eat your cooking every day, I can't exactly blame 'em! I'm actually jealous!" she said.

"Foolish girl," Ramon angrily muttered. "We are no fledgling adventurers who live from hand to mouth!"

"He's right, Rita," Werner concurred. "When was the last time you went hungry? I bet you can't even remember."

"That's got *nothing* to do with this! It's not about being full, it's about Mukohda's food being better than anything else I've ever eaten!" Rita countered.

Vincent nodded in enthusiastic agreement. "I actually thought we'd run into you earlier, to be honest. We figured we'd see you in the capital's guild hall eventually, but you never showed up at all," he added with a slight pout.

"Yeah, that's my bad. Sorry," I replied. I'd had my reasons for staying as far away from the guild as possible. Well, one reason, really, that being my desire to not get involved with one particularly irritating individual as far as I could manage...though considering that *he'd* found *me* a few minutes ago, that plan had only carried me so far.

"Admit it—you were just hoping that you could convince him to cook for us," Franka said as she rolled her eyes.

"Oh, lay off!" Vincent snapped. "I'm not the only one who had his hopes up! Remember how Rita was all 'Oh, boy, we might get to eat his cooking again' when we found out? She was literally drooling!"

"Was *not*! I've never drooled in my life!" Rita shouted.

"Hah! I know what I saw."

"You didn't see squat!"

As Vincent and Rita's exchange devolved into a shouting match,

Franka shook her head and sighed. “Honestly, you two,” she muttered.





"Would the two of you please restrain yourselves?" Ramon finally said, cutting into Vincent and Rita's argument. That put an end to their verbal sniping, at least, though they still kept glaring at each other like a pair of hissing kittens.

I guess this might be one of those cases where the more you get along with someone, the more likely you are to have silly little fights.

"Sorry for the ruckus," Werner abashedly commented.

"Oh, nah, it's fine," I reassured him. "I'm actually glad to see how little all of you have changed since the last time we met."

"Ha ha! You're not wrong about that. Vincent's as cocky and Rita's as loudmouthed as ever."

"*Boss?!*" Vincent and Rita shouted in unison.

"Not to mention sharp-eared at the worst possible times," Werner added with a grin as he glanced back at them. Now it was my turn to be a little jealous. I sort of envied how well their party got along. "Oh, right! Not to contradict you or anything, but we actually *have* changed in one big way."

"Oh? What's that?" I asked. That surprised me. None of them *looked* any different, at least.

"We've moved up to B-rank, that's what," Werner said.

"Oh, seriously?! Congratulations!"

"Thanks."

"As a matter of fact, that is also the reason we were able to participate in this endeavor," Ramon noted.

That answered one question I hadn't really thought to ask. B-rank, it seemed, was the point at which the guild considered an adventuring party to be high-ranked.

"Well, that's something we'll have to celebrate later for sure," I said. *Maybe I'll take them to a nice restaurant in the capital once the leviathan's all carved up, or something.*

"Ooooh! In that case, I want to eat your cooking again!" exclaimed Vincent.

"Count me in too!" Rita chimed in.

"What, really? But we're in the capital! There's gotta be tons of restaurants around here that make way better food than I can," I protested.

The capital was huge, and had so many more restaurants than a typical town that there really was no comparison. Plus, I'd heard that a lot of those restaurants were really high-class. Genuine gourmet dining *had* to be better than the slapdash home-cooked meals that I always threw together, and I'd thought that visiting one would be a nice treat for everyone. And to be honest, I just wanted to go to one myself.

"That is *absolutely* not true!" Vincent insisted. "I've been to top-class restaurants before, and they taught me a valuable lesson: It takes more than expensive spices and fancy meat to make a tasty meal! Your food is *way* better than anything you could get at one of those places!"

"That's right!" Rita agreed. "Your food really is incredible, Mukohda!"

The two of them stared straight at me, their gazes full of hope. *Don't give me that look, please!*

"I mean, if you're *really* fine with my cooking, then sure," I conceded.

"*Hell* yeah!"

"Woo-hoo!"

Vincent and Rita threw their hands up in celebration.

"Again, Mukohda, I'm *so* sorry about this," Werner sighed.

"It's fine, really. I'm not exactly offended to find out that they like my cooking that much."

We kept chatting and catching up for some time until finally, the gathered adventurers were called away to meet with the guild's higher-ups.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

As time went on, more and more participants kept pouring into the field. Shortly after Iron Will was called away, one of the guild's officials came over to speak to me.

"All right. It's time to bring out the leviathan, if you would," the guildmaster of the capital branch, Bram, said to me.

I hesitated. I'd already exposed my Item Box's capacity to a fair

number of people, but letting that secret slip in front of a crowd this huge still felt like a step too far.

《**What are you waiting for? Bring it out.**》

《Go on, my liege!》

《We'll never get this done if you don't get it out already!》

《Masteeer, what's wrong?》

My familiars all chimed in telepathically to rush me, and I replied telepathically as well. 《See, the thing is, if I bring it out here, then *all* these people will know about my Item Box,》 I said. Just the fact that I had one was bad enough. If I revealed that mine was big enough to fit a monster of that size, it was all but certain that the rumor mill would spread that information far and wide in no time.

《**Surely it is far too late to concern yourself with such matters?**》 Fel said.

《I mean, maybe, but so far I've always told people that mine is just a *little* on the big side of things. If I pull a literal leviathan out of it, they're gonna know that I have something hero-adjacent going on for sure,》 I replied.

《But why would that be an issue?》 Gon asked. 《You have me and Fel in your service, my liege. It seems less than likely that anyone would be so reckless or foolish as to lay a hand on you.》

《I mean, you're not wrong, but still...》

Fel clicked his tongue with irritation. 《**You have wasted more than enough time. Bring the beast out at once,**》 he impatiently urged.

The guild higher-ups, meanwhile—who couldn't hear any of my conversation with my familiars, of course—looked very confused. I could hear them muttering to one another. I caught a "What's wrong with him?" and a "How long is this going to take?" among other comments.

《Agggh, fine! I'll do it!》

It was time to throw caution to the wind. I pulled the leviathan out of my Item Box, and it landed on the ground before me with an enormous *thud*. The guild higher-ups had already seen its head, so they'd had some idea of its scale, but witnessing the corpse in full for the first time still made their jaws drop.

"I can't believe it's *that* enormous..."

"It's even larger than I'd imagined."

"Same here."

"To think even this field would barely be big enough for it."

"We can count ourselves lucky there was a large enough space at all..."

I guess it'd be hard not *to be surprised when you saw that thing, yeah.* I really got where they were coming from—and, for that matter, how the adventurers who'd been holding their meeting a short distance away felt as well. They were stunned, for the most part, though *one* of them was reacting in a slightly more outrageous sort of way.

"*Woo-hooooo!*"

I heard a downright bizarre wail of joy as one of the adventurers split off from the pack, sprinting full tilt over to the leviathan and clinging to its side.

"It's a leviathan! An actual, genuine, *leviathaaan*!"

I didn't even need to take a closer look to figure out who *that* was. There was only one person here who'd behave so ridiculously. *Elrand, what are you* doing*?!*

"*Never* make that horrid noise again!" Moira shouted, loudly enough that I could hear her clearly even from across the field.

You've got a tough job, Moira, but someone definitely has to do it.

Before long, the higher-ups started making their way over toward Elrand. We reluctantly followed along, though by that point, "we" meant me, Fel, and Sui. Gon and Dora-chan had been so disturbed by Elrand's shout that they'd excused themselves on the spot.

In Gon's words, 《I-I have raised my barrier. Fel will have to handle the rest. In the meantime, I shall patrol the skies.》

《Y-Yeah, me too!》 Dora-chan had chimed in.

The next thing I knew, the two of them had evacuated into the air above us. Fel had seemed content with the idea of a midair guard, and had readily agreed to the plan before raising a barrier of his own.

Nobody's suffered more from Elrand's eccentricity than Gon and

Dora-chan, I guess. I could understand why his unhinged wail had driven them away in a heartbeat. If I'd had my way, I would've kept my distance from him too. However, the guild's highest-ranking officer, Bram, had other ideas.

"Ugh... He's a problem, I'll grant you that, but we really do need him to direct the leviathan's butchering," he'd groaned.

The other bigwigs all chimed in with their own opinions as well.

"It's shocking how competent he is, considering."

"In his field, and *only* his field."

"You've met him before, haven't you, Mukohda? I'm sure you understand."

"Bringing him here was a necessary evil."

Yeah, again, I can relate. You all have my sympathies.

I reluctantly plodded over to where Elrand was still adhered to the side of the leviathan, seemingly in a trance.

Bram rolled his eyes and stepped up to him. "All right, Elrand, that's enough of that," he said.

"Oooh, *Bram*!" Elrand excitedly exclaimed. "Look! It's a leviathan! It's a real leviathan!"

If there's one thing I'll give this elf, it's that he's consistent to a fault. Not even the highest-ranking member of the guild in the country can sway him.

Bram sighed. "I'm well aware, thank you. That's the only reason you're here, though I'm starting to wonder if that was a mistake after all."

I nodded in reflexive agreement. *Right? Hard not to start questioning these things when you see him like* that*.*

"Huh?" Elrand blinked. "What are you saying?! Do you really think there's anyone else out there who could butcher a leviathan?! A *leviathan*?! No one could possibly be more suited for this job than me, and that's a fact!" he vehemently insisted.

"Then hurry up and prove it! You've got a job to do, and you'd better do it well!" Bram demanded. The other guild leaders chimed in to agree.

"Your concern is not needed!" Elrand huffed. "I'll do my job, and I'll do it *perfectly*! I just need a moment to enjoy the leviathan to its

fullest before I get started!”

A *very* loud slap resounded across the field.

“*Ow!*”

“You are in *no* position to make demands! Do your work, and do it *now*!” Moira fumed, a furious scowl once again plastered across her face. Elrand’s chaperone had saved the day yet again.

“Come *ooon*! Why are you all so insistent on rushing me? You could at least spare me a moment to bask in the blissful joy of meeting my very first leviathan,” Elrand grumbled...but between Moira’s expression—which had grown even more threatening and was now downright demonic—and the glares of the higher-ups—which were so frigid they felt like they’d hit absolute zero—he seemed to finally take the hint. “I-I’ll do it, though! Have it your way,” he squeaked before shifting into work mode. For the first time that day, a very serious look came across Elrand’s face as he started inspecting the leviathan.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

Just looking over the leviathan’s whole body took quite a long time. No surprise there, considering how ginormous it was. I actually started wondering if I could get away with slipping off to wait somewhere a little nicer at one point, but of course, I would have no such luck.

I did *try* by telling Fel and Sui, 《So hey, even if someone does try to get at the leviathan, those two barriers should keep them far away from it, and if someone actually got through them, you’d know right away. Seeing as there’s nothing for us to do to help, why don’t we go find somewhere more comfortable to sit down?》 through telepathy, but Fel was unconvinced.

《**The elf’s obsession with the leviathan makes *him* the greatest threat of all. I will not let him out of my sight,**》 was how Fel put it.

Okay, yeah. It’s hard not to see it that way, considering how Elrand’s been acting.

I didn’t *like* it, but I also couldn’t deny that Fel had made a solid

case. That said, it was also true that Elrand had Moira constantly breathing down his neck, not to mention every single one of the Adventurer's guild higher-ups watching him like a hawk. Apparently, *nobody* trusted him.

Anyway, to make a long story short, I was stuck walking along with Moira and the guild folks as Elrand did his checks. The king, queen, and assorted nobility who were attending arrived partway through that period, raising a bit of an uproar in doing so, but the king instructed everyone to pay them no mind and keep working. Nobody was about to argue with him, so the process resumed as quickly as it had been disrupted.

At long last, Elrand seemed to have finished checking the leviathan from top to bottom...but to my surprise, he ended up returning to us with a frown on his face.

"What's wrong, Elrand?" Bram asked.

"I'm afraid to say that, unfortunately...butchering this leviathan may prove impossible," Elrand replied.

"*Whaaat?!*" Bram wailed, completely aghast. That was *not* the news he'd been hoping for after over a week of preparation.

"All that talk about how much you were looking forward to it, and now you mean to tell us you're not up to the task?" Moira jabbed.

"We remember how confident you were!" said one of the guild's higher-ups.

"You badgered us incessantly to get things started as soon as possible!" another exclaimed.

"Indeed! What is the meaning of this, elf?!" Fel barked, joining in on the protest.

Everyone—Fel included—kept hounding Elrand for an answer for some time, noting that if he couldn't handle the job, he should have said so in the first place, and griping bitterly about how he'd made it sound like butchering the monster would be child's play for him. Elrand had ended up with a whole crowd of very angry people on his case.

"W-Wait! At least let me explain myself!" Elrand frantically shouted.

《Hey, Master? Does this mean Sui doesn't get to try the

leviathan meat after all?》 Sui asked. The slime was already feeling a little depressed, from the sound of it.

《I hate to say it, but we should try to be ready for that possibility,》 I replied.

《Awww! Sui wants leviathan meat, Master!》 Sui repeated as it bounced off Fel's back, landing in my arms.

I guess you were more excited than anyone, huh, Sui? I gave the slime a comforting pat as I waited for Elrand to clarify what was going on.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Well then, to put matters simply," Elrand began. He launched into an explanation, bringing me, Bram, the rest of the guild's leaders, and Moira up to speed on why it might not be possible to butcher the leviathan after all.

According to Elrand, he'd spent the entire trip from his home to the capital reading and rereading a reference book on leviathans, barely even pausing to eat or sleep. One passage that had particularly grabbed his attention recounted the processing of a leviathan that had been brought to the Adventurer's guild roughly four hundred years ago. That book, by the way, had apparently been the prized possession of another nation's Adventurer's guild. They'd actually refused to show it to Elrand, who'd been a C-ranked adventurer at the time, and he'd responded by snatching it when no one was looking.

What were you thinking*, Elrand...? As in, what were you thinking when you stole the book, and what were you thinking just now when you admitted it to us? You could've easily kept that part to yourself, and then Moira wouldn't have had to punch you.*

Anyway, that digression aside, the book had contained incredibly detailed information regarding how the leviathan had been slain, how it had been butchered, and which parts had been sold for how much gold.

"Every bit of it, from the last drop of its blood to the smallest of its bones, fetched a high price," Elrand explained. Moira and the

higher-ups muttered about how unsurprising that was to one another. "They knew that would be the case, and so a magical tool was devised and crafted to ensure that none of its blood went to waste," Elrand continued.

Apparently, this was something that had been on Elrand's mind since I had asked him to butcher the earth dragon that we'd caught. Butchering a creature indoors on a workbench made collecting its blood relatively easy. All you had to do was tilt the work surface slightly, and the blood would flow exactly where you wanted it to. Butchering a dragon that was far too big to fit on a workbench, however, was a much taller order, and Elrand had known that as long as my familiars and I were around, it was a problem that he would be faced with sooner or later.

"And that's why I made these," Elrand declared with a rather self-satisfied grin as he brought what looked like a long, narrow tube out from his Item Box. "I've never been happier to have dabbled in magic tool creation. I may not be a master of the craft, but making simple tools is well within my abilities!"

"You mean making them *with my help* is," Moira noted.

"Erk—with the help of Moira, the most esteemed and knowledgeable magical craftswoman! I made fourteen of them in total," Elrand said. He explained that his tools used wind magic to produce a suction effect.

"All right, then. I take it you were planning to use those tools to drain the leviathan's blood?" Bram asked.

"Yes! That's exactly right!" Elrand replied.

"Well, if you put enough care and forethought into this project to craft tools like that, why are you telling us that butchering it might still be impossible?"

Right? He was excited enough to sink that sort of time and effort into this project. What could be a big enough issue to make him abandon it?

"Well, I believe that with my tools, recovering the leviathan's blood should indeed be possible. But that's *just* its blood," Elrand specified.

At that point, the conversation finally looped back around to the

book he'd read on his way to the capital about the leviathan that had been brought in four hundred years ago.

"The issue stems from the fact that the leviathan back then was quite a bit smaller than the one we're dealing with now," Elrand explained. Supposedly, there had been some suspicion four centuries prior that the slain leviathan had been a juvenile. Having inspected the one I'd brought in, Elrand was now certain that theory was true. "And even so, butchering the leviathan back then required the use of a dragon sword."

It seemed they'd had a mithril butchering knife on hand, which had technically been *capable* of cutting through the leviathan's hide, but not without applying an impractical amount of strength. Cuts made with the mithril knife had turned out rough and imprecise. At the time, however, the guild had been in possession of a dragon sword, which had been even sharper than a mithril blade. They'd tested it out just for good measure and had been surprised to find that it sliced through the beast with ease. In the end, they'd used the dragon sword throughout the whole process, ensuring that the leviathan's extraordinarily useful materials could be harvested undamaged.

"And knowing all that, I naturally decided to bring *my* dragon sword along with me," Elrand said. He drew the sword that was hung in a scabbard at his waist in a swift, fluid motion. "What do you think? A thing of beauty, isn't it?! It was crafted from the fang of a red dragon! Just look at that luster!" he excitedly declared as he practically shoved the dragon sword in our faces. It wouldn't have surprised me if he'd started nuzzling the thing. Elrand was incredibly consistent, if nothing else.

"How in all that is holy did you get your hands on one of *those*?" Bram demanded. The other higher-ups had started muttering to one another as well. Their reactions alone made it pretty clear that dragon swords were *very* rare.

Thwack!

"*Aaaaaaugh!*" Elrand wailed as he fell to his knees. He *almost* dropped his dragon sword, but just barely managed to hold on to it in the end—not that getting dropped on the ground could ever

damage a weapon like that in the first place. “Wh-What was *that* for?! You can’t just *kick* people like that, Moira! I almost dropped my precious, beautiful dragon sword thanks to you!”

“You *earned* that kick, and you know it!” Moira shot back. “What do you mean, *your* dragon sword?! We both know very well that it isn’t *yours* at all! Ugohl told me the whole story—you bought the fang with your own money, but you couldn’t afford to have it made into anything and went into debt with the guild to cover the expense!”

Elrand gulped.

“W-Wait, seriously?!” I exclaimed. *You went into* debt*, Elrand?! Are you nuts?!*

Moira let out a long, heavy sigh. “He badgered Ugohl into agreeing to it. By which I mean he followed him around day in and day out, bawling like an infant and swearing that he’d put the finished sword up as collateral until he’d paid off his debt.”

“Ughp!” Elrand grunted.

What was that *noise? And seriously, what were you* thinking*?*

“Well,” Bram said with a roll of his eyes, “I think we can all agree that an extension of Moira’s tenure is in order.”

“Agreed,” the other higher-ups said in unison.

“Wh-Whaaat?! But *why*?!” Elrand wailed.

Why? Really? I can’t believe you have the nerve to ask that after bringing your private life into your day job that intrusively. This is totally on you, Elrand.

“But we’ve drifted from the point at hand,” Bram continued. “From what you’ve told us, butchering the leviathan should be possible with a dragon sword, which you have. I don’t see the issue.”

The other bigwigs and Moira muttered in agreement.

Elrand sighed. “Yes, well, if this was the leviathan from four centuries ago, there *wouldn’t* be an issue at all. That, however, was a *young* leviathan...” he said as he glanced over at the impossibly huge corpse lying on the ground. The rest of us took a moment to stare at it as well. “Does that look young to you?”

“Not even remotely,” Bram said.

Yeah, no kidding.

"Assuming my inferences are correct... *Hrrah!*" Elrand exclaimed as he swung his dragon sword at the leviathan's side.

Piiing!

He swung again. "*Hiyah!*"

Ka-shiiing!

And again. "*Hah!*"

Diiing!

At first, it didn't seem like Elrand was making any progress at all. It took him five whole slashes to make any sort of cut in the leviathan's hide, and a few more to reach the meat beneath.

Elrand paused to gasp for breath. "So, as you can see, we *can* make the incisions we need to drain the beast's blood, particularly given that we can work with the wounds that Gon left...but do *you* see any practical way to butcher it beyond that?"

"W-Well, you *did* cut it in the end, didn't you? It took some effort, yes, but it's not impossible!" Bram protested.

Elrand sighed once again. "*I* did, yes, because I had the skills and knowledge necessary to do so. How many people do you think would be able to strike the exact same spot, multiple times in a row, with perfect precision and the force necessary to pierce its hide?"

"W-Well..."

"Not to mention that it would only be a matter of time before my precious dragon sword shattered! A *short* matter of time!" Elrand added. He'd casually referred to it as *his* dragon sword yet again, brushing past the fact that it would only be his after he'd paid off his debt. "If you can prepare several more dragon swords to expend over the course of the project, then I suppose it would *technically* be possible to butcher it. Is that within your means?"

"Ugh," Bram grunted with a scowl. Everyone—presumably including Elrand—knew that the very idea of having multiple dragon swords on hand for something like this was absurd.

"And that, in short, is why I believe that butchering this leviathan may very well be impossible for us. Unless we can get our hands on a magic sword, or some equivalent tool, it's just not going to be practical," Elrand concluded.

Hm? A magic sword?

I looked at Elrand. He looked at me.

"*Aaaaaahhh!!!*"

Whoa! Why're you pointing at me like that?! Cut it out!

The next thing I knew Elrand had sprinted straight over to me and grabbed me by the shoulders. There was a legitimately crazed look in his eyes. "That's it! Of course! Your magic sword, Mukohda! Caladbolg! The one you found at the bottom of the Dolan dungeon!"

You're really just saying *that?! Straight up, full volume, in front of everyone?!*

"I understand. In short, using a magic sword will allow you to butcher the leviathan, correct?"

Why are you chiming in now*, Fel?! Of all the moments!*

"Yes! Yes, it absolutely would!" Elrand insisted.

"I see. In that case, you will have to provide the equipment they need," Fel said, glancing at me. **"You have several, do you not? Bring them all out."**

Okay, nope! Hold the phone, Fel! Is everyone *planning on spilling my secrets without a second thought here?!*

"Hold on a minute," Bram said. "Did I hear the fenrir right just now? Did he say you have *several* of them?"

O-Ooooh, no. My gaze met Bram's. "Well, I, umm," I stammered as a waterfall of cold sweat began to drip from my pores.

"He has four, as I recall."

Felllllll!

Fel had once again casually given up one of my most closely kept secrets, and this one had even more of an impact than the others. Bram, Moira, Elrand, and the other guild bigwigs had all been rendered speechless. I started seriously considering spinning around and heading for the hills while they were still out of it, but before I could resolve myself to make a break for it, Elrand—who, by the way, was still holding on to my shoulders—came back to his senses a step ahead of the others and started shaking me wildly, the look in his eyes more crazed than ever.

"Y-You have more of them, Mukohda?! Caladbolg isn't your only magic sword?!"

O-Oh, god, okay, back off! The face you're making right now's

terrifying enough when I'm not *seeing it at point-blank range! How are your eyes even that bloodshot?!* "C-Calm down, Elrand, please! And give me some personal space while you're at it!" I shouted as I shoved him away from me. It didn't work very well. The elf kept a *very* firm grip on my shoulders, and was huffing and puffing wildly as he tightened his grip. He had no intention of letting me go anywhere.

"All right, settle down, Elrand," said Bram, who stepped up to Elrand and patted him on the back. "Now then, Mukohda, is that true? Do you really have *four* magic swords in your possession?"

I gulped. Bram sounded calm and collected. He was smiling, even...but there was something about the look on his face—something about the look in his *eyes*—that wasn't friendly at *all*. It was *terrifying*.

"Well, the thing is, I, umm," I stammered. I couldn't stop glancing at Bram's face every other word.

"Give it to us straight, Mukohda. Please."

I hesitated...then gave in. "It's, umm, true. I have four, yeah," I admitted. I could tell that even if I tried to lie, Bram would've seen right through me.

A stir began to run through the higher-ups, but Bram put a quick stop to it before things could get out of hand. "Let's see them," he said.

I started bringing the magic swords out from my Item Box, one by one. "This one's Caladbolg," I said as I pulled out the first blade. Elrand held his hands out, and I reflexively passed it to him without really considering what I was doing.

"This is the one that the behemoth at the bottom of the Dolan dungeon left behind! It's made out of adamantite, I believe!" Elrand enthusiastically explained.

Yup, it's adamantite! That's why it's so heavy, and that's also yet another piece of information that would've been better kept secret! Not that it really matters at this point, I guess.

"Then these are Hrunting, Gram, and Eckesachs," I continued as I produced the remaining three swords, which I handed to Bram and two of the other bigshots who held their hands out as well. I idly

wondered if those three had the greatest seniority out of the five of them.

One way or another, all three of them were overjoyed to get to hold a magic sword. I knew that for a fact because they said as much, out loud, very excitedly. It was like they were a trio of little kids playing with their new toys, and I couldn't help but be a little charmed in spite of myself. I spent a while watching them until finally, Elrand cleared his throat.

"Ahem! May I?" he said, gesturing toward the leviathan. He seemed ready to set about butchering the creature that very moment.

The high-ranking guild officers seemed to snap back to reality with a start, and all looked a little embarrassed by their momentary lapse. I *shouldn't* have laughed, but I have to admit that I might've let out a chuckle.

"I believe we should have no difficulty butchering the leviathan if we borrow these swords from Mukohda, but I'll have to test that before I can make any promises! We'll begin by bleeding it. Follow me, please!"

Elrand led us up along the leviathan's body, finally coming to a stop near its head—specifically, by the enormous wound that Gon had left when he bit its head most of the way off. Blue blood was oozing out of the gash, and it seemed that they'd already set out basins to collect all of it, which struck me as smart of them.

"Now, ordinarily I would make a cut around the base of the creature's head, but seeing as Gon apparently already handled that part of the process... *Hiyah*!"

Elrand moved away from the wound, striking slightly farther down on the leviathan's body with Caladbolg. The sword pierced straight through the creature's hide with a mighty *shiiing*...and sliced nearly halfway through its body in a single stroke. A wave of blue blood gushed out of the gash, soaking Elrand, Bram, the rest of the bigwigs, Moira, *and* me from head to foot.

"Fool," Fel commented with a roll of his eyes.

Agreed. Also, how did you *manage to get out of that spotless,*

Fel?

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"I'm gonna smell like fish for *weeks*," I muttered with a grimace—the leviathan's blood had a *very* potent aroma—before shooting Fel a glare. "Really? Putting up a barrier around yourself and leaving me to get soaked? That's not even a little bit fair!"

"Hmph! What I do with my power is my business, and mine alone. I see no reason not to use it for my own sake," Fel countered.

Okay, but it's not like it would've cost you anything to put it around me too, right? Maybe it happened too quickly for you to manage it, I guess, but I'm still not happy about it.

《Master, are you okay?》 Sui asked.

"That's definitely not the word I'd use to describe myself right now, no. Let's just go home, okay? I *really* wanna change out of these clothes," I said. Sui, by the way, had been on Fel's head at the time of the disaster and had gotten out unscathed. I was the only one who'd gotten dunked face-first in leviathan fluids.

"Surely you jest. They have only now gotten started, and you expect us to abandon our watch?" Fel said. I was ready to get the heck out of there, but of *course* he wasn't going to make it easy.

"Come on, just look at me! This is so nasty!" I whined. I'd wiped my head off as best as I could, of course, but there was no saving my outfit. My shirt and pants were both drenched in blue blood.

"You will simply have to bear with it. If we were to leave, we would be unable to deal with any miscreants who manage to sneak in."

"I guess I can't argue with that..."

As the project had dragged on, a surprisingly large crowd of rubberneckers had gathered up to spectate. The adventurers who'd shown up to help were doing a good job of keeping anyone from getting close to the leviathan, and even if someone managed to slip past the first layer of security, they'd run straight into Fel's and Gon's

barriers, but I had to admit that even just the thought of thieves lurking around was a little disquieting.

"Okay, *fine*, plan B," I said. "Hey, Sui, you know how you spray Uncle Fel with water sometimes to clean him off? Think you could do that for me?"

《Yeah, okay!》

"Great, thanks!"

Sui stretched out a tentacle and showered me off with it, washing away the nasty, fishy leviathan blood.

"I hope you'll at least be up for drying me off, Fel?"

"If you insist. There," Fel said as he buffeted me with a burst of warm air. A short while later, my clothes were finally dry. Still a little fishy-smelling, but much better than before, at least.

"Looks like things are finally settling down on that end of things as well," I noted.

The burst of leviathan blood had caused a pretty sizable uproar, which was totally unsurprising considering the stuff was worth a not-so-small fortune. Every drop of blood left to soak into the ground was effectively gold poured straight down the drain. The bigwigs and Moira had been so busy ordering the guild staff to collect as much of it as possible that it seemed like they barely even noticed that they were as thoroughly bloodsoaked as I'd been.

It seemed, however, that the gash Elrand had cut had finally finished actively bleeding, and with the help of his magic tools, the workers set up a system to safely and effectively collect the leviathan's remaining fluids. Now that things were once again under control, the higher-ups' attention turned back to a certain person who, frankly, all of us knew was due for a scolding.

"Oh, Elrand...?"

"I'm *really* sorry about this," the elf muttered. He was down on his knees, right on the dirt, with Moira, Bram, and the others all looming over him.

Bram looked especially furious. "I don't mind being soaked in blood," he said. "Well, no, I mind it quite a lot, actually, but I can *tolerate* it. What I *can't* tolerate is wasting *gallons* of a resource as tremendously precious as leviathan blood, and I know for a fact that

we're not the only ones who feel that way! *Look!*"

Bram gestured at a group of individuals who were gathered up nearby, and boy oh boy, did they look *furious*. They were shouting stuff along the lines of "How dare you?! How *dare* you?!" and "Sham of a butcher!" and "Make him pay with his head!"

"*Those* are the capital's apothecaries," Bram explained. "I believe you are aware of just how prized this blood is to individuals of their profession?"

Ooof! That would do it, all right. I bet leviathan blood's one of those things that you can synthesize super potent medicines with. No wonder they'd be upset.

"And I *hope* you realize just how much of that precious blood you used to water the grass a few moments ago?!"

"I'm so, *so* sorry!" Elrand wailed, bowing so low he pressed his face into the ground. It was a really impressive display of remorse by Japanese standards, though part of me had to wonder if that pose carried the same sort of connotations in this world, or if he was simply doing it instinctively.

"Why are you apologizing to *us*?! Have you forgotten who this leviathan belongs to in the first place?!" Bram bellowed.

Elrand stood up, scooted over to me, then got right back down on the ground and bowed once more. "I am so, *so* sorry, Mukohda!"

"Huh? Wait, no, stop! No crying!" *And no kowtowing either, please! It's making me really uncomfortable!*

"My carelessness wasted so much of your precious leviathan blood! I know I can never make it up to you, but I'm truly, *truly* sorry!" Elrand wailed, a river of tears pouring down his cheeks. Elf or not, I don't think *anyone* would enjoy seeing a man of his age bawl like that.

"I-It's fine, honestly!" I said. "We really don't care much about the blood in the first place. R-Right, guys?"

"Correct. I have no interest in the beast's blood. I care only for the meat, and the speed at which we obtain it."

《Leviathan meeeat!》

"S-See? Not a big deal!"

My familiars only care about the prey they catch up to the point

where we've gotten its meat. After that, anything goes as far as they're concerned! So please *quit crying like that, okay? We're getting a lot of stares, and I'm really not enjoying all the attention!*

"M-Mukohdaaaaaa! I knew it! You really are my greatest friend! *Bwaaaaaahhh!*" Elrand wailed as he flung his arms around my leg.

"*Gah!* N-No! Off! L-Let go of me!"

"My bosom buddy! Mukohdaaa!"

"No, seriously, let go! Personal space! Personal spaaaaaace!"

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Heave, ho!" the workers grunted as they plopped a chunk of one of the leviathan's organs—maybe its heart, or its liver, or something?—into a massive pot. The guild folks were hard at work chopping up and pulling out the beast's insides, and oh *god*, was it ever gross.

No, seriously, can I please just go home now?

It had been a long and eventful process, with a fair few of those "events" involving Elrand clinging to the leviathan again, but the monster's blood had finally been drained. The butchering process had now moved on to its next stage: harvesting the leviathan's innards. Elrand was ecstatically chopping away at its stomach with my magic sword, though he didn't let his ebullience get the better of him and was taking a lot more care than you'd think at a glance.

The biggest obstacle that stood in our way was, unsurprisingly, the creature's incredibly tough hide. That was a trait that wasn't exclusive to leviathans, it seemed—all dragons had it, to a greater or lesser extent. However, once you managed to cut through their skin, (or rather, *if* you managed to cut through it—the fact that we had to bring out magic swords to do the job said it all) the creature's flesh and innards were soft enough to slice with perfectly ordinary knives. Not even the strongest monsters, it seemed, were borderline invulnerable both outside and in.

Of course, just because it *could* be butchered with an ordinary knife didn't mean that was what we'd actually settled on. In Elrand's words, "This is a leviathan we're working on! My cuts have to be as clean and precise as possible if I want to avoid waste, and that

means I *have* to use a mithril knife!"—a declaration that he proceeded to follow through on.

As you might expect, considering the creature's sheer size, the leviathan's organs were ginormous as well. Not even the biggest containers that the guild could provide were big enough to fit even its smallest organs, so instead, each of them was cut apart on a wooden butchering table and then stored in pieces. It was a *really* gruesome process to watch, but Elrand seemed over the moon to be right down in the thick of it. I even caught him muttering little comments to himself from time to time along the lines of "Oh, I see! So *that's* where their hearts are located" or "I've never seen a liver this glossy and firm before... *Beautiful!*"

I've gotta admit, watching a guy talk to himself while he disembowels a monster might very well be the creepiest thing I've seen in ages.

In short, the whole process was mentally exhausting to watch. It kept wearing on until eventually, Bram let out a shout. "All right! Let's wrap it up for today," he said.

"What?!" Elrand exclaimed. "But I still have so much work left to do!"

"I'm aware, and you'll just have to do it tomorrow."

"Why, though?! I can work straight through the night! That wouldn't bother me at all!"

"Even if *you* wouldn't mind, *I* can't afford to take responsibility for that decision."

According to Bram, our current security setup wouldn't be sufficient to make working through the night a feasible plan. The fall of darkness would almost definitely mean more would-be thieves deciding to try to grab a quick windfall. Not only would the guards have more trouble to deal with, they'd also be working in worse visibility *and* dealing with the exhaustion of staying up and alert long into the night. Putting a pause on the process was the much more practical option, and so I stowed the remainder of the leviathan's corpse in my Item Box once more. We could pick it up again the next day, when we'd be working under much safer circumstances.

"I'd like to begin at the same time tomorrow as we did today. Will

that work for you, Mukohda?" Bram asked.

"That should be fine, yes," I replied. "No objections, right, Fel?"

"Hmph. I wish to partake of the leviathan's meat as soon as possible, but the reason behind your words does not escape me. An overnight vigil is far from a desirable task. All the more so seeing as I have grown *quite* hungry," he added as he shot me a rather sharp glance.

Oh, crap. Now that he mentions it, we totally skipped lunch today, didn't we? I'd been so preoccupied watching everyone go about their business that it'd completely slipped my mind.

《Sui didn't eat anything for lunch, so Sui's really, really hungry too!》 the slime chimed in from its perch atop Fel's head.

《Yeah, my bad! I'll make something really filling as soon as we get home,》 I telepathically assured my familiars.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"What *am* I gonna do with this stuff...?" I muttered as I gazed at the lump of meat on the kitchen counter. It looked more like whitefish than anything else, and I was at a loss as to how I should prepare it. "I guess the first thing I should do is cook a bit and give it a taste test!"

I cut off a small portion of the meat, lightly seasoned it with salt and pepper, and got it cooking in a frying pan. My ingredient of choice that evening was ice dragon meat, which I'd obtained back in the Brixt dungeon. That particular dungeon had concluded with us meeting Gon, which had been such a huge deal it had more or less blown everything that came before it out of the water in terms of significance. In other words, I'd totally forgotten that the meat had dropped at all.

Honestly, I'm impressed that Fel did *manage to remember it.*

When it became clear that the rest of the butchering process would have to wait till the next day, I'd sent Gon and Dora-chan a telepathic message, and the five of us had reconvened on solid ground to go home. Elrand had done his best to turn that five into six, but Moira had descended upon him like a bolt of elven lightning

and we'd managed to return to the house we'd rented without any unwelcome hangers-on in the end.

I hadn't really done anything at all throughout the whole day, and yet I felt like my time in that field had been packed with exhausting events from start to finish. I was hoping to sit back, relax, and sip my way through a nice cup of coffee before making dinner, but Fel, of course, had other ideas.

"A day such as this merits a delicious dinner. No—it *demands* it," Fel said the second we stepped through the door. Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui had quickly chimed in to agree, and just like that, my fate was sealed.

Anyway, dragon meat was more or less the gold standard for delicious food, as far as my familiars were concerned. It had only been a couple days since we'd had dragon steaks at Earl Langridge's home, though, and my reserves of both earth *and* red dragon meat were looking really dicey. I barely had any earth dragon meat left at all, in fact—the amount I had in stock would probably only get me through two more meals at most, considering how much my party ate. I knew for a fact that everyone would suddenly start craving that stuff the second I was out of it, and unfortunately, I also knew that running into an earth dragon and a red dragon in quick succession had been a major stroke of luck.

Then again, it does *sort of feel like dragons are magnetically drawn to me, or something. Maybe it won't be an issue in the long term after all.*

When I explained our dragon meat predicament to Fel, he'd paused for a moment to consider the matter before suddenly perking up with excitement. **"Come to think of it, did we not have the meat of an ice dragon?"** he asked. I'd actually had no idea what he'd been talking about at first, but when I checked my Item Box and really did find the stuff, it all came back to me in a flash.

"Though we are not able to eat the leviathan yet, the meat of an ice dragon will serve as a satisfactory appetizer. They are, after all, not altogether unalike in flavor. It will enhance our anticipation for the leviathan itself," Fel

declared.

"Oh? An ice dragon's meat is a rare thing indeed," Gon noted. "And I suppose it *does* taste rather similar to leviathan meat, yes. I'm excited to sample what you make with it!"

《Riiight, from that one dungeon! We met Gon right after, and I forgot all about it!》 Dora-chan said.

《Oooh, ice dragon meat!》 Sui cooed excitedly.

Just like that, ice dragon meat was put on the evening's menu before I could get a word in edgewise. My familiars sent me off to the kitchen on the double, their gazes full of anticipation.

"All right, that should do it," I said as I plucked the piece of ice dragon meat from the frying pan. It still looked pretty fishlike, even after it was cooked. I gave it a bite. "Oooh," I murmured. The meat was soft—flaky, even.

"You know, this reminds me a little of cod, actually!" I said. The meat was deliciously umami-rich in a way that cod could never compare to, of course, but in terms of texture, there was a distinct similarity. "Yeah, this is really tasty! That's dragon meat for you, I guess. I can think of all sorts of dishes that it would work well in. A nice, simple meunière would be good, but I think I have a better idea..."

An image had sprung into my mind of a veritable mountain of fish and chips. *Yeah, that sounds like it'd hit the spot. I think I'm on to something. Tonight's dinner will be fish and chips, for sure!* I snapped up some simple ingredients from my Online Supermarket, then got right to work!

To start, I cut a bunch of Alban's homegrown potatoes into wedges, leaving their peels on, then left them to soak in a bowl of water. While the fries were soaking, I sliced the ice dragon meat into pieces, gave them the ol' salt-and-pepper treatment, and lightly dusted them with flour as well.

Next up: the batter! I combined flour, baking powder, and a little salt in a bowl, then added liquid in the form of beer. The combination of beer and baking powder would give the batter a really nice, satisfying crunch when it was fried. Speaking of frying, that was the very next step—I dipped the pieces of ice dragon meat

in the batter, then plopped them right into the oil.

The potato wedges had spent long enough in their bath by that point, so I scooped them out and gave them a *very* thorough drying before frying them as well. This was one of those moments when having several burners available to me was a godsend—I could have multiple pots of oil going at the same time. When the fries and fish were just the right shade of golden-brown, I pulled them from the oil, let them drain for a moment, and that was that!

"Okay, that should do it! All it needs is some ketchup, and"—I paused to bring out a certain secret ingredient from my Item Box —"my own homemade tartar sauce!"

The sauce was a very simple mixture of minced-up hard-boiled eggs, pickles, and onions, plus mayo, vinegar, and a bit of salt and pepper. I'd made a ton of it a while back, and still had plenty left over for this meal.

"All right, looking perfect!"

I piled everyone's plates high with fish and chips, stashed them in my Item Box, and headed out into the living room where my familiars were eagerly waiting for me.

"Here you go, guys! I decided to try frying the dragon meat this time," I said as I presented the fish and chips to everyone.

"Hmm. This is not unsatisfactory, though the potatoes are unnecessary," Fel said, wasting no time in digging into the dragon meat side of the meal.

"Well, fries are an essential part of this dish, and that's all there is to it!" I said. "You should really try them before you complain! They're great!"

"Yes, this *is* delicious! What a wonderful crunch! It gives me the strangest thirst, if you take my meaning, my liege," Gon said as he dug into his meal as well.

"Oh, do I ever. A beer would go great with this," I agreed. *Honestly, that's a really good idea. I should bring one out for him—and for myself, while I'm at it.*

《This white stuff's called tartar sauce, right? It works *so* well with the meat!》

I can always count on you to appreciate these things, Dora-chan.

Fish and chips just isn't the same without tartar sauce.

《This is sooo yummy, Master!》

And looks like Sui's a fan too! Always good to see. Time for me to take a bite too. But first...

"How about a beer, Gon?"

"Oh? Is tonight a night to indulge, my liege?"

"Why not? Though we've got another long day ahead of us tomorrow, so only a little," I replied. *Fortunately, I picked out a few good-looking beers for myself last time I was looking for offerings for Agni. Already got them nice and chilled too!* "Here we are! This is a kind of expensive one. It came in a gift set!"

I started filling up Gon's bowl with beer...and went through three bottles of the stuff before it was actually full. *E-Eh, should be fine, I guess.*

"Okay, here you go."

"Ooh! Many thanks, my liege. Let's have a taste," Gon said before skillfully gulping down a hearty mouthful. "*Ahh!* This is delectable indeed! It's nothing like the human liquors I've drunk before!"

"Ha ha ha! That'd be because this stuff's from the world I came from," I explained.

"Might I ask for seconds, perhaps?" Gon said, nudging his bowl toward me with one of his foreclaws.

"Wait, you already finished? Okay, but like I said, not *too* much," I replied as I opened up another three bottles to refill his vessel.

All things considered, it was another fun, slightly raucous dinner. Before long, I heard the front door open.

"I'm back!" Willem called out as he stepped inside.

"Oh, hey! Welcome home," I replied.

"Drinking already, are you?" Willem jabbed. "Seems you've been having a proper party for yourselves while I was hard at work."

"Well, it's not like there was any work we could've done even if we'd stuck around, right?" I countered. I didn't know the first thing about the guild's internal business affairs.

"Fair point, I suppose," Willem admitted.

"Are you hungry at all? We were just eating," I asked.

"Oh? Set a portion aside for me, did you? I won't say no to that."

I served a plate of fish and chips to Willem as well—with a beer to accompany it, of course. It randomly occurred to me that he probably would've described it as ale, since that was the standard term in this world. A moment later, he proved me right.

"*Ahhh!* What *is* this ale?! It's incredible!" Willem exclaimed after his first gulp of beer.

"I just happened to stumble across it somewhere," I vaguely replied.

"Well, there aren't many things I'd take over getting the chance to drink booze like *this*," Willem said. He was apparently quite the alcohol lover, and seemed to be in a fantastic mood all of a sudden. "Now, I can tell that these are potatoes, but what're those other things?"

"Oh, just try one and see for yourself! They're good, trust me, especially if you dip them in that white sauce."

Willem followed my instructions, grabbing a piece of fried ice dragon, dipping it into the tartar sauce, and taking a bite.

"*Ooh*, that *is* something, all right! Delicious! What is it, fish?"

"Ice dragon, actually."

For a moment, Willem froze solid. He very slowly set his partially eaten piece of dragon meat down on his plate, then took a long, deep breath.

"I think I misheard you. It almost sounded like you said this was ice dragon meat?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"It's every time with you, I swear! *Every time*! *Why*?!"

Why are you putting the blame on me? I'm not the one who demanded we have ice dragon for dinner tonight. You can thank those four *for that.*

"Does that mean you don't want any more of it?" I asked.

"No, no, I'll eat," Willem sighed. He took a moment to psych himself up, then started stuffing his face. "Just another reminder that expecting common sense from you is always a mistake, I guess. I think I'm finally starting to internalize that," he commented between bites.

"Come on, really?" I said.

"All I'm saying is that nobody who has a fenrir and an ancient dragon as his familiars could ever be totally normal. You're barely any better than they are, really. That's exactly why the king's being so careful about how he deals with you, and exactly why all those nobles *should* be following his example. Trying to make *them* understand that is a losing battle, though."

"Come to think of it, the king and queen came to watch the butchering process, didn't they? I saw them arrive, but I didn't even notice when they left."

"They're busy—couldn't stick around forever. They headed back to the palace while we were draining the leviathan's blood."

Oh, really? I'd almost expected them to come over and demand that I hand over my magic swords, but apparently, I shouldn't have bothered worrying after all.

"I bet you were expecting them to ask for a magic sword, weren't you?" Willem asked, rather perceptively.

"I mean, yeah," I admitted.

"There was some talk along those lines, from what I heard, but the king himself shut it right down. Seems he's pretty dedicated to making sure you're not driven off to some other nation."

Some of the other nobles had apparently persisted, claiming that all the king had to do was make sure that I *couldn't* flee the country, and the king had responded by reminding them of the sort of company I kept. "If keeping a leash on a man with a fenrir and an ancient dragon at his beck and call was that easy, my job would be *much* simpler than it is," he'd apparently scoffed.

"Oh, and he also gave a preemptive order that nobody was to try to pressure you into handing over any of the leviathan's materials," Willem added.

That had apparently been the queen's decision, in part. In her words, "Any attempt to lay claim to it could earn our whole nation the wrath of his familiars, and that is a storm we simply cannot weather. In other words, to do so would amount to nothing less than an act of outright treason, and I'm sure none of you are foolish enough to commit such a crime. Are you?"

Y-Yeah, honestly, I can't deny it. If Fel and Gon wanted to, they

really could blow the whole country away. Nice work, Miss Queen.

"So, that's the long and short of it," Willem said. "The king's keeping anyone who might hassle you in check...though he isn't doing *anything* to help *us* with the hoards of apothecaries and merchants beating at *our* door."

"Have there really been that many of them?" I asked.

"More than you could know. They've been coming at us in droves, demanding the chance to make a deal. It's not even the guild's leviathan to sell yet—not that that'd ever stop them from asking for it anyway," Willem explained with an irritated frown. I got the sense he was pretty fed up with all those businesspeople. "Hell, we haven't even decided what we'll be buying from you to begin with."

"Wait. You're not buying the whole thing?" I asked. *I really only need the meat! The rest is totally up for grabs.*

"Are you *insane*?! That'd bankrupt the whole guild, and drive us into debt afterward!"

W-Wait, really? It's that bad?

"Don't worry, though. Bram's made it pretty clear that he'll be buying as much of it from you as we can possibly manage."

Well, that's good to know, at least. I wouldn't know what to do with the blood and guts and whatnot, so giving it back to me would feel like a waste. Maybe I can give some to the king and Earl Langridge if there's too much of it left over in the end? And maybe I'll have Sui make some elixirs out of anything I still have after that.

Chapter 6: Leviathan Meat at Last!

"Phew! And with that, we've finished harvesting the last of its organs!" Elrand said, dabbing at the sweat on his brow with a rag he kept hung on his belt and dyeing the cloth blue with the leviathan blood his hands were still covered in.

Elrand had a perfectly satisfied smile on his face. He might have been a sorry excuse of an elf, but he *was* still an elf all the same, and between those classically handsome elven features and the smile on his face, he was practically aglow. I had to admit that it was sort of incredible—in every sense of the word—that someone could be *that* happy about having had to do such a gory, brutal job.

The man's unbelievably consistent when it comes to his interests, that's for sure. In a certain sense, I had to respect that. It was a job that I never would have been able to handle. In fact, one glance at the Leviathan's intestines getting yanked out of its body had made me nearly lose my lunch—or, well, my breakfast, really. I felt a lot more tired than Elrand looked as he moved along to the next stage of the butchering process.

"I'll be removing the head next! Ordinarily, I would proceed to butcher the head itself afterward, but in this instance..." Elrand lowered his voice to explain the situation to me. "A leviathan's skull is full of tremendously valuable components—its eyes, fangs, brain, and the like—which means that it's the most likely part of the monster to be targeted by thieves. Bram has requested that I instead butcher the head indoors at the guild."

Oh, that makes sense. We know the guild's storehouse is big enough for the head to fit, so there's no reason not to do it there.

"Now then, I will begin the removal forthwith!" Elrand said before raising the sword he'd borrowed from me aloft, then slicing the Leviathan's head clean off. "Oh, I wish I could process it right now! What a terrible shame!" he muttered as he stroked the monster's

severed head.

Mental note: Make a point of not listening to Elrand when he talks to himself from now on. It basically always ends up being something super freaky.

"I'll go ahead and put this away for now," I said. I stepped up to the leviathan's head and stowed it in my Item Box for safekeeping.

"Ahh..." Elrand quietly moaned, reaching a longing hand out toward the head as it vanished away.

It was decided that I'd keep hold of both the monster's head as well as the portion of its neck that Gon had bitten into in my Item Box for the time being, then drop them off at the Adventurer's guild on my way home.

"Just don't go thinking you can take it easy for the rest of the day," I said. "I know Moira isn't around right now, but if you slack off and don't get any work done, she'll chew you out again the next time you see her."

"I-I'm well aware! I'll do my part, I promise!" Elrand replied.

Will he, really? I'm not so sure. The local Adventurer's guild had been absolutely swamped with inquiries, and was more or less in a state of barely controlled chaos. Bram and the other bigwigs didn't have even a second to spare, and Moira had been forced to temporarily step away from her role as Elrand's babysitter to back them up. *And, wait—backing the conversation up a few steps...*

"Hey, remember what you said about thieves targeting the leviathan's head? Is that really something we have to worry about? Like, would anyone dare to even try with this many high-ranking adventurers standing guard?" I asked.

And that's not even starting on Fel's and Gon's barriers! Plus, I didn't hear about any would-be thieves turning up yesterday. I'd been pretty worried about the possibility at first, but since nobody had made an attempt, I'd sort of figured that the incredibly heavy security had scared them all off.

"I'm afraid to say it is. Regrettably, more than a few people have tried already," Elrand replied.

As it turned out, I simply hadn't been paying close enough attention. There *had* been thieves—a frankly astonishing number of

them, in fact—which the adventurers had been apprehending. Gon and Dora-chan had captured a decent number as well, supposedly.

Come to think of it, those two took off pretty much the second we arrived at the work site today. They said they were keeping watch again, but I sort of figured they were just running away from you-know-who. Neither of them had said a word to me about having caught so many prospective criminals.

Apparently, the potential to score a massive windfall by selling a single piece of a monster was simply too good for a lot of people to pass up, no matter how many guards there were around said monster. I just didn't get it. Who could look at a group of adventurers like that and *not* give up on the spot?

"Fortunately, we *do* have the adventurers to stand guard. We'll trust them to handle security while we move on to skinning the creature, at long last! Thankfully, expert butchers from all across the guild's network have traveled here to help with that stage!" Elrand explained. And indeed, I saw that a whole host of butchers were starting to gather around him as we were speaking. He must have already put out the word that it was time for them to get to work.

Oh, hey, there's Johan! He seemed to notice me and gave me a wave, which I returned. A moment later, however, he dropped right back into serious mode and moved along. The man was a true professional.

Bram and the rest of the higher-ups apparently wanted the leviathan's skin to be removed in pieces that were as big as possible. That meant that a large number of butchers would have to work together in tandem to pull the task off. Doing the *whole* monster in one piece just wasn't feasible, given its size, so Elrand started by walking along its length, slicing it into pieces with my magic sword. Clusters of butchers would then gather around each chunk and start working to remove its skin, which they did with astonishing speed and efficiency. I could really tell that they were all seasoned veterans of their craft.

Watching the leviathan's enormous form be gradually skinned was a pretty breathtaking spectacle. I wasn't the only one fixated on it either—Fel was lying nearby, watching with his eyes wide and his

breath bated as the monster's white flesh was exposed.

"Today, at long last, we shall feast on leviathan," Fel said, his tail wagging furiously.

《Sui's really excited too!》 the slime chimed in with a happy little bounce.

I hope you guys are right. I would've hated to disappoint them after they got *this* excited. *I'll have to think up a good meal plan in advance.*

The work carried on in much the same manner until finally, it was called to a close for the day. They hadn't been able to remove all of the leviathan's skin in the end, but several of the sections it had been cut up into *had* been fully skinned, leaving their glossy, whitish flesh fully revealed.

"Good. We shall claim the pieces that have been skinned," Fel declared. **"Tonight, we dine on leviathan! At long, long last, its meat is ours!"**

Fel was, to say the least, *very* eager for dinner. He was literally drooling in anticipation.

《Yaaay! Leviathan meat!》 Sui squealed in a singsong tone as well. Its expectations were sky-high too.

Just then, Gon and Dora-chan returned from their overhead vigil.

"Oh? I see the meat is finally ready for us to consume!" Gon said.

《Woo-hoo! Friggin' finally! Feels like we've been waiting for years!》 Dora-chan chimed in.

"Well? Hurry and collect the meat. We shall return home at once," Fel said as he prodded my back with his nose.

"Okay, okay! You don't have to push me, sheesh," I replied. However, before we could do that, I figured that I should check in with Elrand first. "Hey, Elrand? Are those pieces of meat ready for us to take home yet?"

Elrand gave me a genuinely horrified, wide-eyed stare. "*No*! Absolutely *not*!" he shouted in such an openly menacing tone, I was actually taken aback.

"*What?*" Fel said in a low growl, his snout wrinkling as he bared his teeth slightly.

"What could there be to explain? The butchering process isn't

finished yet!" Elrand replied. He hadn't even flinched in the face of Fel's intimidating aura.

"Not finished? Its meat has been bared. What else could there be to accomplish?"

"How could you *possibly* not know?! Its bones! It's still *full* of bones, isn't it?!"

Oooh, right. He actually does have a point. They hadn't deboned the monster at all, and it was pretty easy to guess that those bones would be just as valuable as the rest of its anatomy. Fel kept insisting that the meat *had* to be ready for cooking now that it was exposed, but I had to admit that Elrand's explanation made a lot of sense.

"Th-The bones are no obstacle. He can simply prepare the meat bone-in style. That is an option, is it not?"

Oh, come on, Fel! Did you really have to pull me into this?

"M-M-M-Mukohda!" Elrand exclaimed, grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking me wildly. "Y-You aren't about to tell me that you actually plan to cook the leviathan, bones and all, are you?!"

"Whoa, whoa, hold your horses! Calm *down*, Elrand, please!" I shouted back. "I guess I technically *could* cook it that way if I wanted to, but I never said a word about that being *my* plan!"

"You *could*?! How could you even *say* that?!"

N-Nope, it's no use. He's worked himself into a total frenzy.

"Listen to me, Mukohda! As I told you before, even a single drop of a leviathan's blood or a single fragment of one of its bones would sell for a *tremendous* price! They're unbelievably high-quality materials! Why would you even entertain the *possibility* of throwing its bones on a grill?! Those are valuable even by leviathan material standards! They can be made into arms *or* medicine!"

Supposedly, leviathan bones could be crafted into swords, spears, or even bludgeoning weapons. They could also be ground into a powder, which turned them into a potent ingredient for medicines of all sorts. They were a material that any craftsperson would want to get their hands on, and Elrand spent nearly an hour lecturing me about how completely absurd it was to even *consider* using them as part of a meal.

My familiars tried to quietly excuse themselves a short way into his tirade, but for once, they weren't so lucky. "Where do *you* think you're going?! You four need to hear this as much as he does!" Elrand had barked, and just like that, they were in for the long haul right along with me. *Serves you right, Fel.*

When Elrand finally wrapped his speech up, all of us scurried away without wasting a moment.

"Grr... How dare that elf preach to a mighty fenrir," Fel bitterly grumbled.

"That was altogether unpleasant, yes," Gon tiredly agreed.

《Yeah, and why did *I* get dragged into it?》 Dora-chan weakly griped.

《Masteeer, Sui's huuungryyy,》 Sui chimed in. One of us was behaving more or less the same as ever, at least.

Ugggh, I'm beat. Man, though, who knew that Elrand had it in him to lecture a fenrir and an ancient dragon like it was nothing when he was mad? Guess he's a guy you should never underestimate.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

The day after Elrand had taught us that painful lesson on the value of leviathan bones, the guild's butchers continued to work on removing the leviathan's skin. It was a momentous task, and it ended up spilling over into the day after that as well, once again putting my familiars' long-awaited leviathan meat meal on hold. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui's spirits could hardly have been lower.

Fel was particularly surly. He had a perpetual scowl on his face, and when I offered to cook whatever he wanted to make up for the delay, he replied with the single grunted word **"Karaage."**

That was a favorite for all of my familiars, so I went ahead and whipped up a batch that evening for dinner. The one problem: Everyone was still deeply upset about *not* getting to eat the leviathan, and they seemed to take their frustration out on the meal. They ate, and ate, and ate, quicker than I could even fry the stuff, and I ended up running out of poultry equivalents to make more

with before they were finished. I was forced to dip into my dungeon pork and beef reserves to cook up cutlets for them instead, and by the end of the meal, I was as exhausted as I'd ever been.

The day after, the skinning process finally came to an end and the deboning process began. They didn't get all that far, relatively speaking, but they *did* manage to remove all the bones from one section of the monster, which meant that its meat was finally ready to be handed over to us, for real this time. The fact that my familiars had made it very clear that they wanted to eat the stuff as soon as possible had probably been a pretty big motivating factor—Fel and Gon all but menaced the butchers, really—and the guild's staff had somehow managed to grant that wish in the end.

And so, four days after the leviathan's butchering began, we'd finally secured a portion of leviathan meat, albeit a relatively small one. Unfortunately—and to be clear, I *had* seen this coming a mile away—the second the meat was in my hands, my familiars started kicking up a fuss, urging me to head home right away. I'd been planning on taking a moment to talk to Elrand and Johan before I left, but Fel grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and threw me onto his back before I even had the chance to try. Sui was already sitting in my bag, perhaps to ensure it would be ready to go at a moment's notice, while Gon and Dora-chan said that they'd go on ahead and had already headed back to the capital even earlier than the rest of us.

That was how I ended up clinging to Fel's back as he raced through the streets of the capital so quickly, you'd think there wasn't a moment to spare. I told him to stop, but he ignored me, so instead I tried shouting, "Slow down, or so help me, I won't cook *any* of the leviathan meat tonight!" out of desperation. That got him to lower his pace, at least, but he still took me straight to the house we were renting in the capital anyway, now grumbling all the while. The instant I stepped inside, I was herded straight into the kitchen without even a moment to rest.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"For crying out loud. They could've let me take it easy for a *couple* minutes, at least," I griped to myself as I thought through my options for the evening's meal. "If I make something that takes too long to cook, those four are gonna riot. Plus, I'd really rather whip up something simple and be done with it, anyway..."

Fel and Gon said that leviathan tastes a lot like ice dragon, but I dunno, I thought. Looking at the leviathan meat, which I'd already removed from my Item Box, it *did* have that same whitefish-esque quality that I'd seen in the ice dragon meat. That said, when I prodded the leviathan meat, I noted that it felt at least a little more plump and malleable than the dragon meat had.

"Guess a quick taste test is always the right place to start with new ingredients like this," I said. I sliced off a very small portion of the meat, salted and peppered it, and then quickly cooked it up in a frying pan. It still looked like the ice dragon meat after it was cooked, and I wondered if it would also taste like cod as I popped it into my mouth. "*Whoa!* Now *that's* really something..."

The meat really *was* similar to the ice dragon's in some ways. It had that same nice, flaky texture. That said, its *flavor* was completely different. Its umami was out of this world, to the point that I could barely even describe it in words. It was like all the tastiest whitefish I'd ever eaten put together, then cranked up to a hundred and fifty percent. I mean, it was just plain *good*.

"I could probably get away with serving it up as is, but that feels like a bit of a waste," I said to myself. "I bet this would go amazingly with all sorts of sauces. I could make a meunière, or even just grill it with some butter and soy sauce—a pretty obvious way to go, sure, but an awesome one. Oh, or I could do a butter lemon sauce! What else...? *Oh*, of course! This might work really well with that seasoning I saw on my Online Supermarket the other day!"

The seasoning in question had come into stock just recently. I'd realized I was almost out of ketchup, opened my skill's menu to stock up, and randomly stumbled across a new product in the process. It was a tomato-based sauce made by a company that was famous for its ketchup, and its description claimed that it would "brighten up any dish with a burst of delicious flavor!" I'd been

thinking of using it on something, and this seemed like a perfect chance.

There were three different varieties of the sauce, which meant it'd be pretty flexible, and since making tomato sauce from scratch could be such a pain, it seemed like it could expand my easy-cooking repertoire quite a bit. Plus, most importantly of all, my instincts were telling me that it *had* to be tasty. That brand's ketchup and canned tomatoes had always served me well in the past, so I had faith that the new sauce would be a winner as well.

"All right, I think I know what to make! I'll go with a simple leviathan meunière, to start!"

I quickly bought up the extra ingredients I'd need from my Online Supermarket, including the tomato sauce made by the famous ketchup brand.

"That should do it! Now then, first things first..."

I started by lightly seasoning the pieces of leviathan meat with salt and pepper, then coating them with flour and shaking off any excess. Next, I melted some salted butter in a few frying pans, into which I laid the pieces of leviathan meat, cooking them until both sides were nice and crispy. I pulled the cooked meat out at that point and got ready to use the same pans to make the sauce in.

"I'll go with butter and soy sauce for this pan's batch, I think. And *this* one can be the butter lemon sauce," I muttered.

Salted butter and a splash of soy were all that was in the first sauce I was preparing. Once those two ingredients were nicely combined, it was good to go! The butter lemon sauce was simple as well—it started out with some salted butter too, followed by lemon juice, salt, and a bit of coarsely ground black pepper.

"Freshly grinding pepper really does make a difference! What an aroma!" I said. I was using a brand of black pepper that came packaged in its own little pepper mill. Products like that made me more grateful than ever to have access to my Online Supermarket.

Once the butter lemon sauce was all mixed together, I moved on to the tomato sauce meunière. I didn't think that butter and the tomato sauce would work well together—it'd come out too heavy—so I cooked the leviathan for that dish in olive oil instead. The sauce

didn't need any extra work at all, so all I really had to do was crisp up the leviathan, at which point...

"Okay, I think this is ready!"

My voice, it seemed, had carried farther than I'd expected it to. No sooner had the words left my mouth than Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui came crashing into the kitchen like a raging avalanche of fur, scales, and slime.

"It is finished?! Good! Let us eat at once!"

"Finally, a taste of leviathan! It's been far too long!"

《Tell me about it! The wait was killing me!》

《Leviathan meat! Yaaay!》

"Okay, okay, back it up! I'll bring it out to you, so go wait in the living room!" I scolded. *Honestly, talk about overexcited,* I thought, holding back a chuckle as I watched them plod back out of the kitchen.

Just a few minutes later, I brought out the plates of leviathan meunière to serve to everyone. "I decided to make a few simple meunières this time," I explained. "This one uses a butter soy sauce, this one's a butter lemon sauce, and this one doesn't have a sauce *yet*, buuut..."

I brought out my secret ingredient: the three varieties of tomato sauce I'd purchased. One of them was a fairly standard sauce made with onions and crushed tomatoes, one had a *ton* of garlic in it and was supposedly very flavorful, and one was made with a base of tomatoes and red peppers and was slightly spicy. Apparently, that last one was based on bravas sauce, which originated in Spain. I topped everyone's currently sauceless leviathan pieces with a little of each flavor.

"Oh! Actually, Sui, the bravas sauce—that's this one—is a little spicy. Maybe we should skip that one for you?" I suggested. I'd taste tested a dab of the sauce, and it definitely had a decent kick. I had a feeling that it might be a bit much for Sui's childish palate.

《Aww, but Sui wants to try all of them!》 Sui complained.

"Okay, but just a little to start! If you end up liking it, I'll put more on the rest of them."

《Okaaay!》

With that, everyone had a grand total of five flavors of meunière to sample. The gluttonous quartet wasted no time digging right in.

"Ahh, yes. Leviathan meat is truly as delectable as I remember!" Fel said.

"Yes, indeed it is! This flavor matches my memories of this meat precisely, but my liege's cooking has made it all the better!" Gon agreed.

《Holy *crap*, this stuff's awesome!》 Dora-chan exclaimed.

《Leviathan meat's sooo yummy!》 Sui chimed in.

Their long wait for leviathan meat had finally paid off, and clearly, it was living up to even their hyperinflated expectations. They polished off their first portions in the blink of an eye and asked for seconds right away. The bravas sauce really did turn out to be a bit too spicy for Sui, by the way, so it asked for the four nonspicy sauces for its second serving.

I think it's time for me to dig in too! I went straight for the tomato sauce dishes, which I'd been excited to try since the idea had sprung into my mind. I started with the basic tomato sauce version, which turned out to be really refreshing, with the perfect amount of acidic bite. *Yeah, that's as good as I thought it'd be!*

Next, I sampled the more strongly flavored garlic sauce meunière. *Oooh, this one's great too! It's hitting all the right flavor notes for me. Let's give the bravas sauce a try next... Yup, that's got a bit of a punch! Really tasty, though. It's got that spicy kick that kids like Sui just can't quite appreciate yet. It's really good, though—in fact, all of them are! And I bet they'd be even better with some bread on the side!*

Fortunately, I had plenty of Theresa's homemade sourdough stashed in my Item Box. I brought out a loaf, cut myself a slice, and dipped it in the tomato sauce. *Yup, just as good as I thought it'd be!*

I moved from the bread to the meunière, then right back to the bread again. It made for a dangerous combination—if I wasn't careful, it felt like I'd just keep eating forever...or I might have, if it weren't for the fact that it was only a matter of time before I'd be interrupted.

"Hey! I require another serving of these two, at once!" Fel

demanded, gesturing at the garlic tomato sauce and bravas sauce meunières.

Yeah, no surprises there. Those would *be the ones that Fel would be into.*

"More for me as well, my liege! These two suit my taste," Gon said, indicating the butter soy meunière and the plain tomato sauce meunière. He'd taken a liking to the most basic flavors, it seemed.

They're basic for a reason, I guess. Nothing beats the classics.

《More for me too! I'll take these!》 Dora-chan added. He picked the butter lemon sauce and the bravas sauce as his favorites.

I can get behind that—the lemon really brings something out in the dish, and it's light in a way that makes the strong, spicy bravas sauce taste even better in comparison.

《Sui wants more too! Of, umm, all of them!》

Ha ha ha! All of them except the spicy one, I'm guessing. That slime's appetite never fails to impress.

I served everyone their third helpings, and barely a few minutes later, all four of their voices rang out in unison.

"More!"

"Already?!"

They were eating at an even more rapid pace than usual. Maybe the lengthy wait explained why they were scarfing it down so quickly?

"My hunger is nowhere near sated. I assume you have prepared an ample stock of the leviathan's meat for us?" Fel asked as he polished off his portion, then licked his lips.

"I'm still hungry as well, my liege!"

《Same here! I've never had this stuff before, and I wanna make my first impression as complete as possible!》

《Sui can eat lots and lots and *lots* more too!》

"I'll, uh...go cook up a bit more," I replied, my eyebrow twitching slightly. The gluttonous quartet, it seemed, was going to keep me locked in the kitchen for most of the evening.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

The fifth day of the butchering process had arrived, and now that they'd had their long-awaited leviathan meal, my familiars were finally acting a little more chill about the whole deal...though of course, they were still insisting that we'd have another leviathan meat feast for dinner that evening as well.

I was glad that they weren't being as uncomfortably on edge about it anymore, but we clearly still had a lot of work to do when it came to their obstinacy. I was the one who'd have to make that feast, after all, and I'd already spent the night before cooking who even *knew* how many servings of meunière... I'd ended up so tired that I'd barely had the chance to eat my own helping of leviathan meat in peace. Knowing that I'd probably be going through that whole experience all over again had me feeling deeply dejected—not that moping would help me avoid my unfortunate fate.

The butchering team would be spending most of the day deboning the remaining chunks of the leviathan's body, it seemed. That was what Elrand said, anyway, and he *was* technically in charge of the project, so it was probably safe to take his word for it. As a sidenote, if Elrand was tired out by his work at all, he sure wasn't letting it show. He'd arrived at the work site with a huge smile on his face, day after day, and seemed no less lively than he'd been on day one.

Anyway, I knew that if they were deboning more of the meat chunks today, that meant that I'd be given a *much* larger stock of leviathan meat at the end of it than had been handed over to me the day before. The gluttonous quartet had put two and two together as well, and were already preemptively celebrating our upcoming meaty windfall.

Ugggh. It's gonna be another rough evening, all right...

If Willem had been around, I could've griped to him, which might've made me feel a bit better, but he was so busy he hadn't even made it back to the house the night before. I'd run into him when I arrived at the butchering site that morning and had managed to grab him for a very quick chat, during which he'd explained that he'd spent the night at the capital's Adventurer's guild hall.

According to Willem, "I'm so busy right now that sleeping at the

guild just makes sense. It's more efficient that way, and it means that even if you do get into trouble again, *I* won't be around to get sucked into your mess." I was a little confused by that—like, what sort of trouble would I even be getting into?—but Willem quickly clarified by asking, "You would've fed me part of the leviathan if I'd gone back to the house last night, right?"

"Well, yeah," I replied. My familiars would never have let me get away with *not* cooking something with it, and I wouldn't have denied Willem his dinner.

"Well, imagine if word got out that I ate part of the leviathan that's been the talk of the nation lately—hell, the talk of *all* the nations in this part of the continent! Have you considered how that could turn out for me?"

"Okay, but you ate dragon meat the other night, didn't you?" I countered.

"Ugh... Let's just say that I've learned from experience," Willem said.

Wait, what's that *supposed to mean? And besides, even if he ate part of the leviathan, he'd be doing it with my permission! Why would anyone have any right to complain about him eating something that I'd made for my own party and willingly shared with him? And who would even complain about something that petty in...the...*

Oh. Right. Him*.*

I *did* know one person—specifically, one elf—who would probably react to the news that Willem had sampled the leviathan's meat by throwing a bawling, screaming fit about how he wanted to try it too. It was incredibly easy to visualize, not to mention distressing, and with *that* factor in mind, I couldn't argue with Willem's logic.





Unfortunately for him, it's pretty much set in stone that we'll be eating leviathan again tonight. And speaking of which...

I spent quite some time after that point staring at the massive chunks of skinned leviathan meat, muttering to myself as I racked my brain for a good recipe that I could use it in that evening.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

That evening, I was once again herded straight into the kitchen the instant we got back to the house I was renting in the capital. No resting time for me! I *had* settled on a recipe, at least...but I had my doubts about the situation's sustainability.

"Are they gonna keep demanding leviathan meat every single night from now on, or what?" I muttered to myself. Just remembering the mountain of meat that now occupied my Item Box made my spirits sink. Even considering the black holes that my familiars had for stomachs, it would still probably take ages for me to work through it all. "And as if that wasn't bad enough, there's still more of it coming..."

Much to my chagrin, the deboning process wasn't even halfway finished yet. That, of course, meant that I'd soon have even *more* leviathan meat on my hands, in massive quantities. I shivered.

"Y-You know what? I'm just not gonna think about it right now. They'll get sick of it eventually, anyway!"

If anyone else had heard me talking about getting sick of leviathan meat, they might very well have passed out on the spot. I, however, found myself praying internally that the gluttonous quartet would move on to their next food fixation sooner rather than later as I got to work on the night's dinner.

This time, I'd be making foil-baked leviathan. I'd have to make a metric ton of whatever dish I settled on, so I'd decided to prioritize simplicity above all else. Baking the meat in foil meant that I could throw in a bunch of vegetables and stuff as well, which I was positive would be delicious. I purchased the ingredients that I didn't have in stock from my Online Supermarket, then got straight to work.

First up was cutting the vegetables. I had a ton of onions and cabbage from Alban's garden in my Item Box, and brought out some of each to use in the dish. I sliced the onions thinly, cut the cabbage into chunks, and removed the bases of the enoki mushrooms that I'd bought from my Online Supermarket.

Once I'd finished cutting the veritable mountain of vegetables I needed, I moved right along to making the sauce. I'd settled on using two sauces to make two variants of the recipe I'd chosen: a ponzu soy sauce and miso mayonnaise. The ponzu soy sauce would go on right before I served the dish, so I started by making the miso mayo—not that there was much of a process to that at all, really. All I had to do was mix together miso paste, mayonnaise, and just a splash of concentrated dashi stock.

Once the miso mayo was ready, I started prepping the dish itself. I buttered a piece of aluminum foil, then arranged the ingredients on top of it. I started with a layer of onions and cabbage, salted and peppered them, and then slapped on a piece of leviathan meat, which I topped with more onions and cabbage, plus some mushrooms this time. After that, I just had to top some of the piles with pats of butter, top the rest with miso mayo, and fold them all up into little parcels. Then, once I had a ton of those parcels made, I threw them into the oven to bake! I spent quite some time baking one oven full of parcels after another, until finally...

"Okay, I think that should be enough to satisfy everyone!"

I was hoping to actually sit down and enjoy my meal that night, so I made even more servings than I thought I would actually need. Getting sent back into the kitchen like last night would spoil my chance to savor my own leviathan meat, after all. Considering just how many parcels I'd put together, each of which contained an extra-large helping of leviathan meat, I had a hard time imagining that I could possibly run out.

I returned to the living room, where my familiars were hungrily waiting for me.

"I made foil-baked leviathan for us today! You just open it up like this—ouch, hot!" I said. I tore open one of the foil parcels, and the buttery aroma of its contents immediately filled the room. "Oh, and

there's two types! These ones will go great with a bit of this ponzu soy sauce on top, and these are a bit more heavily seasoned and have miso mayo sauce on them. They're all really hot, so be careful!"

《This is so yummy, Master!》 said Sui, who had no trouble eating even the most boiling hot of dishes. It engulfed its foil-baked leviathan without waiting for so much as a second. Judging by the slime's happy jiggle, it was really pleased with the dish.

"Yes, these *are* both delicious! I'm not certain I could pick a favorite," Gon agreed as he chowed down as well.

《They're both good, yeah, but I think I like the stronger-flavored one better,》 Dora-chan said. The miso mayo parcels seemed to have hit the spot for him.

Fel, meanwhile, gave my other three familiars a reproachful side-eye as he used wind magic to cool his parcels down. That delayed him quite a bit, but finally, he dug in too.

"Yes, this is quite decent," he said. **"The vegetables were unnecessary, but the leviathan's meat is truly superb."**

Unnecessary, my foot! Veggies are a core component of any foil bake. Plus, they're just plain good!

I opened up a parcel to sample as well. I started out with one of the miso mayo ones, which I paired with a bowl of white rice. Strongly flavored dishes like that went perfectly with rice. I could hardly think of a better combination.

The leviathan was delicious, needless to say, but the way the vegetables had soaked up the flavor from it and the miso mayo made them incredibly tasty as well. It was so good, in fact, that I ended up seriously considering having a second helping of rice...but before I got the chance, the gluttonous quartet called out for seconds of their own.

"Heh heh heh! You won't be sending me back to the kitchen this time. I made enough to last us through the meal today for sure!" I said as I brought out another round of foil-baked leviathan parcels.

"Oh? Then I suppose we will have to test the limits of your preparations."

"Hah hah hah! Excellent, my liege! In that case, I'll eat even

more than usual!”

《You said it!》

《Sui’s gonna eat waaay more than last night!》

I had made a terrible mistake. One misplaced comment, and the gluttonous quartet was all fired up to stuff their stomachs to capacity.

“Huh? No, wait, that’s not what I meant at all! Be reasonable! Eat as much as you want, then *stop*!” I shouted in a flailing panic.

“Incidentally, my liege, might I partake of the liquor you provided the other night? I believe you called it ‘beer,’ perhaps? I’m quite certain it would pair wonderfully with this dish,” Gon said.

《Aww, no fair! In that case, Sui wants the black bubbly stuff to drink too!》 Sui protested.

《You mean cola, Sui, and I’ll second that! One for me too!》 Dora-chan said.

“And I shall have cider. Also, another serving.”

“Oh! For me as well.”

《Same!》

《Sui too!》

“H-Hey, guys, are you listening to me? I’m serious! Don’t overeat! Be reasonable, *please*!”

Chapter 7: The Coolest Dinosaur Ever

"Well then, today, we shall go hunting."

"An excellent idea! We've spent so long aiding in the leviathan's butchering, and I was just thinking it would be nice to get some exercise."

《I'm down for that too!》

《Hunting! Yaaay!》

"Okay, nope, slow down. What're you even *talking* about?" I asked. We'd just finished breakfast, and I was settling in to enjoy a nice, relaxing moment of peace when my familiars pulled a hunting trip out of thin air and slapped it right onto our itinerary. "You realize that they're not *finished* butchering the leviathan, right?"

Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all looked completely disinterested in that little detail.

"Not finished? They might as well be."

"Indeed! We've obtained the beast's meat, so the important task is over and done with."

《Right? That's what I was gonna say. The meat was all that really mattered.》

《Meeeat!》

"Seriously, guys...?" I groaned.

I mean, yes, I'm well aware that the four of you prioritize meat above all else. You're the most dedicated carnivores I've ever met, no question about it, and since they wrapped up the deboning over the last two days, we do *have all the meat we're gonna get already. My Item Box is as full of meat as it's ever been...but that doesn't mean the* whole *thing is over!*

"Okay, listen up. Just because we have the leviathan's meat doesn't mean we can check out and act like it's all finished! There's

still the whole head left to butcher, remember?" I said.

"Hmph. The head is inedible, and as such, is of no consequence to me," Fel said. Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all chimed in with their agreement.

"Okay, but the world doesn't revolve around you, and I'm pretty sure the head's actually gonna be the most time-consuming part of the whole monster to process," I replied.

"What?!"

"It will be longer still? Truly...? I'd hoped we would be able to return home next week, perhaps. I miss the bath there dearly."

《I know, right? It's easy enough for Sui and me since we fit in the bath here, but no way could you ever squeeze in, Gon.》

《The bath at home's so much bigger and nicer!》

Wait, wait—that's *why you're excited to go home, Gon? For the bathroom?* Sure, I'd had it enlarged specifically so that he and Fel would fit, and it *was* pretty nice to hear that he appreciated it, but did it really compete with the leviathan in terms of importance in his mind? That was a bit of mental priority arithmetic that I didn't think I'd ever be able to square. The gluttonous quartet probably—scratch that, *definitely*—thought that now that the meat was in our hands, we could just pack up and leave, and all I could do was roll my eyes at them.

"Ugh. Why are you guys always like this...?" I grumbled. "Not only are they still working on the butchering process, they haven't even decided what parts of the leviathan they're going to buy yet! We're gonna be here for a good while longer, I'm betting."

They'd made it pretty clear that they wouldn't be buying everything, after all, even with all of the meat taken out of the equation. Their limited budget would've made that practically impossible, from the sound of it. That meant that I had to be available to collect the materials that they decided not to purchase from me, not to mention getting paid for the parts they did want and handling all the other little things I was sure would crop up. It wasn't as easy as waiting for them to finish taking the monster apart and hitting the road immediately afterward.

"They told us that they'd be working at the guild today for a

reason, you know? Let's head over, everyone!"

The leviathan's body had been fully processed, and now, it was time to take apart the head. It was still huge, but it was small enough to butcher in the guild's storehouse, which was the preferable option by a tremendous margin, so long as it *was* an option.

"Grr! Surely we can leave that task in the guild's hands and go on our way?" Fel protested.

"I'm sure they'll have a lot more butchering and bean counting to do that we won't be able to help with, yeah, but they can't exactly process the head if they don't have it, can they?" I countered. I was currently holding on to the thing in my Item Box. "Come on, get a move on!"

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

We arrived at the capital's Adventurer's guild hall, and were immediately shown to the storehouse. The moment I stepped inside, I found that a certain someone had been lying in wait for us.

"There you are, Mukohda! And Dora-chan, *and* Gon as well!" Elrand exclaimed as he dashed over to us at the speed of sound. The smile on his face had shot straight past "friendly" and landed somewhere closer to "dangerously unhinged."

"Yeah, err, and Fel and Sui too," I noted, doing my best to play it cool and smile back at him.

"Oh, so they are," Elrand casually replied, brushing them off entirely.

You know, Elrand can actually be kinda mean sometimes. I could sort of see how the progression had gone down. He'd always been super into dragons, but ever since he'd managed to see a real one—which is to say, ever since he met me—he'd started straying further and further from conventional social graces. It felt like his filter had been particularly lacking recently, to a dangerous degree.

As I reflected on Elrand's devolution, he took the opportunity to validate all of my concerns. "Dora-chan! Gon! I missed you both so much!" he shouted as he charged toward the dragons.

I didn't know *what* he was thinking, but I knew how he was coming across: like a lunatic degenerate. I frantically jumped in front of him and spread my arms, blocking his path.

"Wh-What are you doing, Mukohda?! Why are you getting in my way?!" Elrand wailed.

"That should be super obvious!" I shouted back. "Have you already forgotten what happened back in Karelina?!"

Even if you've forgotten, I remember perfectly well! It's filed in the "never forget" corner of my long-term memory!

"Ugh! Well, that was then, and this is now!" Elrand shot back—nonsensically, if you ask me. "They've been here in the capital this whole time, but I haven't gotten to see them at *all*! They kept being occupied by nonsense like *guard duty* and whatnot, and somehow things lined up so that I never, *ever* ran into them! Do you realize how torturous it is to be so close to them, yet so far away?!"

Elrand's little speech felt very reminiscent of the sort of thing a card-carrying pervert would say to justify their indiscretions—"You could *never* understand how hard it is to live with these urges!"—but, like...it wasn't that the universe was conspiring against him, or anything. The truth was very simple: Dora-chan and Gon had flown away because they didn't want to be around him.

"They were just avoiding you, that's all. Take the hint already," I muttered under my breath. After how everything had gone down that one time in Karelina, it couldn't have been *that* hard for him to recognize the reality of the situation, surely? Any reasonable person would have been able to figure it out. But regardless, that wasn't even the biggest issue here. "And were you trying to *hug* them a moment ago? *Why*? How could that possibly be okay?"

I knew what I'd seen. There was no other way to interpret the way he's spread his arms: He had fully intended to hug the dragons.

"Why not?! Just a little! What's the problem?!" Elrand countered.

"Just a little"? Seriously? "The *problem* is that they don't *want* it, obviously!" I shouted, spinning around to look at the dragons as I did so. Unsurprisingly, they both looked *deeply* disgusted and nodded rapidly in agreement.

"Wh-What?! *Nooo!*" Elrand wailed. "*Why*, though?! How could

they not want to be around me when I love them so, so much?!"

"Okay, see, it's exactly stuff like this. That was *really* creepy," I said. I hadn't meant to be that blunt, but it had sort of slipped out.

"*Creepy?!* How could you say that, Mukohda?! That's so meeean!" Elrand moaned as he dropped to his hands and knees, crawling along the floor. Now he was acting both creepy *and* pathetic. I clearly wasn't the only one who thought so either, judging by how put off all the guild employees who happened to be nearby looked. They hurried off to do their work somewhere else, presumably in the hopes of not having to deal with him.

My familiars and I were left alone with Elrand, and frankly, I had *no* clue what to do about him...which made the arrival of a certain someone who immediately kicked him up to his feet all the more welcome.

"I take my eyes off you for *one* second, and look what happens! Back to work, this instant!"

"Wha— Hey! Cut it out, Moira! I haven't even gotten to touch Dora-chan and Gon yet! Wait, no! Don't take me away from them! Dora-chan! Goooooon!"

And just like that, Moira and Elrand were off, the former bodily dragging the latter. I raised a hand in a gesture of quiet thanks to her.

Before long, the guild's workers returned to the storehouse. I asked where I should put the leviathan's head, and brought it out from my Item Box at the location they showed me. Then, at Dora-chan and Gon's *emphatic* insistence, we left the guild as quickly as our legs could carry us.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Well then, today, we go out on the hunt."

"Yes, that sounds wonderful! We've little else to do with the day, after all."

《Sounds good to me! That guy said we didn't have to bother going back to the guild yesterday, after all.》

《Huntiiing!》

The day had only just begun, and from the way my familiars were talking, you'd think our plans had been set in stone for ages.

"This again?" I sighed. "I mean, sure, we don't have any plans today, but we just went hunting right before the leviathan project kicked off, right? You took down a bunch of dragon turtles! Weren't those big enough prey for a good long while? I wanna take it easy today!"

I'd been sitting down and enjoying a nice after-breakfast cup of coffee when they started pestering me to take them out hunting. It really ruined the relaxing atmosphere, honestly—though as long as I'm being honest, I guess I have to admit that I had also seen Fel's proposal coming from a mile away. In fact, I'd known it would turn out like this the moment it became clear that our schedule for the day was empty.

We'd visited the Adventurer's guild the day before, and frankly, it hadn't gone well. Elrand had gone berserk the moment he'd seen Gon and Dora-chan, trying to hug them and making himself look like a total freak in the process. He'd *really* flown off the handle lately.

Anyway, later that night, Willem—who'd been holed up in the guild for quite some time—finally made an appearance at my rented house again. He'd told me that they had the butchering of the leviathan's head well under control, and that I wouldn't need to stop by the guild until it was done. Or rather, he'd said that I *shouldn't* stop by the guild, since if I showed up, it would cause the work to grind to a halt.

I'd dropped the head off the day before, so I didn't see any particularly good reason for us to stick around either. That said, I *did* feel a little irked by the fact that I was being treated like a liability. I *was* technically the client here, after all. I also had the presence of mind to admit that a certain dragon lover with no sense of restraint was the one who was really at fault, though.

So, long story short, we ended up with a block of free time on our hands from now until the head had been fully processed. We *didn't* have much of anything to do, sure, but I'd been tagging along with my familiars' overactive antics for so long that I had to seize the opportunity to take it easy whenever I had even a hint of a chance. I

welcomed boredom, if that was what it took to let me sit still for a full afternoon.

Unfortunately, however, I was alone in that opinion.

"'Take it easy'? Ridiculous. I have no intention of boring myself for no good cause."

"I got more than enough sleep to last me for quite some time in the dungeon before we met, my liege!"

《Nothing's more fun than getting out there and moving around, right?》

《Sui thinks going hunting sounds fun too!》

Honestly, this is exactly what I meant about you guys being too active! I'm an indoorsy sort of guy at heart, and I need a house day every once in a while.

"Is there *anything* I can say to convince you to just relax today?" I asked, giving my familiars a very tired stare.

"No."

"There is not!"

《Same over here.》

《Sui too!》

They didn't mince their words at all. I hung my head, resigned to the inevitable.

"It is time. Let us be off!" Fel said. He and the rest of my familiars hustled me out the door as quickly as they could.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

I soon found myself walking along the streets of the capital with my familiars at my side.

"So, where are you planning on taking us hunting this time? And come to think of it, are we even going in the right direction?" I asked.

Previously, we'd usually gone in and out of the capital's large front gate—in fact, it was the only one we'd used so far. This time, however, we were walking in the opposite direction, and it sure seemed like Fel was leading us that way on purpose.

"We are," Fel replied. **"The rear gate will be more**

convenient for the sake of our destination today."

"Okaaay. I didn't even know there *was* a gate back there, actually."

"We investigated the matter in advance, rest assured. Did we not, Gon?"

"Quite, yes! Dora and I made good use of the time we spent up in the skies on guard duty. Today's hunting ground is a location I made a note of after we stumbled across it during our watch."

Guess they were keeping a pretty close eye on the ground while they were up there. Also, I guess that makes two hunting grounds in a row that Gon's tipped us off about. He took us to the dragon turtles' territory as well, after all.

《Heh heh! Gon's already told me all about it, and it sounds like we're in for a hell of a fun time today!》 declared Dora-chan, who was somersaulting excitedly through the air.

Dora-chan thinks this place is going to be fun? And it has him this *hyped up...? Oh, I've got a* really *bad feeling about where this is going.*

《We're going somewhere fun?》 Sui asked.

《We sure are!》 Dora-chan said. 《Apparently, there're a buncha monsters that looked an *awful* lot like real nasty earth dragons hanging around there! A huge variety of 'em too—big ones, small ones, whole groups of 'em, you name it. It's gonna be crazy!》

《Oh, yaaay! Sui'll get to pew-pew a bunch of monsters!》

《You know it! It's gonna be a hunt for the ages!》

Dora-chan and Sui made their conversation sound like a casual, happy little chat...but boy, was its content disturbing from my perspective. *Monsters that look like "real nasty earth dragons"? With big variations in size, and that travel in packs? That sounds like a sort of creature I'd rather have nothing to do with, thanks!* I scowled as conspicuously as I possibly could, but nobody bothered to comment on it.

"Yes, it truly does seem like an amusing place," Gon said. "It's not quite like any other hunting ground I've been to before. I suspect you might have been there in the past, though, haven't you, Fel?"

"A hunting ground different from anything you've seen

before, you say?" Fel repeated, intrigued.

"Indeed! You can just barely see it from here, in fact. Do you see that mountain, off in the distance? A basin lies near its peak..."

"A basin atop a mountain...? Oh! *There!*" Fel exclaimed. Gon's explanation had apparently helped him put two and two together. **"Yes, that *could* be an interesting hunting ground indeed!"**

"The only fly in the ointment being that I don't believe much of the meat will be palatable," Gon noted.

"True. Edible though it may be, its flavor was hardly of passing quality. A shame."

"But you've no complaints about its worth as a hunting ground, I'm sure?"

"It is unique. That I will grant you."

Oh boy. There's another keyword I would've rather not have heard. What could "unique" possibly mean in this context...?

I sharpened the glare that I was shooting at Fel and Gon. "Sorry to butt in when the conversation's just getting exciting, but what do you mean, 'unique'? You're talking about the area we're going to, right?" I asked.

"Quite," Fel said. **"You will understand when we arrive, but in short, a forest lies within a mountaintop basin. That forest is populated with monsters that are not often encountered in this region."**

"Yes, and though those monsters come in all shapes and sizes, they share certain unique characteristics! It quite reminds me of a hunting ground we visited in the past, my liege—the one atop a towering plateau that I flew us to? It was full of unique monsters as well, if you recall."

"Oh, yes, that place was full of odd varieties as well—though the monsters we shall face today are unique in a different sense."

A towering plateau that Gon flew us to...? Unique, variant monsters...? Ugh... That's a migraine coming on, all right...

I *really* didn't want to remember the place they were talking about, but it was permanently etched into my memory. I could never

forget The Heavens' Woodland, more properly known as Ouranos.

"Okay! Bad plan. Let's do something else," I said.

"What? It is far too late to turn back," Fel countered.

"You can't be serious, my liege!"

《Right?! And hey, maybe you'll end up having fun when we get there! You never know!》

《Masteeer, let's gooo!》

"First off, I can *guarantee* that I'm not gonna have any fun at all, Dora-chan. *Absolutely* no way, no how! If this place is actually anything like Ouranos, there's *no* chance! Do you have any idea how traumatic my memories of that place are?!" *I got jumped by a wild behemoth and my magic stove got totaled! It was a* complete *disaster!*

"Enough of your petulant whining! We shall pass through the gate, then fly on Gon's back to our destination. I will not hear another word of complaint from you!" Fel insisted. He planted his head on my back and pushed me forward, propelling me through the gate and out of the capital before I knew it. Then, the moment we were outside...

"The time has come, Gon."

"Very well!"

"Dora, Sui, climb aboard."

《Hell yeah!》

《Okaaay!》

"And you as well. Hurry!"

Fel grabbed me by my collar and tossed me right up onto Gon.

"Gaaah!" I yelped, then landed on Gon's back with a mighty *fwump*!

"We are all aboard!"

"Very good. In that case, hold on tight!"

Gon flapped his wings, and just like that, we were off.

"Wait, no! I said no! If this place is even close to being on Ouranos's level, I don't wanna go anywhere near it! *Noooooo!*"

My wail echoed fruitlessly through the open sky as we sailed off

toward the mountaintop.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"So, uhh," I said as I gaped at our surroundings, "are we *sure* we're on a mountaintop right now?"

"Indeed we are, my liege!" Gon replied. "You saw the mountain as I ascended above it, did you not?"

I mean, I did, yeah, but still... "It's just really hard to believe that a forest like *this* could exist in a place like *that*, that's all," I muttered as I gazed vacantly at my surroundings.

It was trees, trees, and more trees, as far as the eye could see. The woods that I'd been brought to for the sake of my familiars' hunting trip were so impressive, I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing, considering they were located in the caldera at the top of a huge mountain. Plus, the scale of the woods wasn't even the most surprising thing about them.

"This doesn't really feel like a *normal* forest, does it?" I commented.

There were a weird amount of fernlike plants around, for one thing. The trees had oddly thick trunks as well, and the canopy of leaves that spread out from the branches up above was very thick. It sort of took me back to the illustrated books I'd read when I was a kid about dinosaurs in the Jurassic era, or whatever. I'd hadn't seen any plants like these since my arrival in this world.

The climate was sort of off as well. The weather in the capital hadn't been especially hot or cold. It was in a comfortable middle ground, like the sort of weather you got in the nicest parts of spring. As we approached the mountain, however, patches of snow had started appearing on the ground below us, and close to its summit, the slopes had been pure white. It wasn't that cold up on Gon's back thanks to a barrier he'd raised, but all those piled-up snowdrifts had had me worried that I'd made a mistake by not dressing a little warmer. That concern, as it turned out, couldn't possibly have been more backward. The woods we'd landed in were so hot and muggy, I could already feel myself breaking out in a sweat.

I could already see why Fel and Gon had compared this place to Ouranos. It certainly felt unique, and I had a bad feeling that I'd only scratched the surface of its strangeness so far. I gulped. I'd been to some pretty terrifyingly dangerous places, and it seemed I would soon have another to add to that list.

《Hey, Master, look! Aren't those leaves funny?》 Sui said as it stretched a tentacle out to prod at a nearby fernlike plant. The moment it touched a leaf, that leaf curled inward, withdrawing toward the plant's stem. Sui squealed with delight.

《The heck was that?! I wanna try!》 Dora-chan shouted. He rushed over to prod another of the fern's leaves, which curled inward as well. 《This is so cool!》

《Sui wants to touch more of them!》

It was a pretty amusing plant, I had to admit. It certainly seemed like the perfect toy to amuse Dora-chan and Sui, who spent a little while gasping and squealing as they watched the plant shrink away from their touch. Even I found myself feeling a little charmed...until I shook my head and snapped back to reality, that is.

"Nope, nope—this definitely isn't the sort of forest you'd take a relaxing stroll in," I reminded myself. "And, wait a minute...we didn't tell the Adventurer's guild where we were going! I didn't even leave a note this time! We flew off without a word! The guildmaster's gonna spend all night chewing me out again!" I moaned, my shoulders slumping dejectedly.

"I was wondering what you would choose to complain about this time," Fel jabbed.

"We're already here, my liege, so I'm afraid you'll have to resign yourself to the consequences," Gon added.

Is a little sympathy too much to ask for from you guys?

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

I jumped as I heard a rustling off in the distance, followed by some sort of snapping sound. "H-Hey, did you hear that? Are you sure we're okay out here?" I asked.

"It was just the sounds of the woods, my liege. There's no need

for you to be quite this frightened," Gon commented, sounding a little exasperated.

"Can you really blame me?! You're the ones who keep threatening my life!" I fired back as I carefully surveyed my surroundings.

《Heh heh heh!》 Dora-chan chuckled. 《Okay, but seriously, you're being even jumpier than usual this time! C'mon, you've got us here with you. What could go wrong?》

《Sui'll protect you, Master!》

"Oh, Sui, you're the only one who's always nice to me! Thank youuu! I'm counting on you!" I said as I hugged the slime, who was currently riding on Fel's back along with me.

"You never cease to impress, in a very particular way," Fel commented with a fed up sigh.

Excuse me? Rude!

"I hardly think we *threatened* you," Gon said, awkwardly scratching his cheek with a claw.

I'd ended up going out on the hunt alongside my familiars this time. I'd been planning on waiting somewhere while they went out and ran wild at first. Between dealing with the nerve-racking experience of sitting around on my own, or following them and confronting ultra-dangerous monsters face-to-face, I had decided that quietly waiting around with only my anxiety to keep me company was the lesser of two evils by at least a slight margin. I'd known that Fel's and Gon's barriers would keep me safe, after all.

When I had proposed that plan, however, Fel and Gon had asked me if I was *really* sure about it. I asked them why I wouldn't be, and they went on to present a laundry list of reasons—**"The monsters in this vicinity tend to be carnivorous,"** "They're hardly the smartest, but they tend to be quite ferocious," **"We will raise barriers, of course, and you will not be *eaten*, even in the worst of cases,"** "But—and please don't take offense, my liege—they're likely to see you as easy prey and gather up en masse to attempt to devour you," and **"Though we will ensure they cannot touch you, we cannot prevent them from warring with one another once they have clustered in your vicinity."**

And that was just *part* of their extended explanation.

Excuse me, what*? That's terrifying!* I could practically feel the color draining from my face.

"We have learned to expect your cowardice. The question seemed worth raising, considering," Fel said, his voice sounding small and far off in the distance from the isolated panic-realm I'd sequestered my mind in. **"You will not be harmed, though. Our barriers will see to that."**

"True, true! Our barriers won't be broken easily. Come what may, at the bare minimum, you won't be made a meal of!" Gon added.

"Changed my mind! I'll go! Take me along!" I frantically shouted.

Sure, the barriers would have kept me *physically* safe. I wouldn't have *died* or anything. Having to watch a bunch of monsters eat one another around me, though? That sounded like a scene straight out of hell, and I wanted no part of it!

I happen to like being able to sleep at night! That's a big ol' "no thank-you" to that *sort of trauma from me!*

I was a little dejected to think that as far as Fel and Gon were concerned, nothing I went through mattered in the slightest as long as I was technically alive and uneaten by the end of it. Still, for the sake of my own mental stability, I decided to follow along with them after all. The five of us struck out into the dark, dense woodland.

《Sui doesn't see any monsters yet,》 Sui grumbled. It sounded a little bored.

《Are you two *sure* the monsters in these woods are raring for a fight?》 Dora-chan asked Fel and Gon.

"What's the problem if they aren't? If no monsters turn up, then I'd say it's our lucky day! In fact, if we keep walking for a while longer and nothing happens at all, why don't we just write this trip off and head home? Feels like a good plan to me!" I said. I couldn't help but indulge in a little wishful thinking and imagine not encountering any bloodthirsty beasties at all.

"Hmph! I think not. Moreover, they have already arrived, albeit only trifling weaklings," Fel said.

"So they have! Small ones that hunt in packs, it seems. A scant few of their number have come to observe us," Gon added.

I jumped with shock, then quickly glanced around the area. Sui and Dora-chan looked around as well, though they seemed more excited than alarmed. A moment later, I heard the rustling of leaves as a group of little *somethings* popped their way out of the foliage.

《Oooh, what're those? Lizards?》 Sui asked.

The monsters were quite small, and there were three of them in total. I was shocked—not by their size, but rather, their appearance.

"Huh? *Dinosaurs?* Wait, but *how*?"

They were a trio of little bipedal dinosaurs. I couldn't see them as anything else. That was pretty shocking, sure, but their size made it sort of hard to be *scared* of them. For better or for worse, I'd seen tons of monsters in this world that were way scarier than a few little dinos. They'd have to be a lot bigger and a lot more vicious to make me run away in fright.

Weird, though. I feel like I've seen dinosaurs just like them somewhere before... Were they in a book, maybe? Or on a nature show on TV?

I couldn't quite remember, but one way or another, compared to the enormous horrors this world usually threw at me, this didn't feel like such a big deal. They looked like dinosaurs, yeah, but they only came up to about my waist, and the way they were cocking their heads from one side to the other as they looked at us struck me as more funny than menacing. If anything, they were actually a little cute. Sui must have thought so too, because the slime had hopped out of my arms and was heading right toward them.

《Hi, lizards! Let's be friends!》 Sui said, reaching toward the dinos with a tentacle. It was a really heartwarming scene, and I found myself smiling...

"Beware. Even the small ones are predators," Fel commented offhandedly.

Chomp!

...and then the next thing I knew, one of the little dinos had *bitten* Sui's tentacle. The other two took that as their sign to attack and leaped forward, biting into the slime's bulbous body.

"Agggh, no! *Suiii!*"





《Boo! You're not gonna beat Sui that easy! Take this!》 Sui said. Barely a moment later, all three of the dinos reeled back and let out horrible, screeching shrieks of pain. They let go of Sui immediately and fell to the ground, their limbs flailing wildly.

《Yikes!》 Dora-chan grunted.

"I see. It secreted acid into them," Fel said.

"Gruesome, but effective indeed. I can think of few attacks more assured to finish off a foe," Gon noted as he watched the dinosaurs dissolve from the inside out.

《Hee hee! That's right! Sui's super strong!》 the slime declared with a proud little dance-like wiggle.

"Sui..." I muttered. I was already feeling drained.

"Do not let your guards down. The main force approaches," Fel warned.

"Wait, what main force?"

"Those three were merely a patrol, my liege," Gon explained.

"Huh? Wait, so that means..."

"They are here. They may be weak, but their numbers are great. Dora, Sui, do what you can to eliminate them on your own!"

《Can't say I like getting sicced on the small fry, but eh, what the hell! Let's rumble!》

《Yeaaah! Sui'll work hard and beat them all up!》

I could hear a thudding noise off in the distance—the sound of countless little dinosaur feet charging right at us. A moment later, the hoard arrived.

"Holy *crap*, that's a lot of them!" I yelped. Seeing the whole cluster of them all at once also finally helped me make the connection and remember where I'd seen them before. "Wait, I know those things! I saw them in a movie once! They're small, but really nasty, like land-bound piranhas!"

Shouting, it turned out, was probably a mistake. A group of dinos broke off from the main pack and charged straight at me.

"*Gah!* No, not this way! Not this way!"

《No bullying Master! Take this!》

Pew pew pew!

《Can’t let you hog all the glory, Sui! I’m getting in on this! Hiyah!》

Shwick shwick shwick!

The air was quickly filled with acid bullets courtesy of Sui and pillars of magic ice courtesy of Dora-chan.

“Oh—Dora, Sui? You would do well to not draw too close to them,” Gon said.

Fwooosh!

《Whoa, yikes!》

“Yes, as you can see, they breathe fire.”

《You could’ve friggin’ said so earlier, Gon!》

“Yes, yes, my apologies. Let that warning carry forward—many of the monsters in this vicinity are capable of it.”

《Oh, really? That was a pretty wimpy fireball compared to mine, though! I’mma show them what real fire breath looks like!》

FWOOOOOOSH!

Dora-chan let out such a violent burst of pseudo-dragon fire, it almost seemed like he was trying to immolate all of the little dinosaurs at once.

“Whoa! Too far, Dora-chan! You’re gonna set the forest on fire!” *And while I’m at it...* “Why the *heck* do the dinosaurs in this world breathe *fire*, of all things?!”

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

《Heh heh! We beat up aaall of them!》

《Buncha wimps, seriously! We didn’t break a sweat!》

Sui and Dora-chan had made such short work of the pack of small dinosaurs, it felt like they’d barely even qualified as a warm-up.

“Naturally. I would expect no less from the two of you,” Fel commented.

“We’ll need to find much mightier foes for them to be a match for you,” Gon said.

I’m sorry, really? They wiped out a whole horde of piranha-dinos in the blink of an eye, and that’s your reaction...? And fire-breathing

ones, at that?

It really didn't help that the dinosaurs' remains had been left scattered *all* around the vicinity. It was pretty gruesome. "I'm glad you took care of them and all, but we're not gonna get any materials out of these things, are we...?" I said as I glanced over their charred, partially melted corpses.

"And why would that be an issue? Their meat is unpalatable, regardless," Fel replied. **"Moreover, carrying such petty prey back with us would hardly be worth the effort, even if they were whole."**

"If you're hoping to secure materials, my liege, you'd do far better aiming for larger prey!" Gon noted.

I almost gave in and left the dinosaur corpses behind, but at the last second, I changed my mind again. Fel and Gon were going on and on about how they weren't a big deal, sure, but could I *really* trust their perspectives? The dinosaurs seemed pretty rare, after all. *I'd* certainly never heard of monsters like them before.

If Fel and Gon were right, and this place really was home to strange and rare monster breeds like Ouranos had been, then it seemed *very* likely that they would be the sort of monsters that the guild would only see cross their butcher's workbench every whatever-hundred years. In other words, the tiny dinosaurs that Fel and Gon were so eager to dismiss could be worth an awful lot to the Adventurer's guild, if only for the sake of studying them. I remembered Willem offhandedly mentioning something to that effect when I had brought him the monsters we'd found in Ouranos, which was probably why he'd bought all of them, no exceptions.

Considering all that, I decided to snap up at least a few of the dino corpses before we went along on our way. Needless to say, I went for the relatively unmutilated ones.

"What exactly do you hope to accomplish by carrying such petty weaklings with you?" Fel grumbled.

"I mean, I know you and Gon don't think they're anything special, but quick question: Have any humans even *been* here? Like, at all?" I asked, giving Fel and Gon an appraising glance.

"I neither know nor care," Fel said.

"Nor I, I'm afraid," Gon added.

"Of course not," I groaned. They hadn't thought any of this through at all, so I took a moment to explain everything I'd been considering to them. "So, long story short, monsters in a place that people can't get to like this would probably be really valuable to the Adventurer's guild, strong or not!"

"I-Is that so? Do as you will, then," Fel conceded.

"Y-Yes, quite," Gon agreed. "No need to refrain from collecting them on our behalf, my liege."

Great—I won't, then.

That settled my course of action: I'd be picking up any monsters that we killed, in the hopes that the guild would be able to put them to good use. That, hopefully, would spare me from another of Willem's patented lectures. Actually, if I'm being honest, *that* was my biggest objective.

I just hope that bringing him some new and compelling monster materials to look into will be enough to spare me his wrath.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"*Agggh!* Would you please *do something*, already?!"

"Be silent! I cannot concentrate on the battle with your ceaseless blathering in the background!"

"Fear not, my liege! My barrier won't be broken that easily!"

《Yeah, seriously! We're fighting over here, so shut'cher trap and wait a minute!》

《Look how strong Sui is! Taaake this!》

Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui were all currently fighting their hardest. For all their complaints about my distracting them, it didn't seem to be preventing them from enjoying the battle at all. It also didn't do anything to stop the monsters that were trying *their* hardest to eat me for lunch!

Sure, Gon's barrier's keeping me safe, but it's not stopping them from trying *to kill me, and all those gnashing teeth are really doing a number on my nerves! Why're they even this aggressive in the first place?!*

"Just finish up quick and help me, *please*!" I shouted, shrinking farther into the ball I'd curled myself up into.

After we had dealt with the aftermath of our encounter with the little dinosaurs, we had once again set off into the woods. It had barely taken any time at all for another dinosaur to make an appearance—the first one that Fel had decided was worth his time to take on. It was big enough that I had to crane my neck to look up at it, with a spiked frill-like sort of thing running along its neck, and a pair of red eyes that were glaring straight at us. It let out a snort, then opened up its mouth to reveal a row of extremely sharp, pointed teeth.

Weirdly, I had a feeling that I'd seen the monster before. I had a really clear image of something just like it turning up in a movie I'd seen, and while I was mulling that over, it let out a screech that was *also* very much like the one the movie dinosaur had made—and that I really couldn't describe in words in any other way—then charged straight at us, moving at a way faster clip than I'd expected it to be capable of.

"Heh. Finally, worthy prey! I shall deal with this creature," Fel declared, stepping forward to take the dino on. I knew that he'd be perfectly fine, so I withdrew a short distance away from the battlefield with my other familiars.

I appraised the monster, and learned that it was apparently called an acrocanthosaurus. It was carnivorous, of course, and I was once again surprised to learn that it could apparently breathe fire—but this time, that was just the start.

"Hey, watch out! That thing's supposed to spit acid!" I shouted.

"Hmph! Mere acid would not harm me in the slightest!" Fel shouted back as he dodged around the acrocanthosaurus, which was lashing out repeatedly to bite at him

Its movements were swift and sharp, but nowhere near impressive enough to keep up with Fel's agility. That must have frustrated it, because a moment later, the acrocanthosaurus raised its head and opened its mouth wide. It was obviously about to spit something.

"As I said before, acid will have no effect on me—and

while you may be swift to the creatures that live here, to me, your movements are so sluggish you might as well be standing still."

Fel brought a foreleg down before him, letting loose what I'd come to see as his signature move: Rending Claws. The attack struck the acrocanthosaurus right in its chest, cleaving straight through it. The dinosaur's head fell to the ground, and just like that, the battle was over.

For a moment, at least, peace had returned to the forest. The sound of Fel's battle, however, seemed to have attracted quite a bit of attention, and before I knew it, dinosaurs started pouring in from all directions. Worse still, I could tell at a glance that every one of them was as nasty and vicious as could be. The local wildlife had thrown down the gauntlet, and there was no chance it would end in anything other than a no-holds-barred brawl.

Fel ended up squaring off against one of the biggest dinos of the bunch. A quick appraisal identified it as a giganotosaurus, and according to its description, it could both breathe fire and bite through pure scarletite.

Gon's dinosaur, meanwhile, I knew the name of before I even appraised it: It was the tyrant lizard itself, a tyrannosaurus rex. My appraisal did, however, inform me that unlike the t-rexes I knew about, this one could breathe fire and bite through adamantite. Oh, and its claws carried a venom strong enough to inflict instant death.

Dora-chan was fighting a dinosaur called a carcharodontosaurus, and its appraisal results were much the same as the t-rex's in that it could breathe fire and bite through adamantite. Instead of venomous claws, however, its claws could apparently slice through adamantite as well.

Finally, Sui was taking on a carnotaurus. It was a bit smaller than the dinosaurs my other familiars were fighting, but it had a pair of horns on its head and was fast enough on its feet that I had a feeling it rivaled the acrocanthosaurus in terms of sheer agility. Watching something *that* fast and deadly looking chase Sui around nearly gave me a fear-induced heart attack. Its appraisal text told me that it could breathe fire, bite through adamantite, and had an

incredible capacity for running that ensured no prey would ever escape it.

While my familiars were fighting all those prehistoric terrors, *I* was stuck in the middle of it all, hoping against hope that they'd wrap it up quickly. The other dinosaurs, however, weren't interested in waiting for their turns and decided to attack *me* instead. The ones that went after me were much smaller than the ones my familiars were locked in pitched battle with, but they still looked stupidly dangerous. The fact that they charged me en masse the second they laid eyes on me was all the proof I needed of that!

I was standing in a barrier, so none of the dinosaurs had actually been able to touch me, but they *were* snapping and gnashing their horrible, toothy jaws at me with everything they had. That wasn't too surprising once I'd appraised them. I was facing down a pack of notoriously belligerent velociraptors.

Anyway, that brings us back to the present moment...

Chomp, chomp, chomp!

"*Gaaah!* Aren't you guys done yet?!"

Fwooosh!

"Even these ones breathe fire?! Seriously?!"

No amount of flinching back was enough when it came to an onslaught like this. And, more to the point, I had a few thoughts about this situation on the whole.

"Okay, I know this is a different world and all, but there's something *seriously* screwed up with these dinosaurs! Hey, Demiurge! You made this world, didn't you?! Why the *hell* did you put fire-breathing dinosaurs in it?!" I shouted, complaining to the world's creator deity, who happened to be an acquaintance of mine, mostly on reflex.

< Oh! Well, yes, I suppose I might have gotten a touch carried away with them, > a voice in my head immediately replied. *< I was inspired by the dinosaurs from your world, you see, but then I thought, 'Why not give them my own personal touch?' You know, add a splash of originality! >*

"Awfully casual about populating your world with vicious death lizards, aren't you?! And why would they need a splash of

originality?! They're *dinosaurs*!"

< To be completely honest, I'd actually entirely forgotten that there were any left alive at all! How interesting! >

"You *forgot*?!"

< You'd be surprised how easy it can be, sometimes! And considering you're accompanied by two of this world's mightiest beasts, I'm sure you'll make it out just fine. >

"That is *so* not the point here!"

< Oh, whoops! Duty calls, but I'm sure you see how it is now. Fare thee well! >

"Wha— Hey, Demiurge?! Demiuuuuuurge?!"

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Ugggh, that was terrifying..." I moaned. If I'd had a mirror handy to look at myself in, I had a funny feeling I'd look so tired and haggard you'd think I'd just gotten over a weeklong fever.

It had been a horrific experience, no two ways about it. I'd lost track of how many times I'd nearly wet myself. The dinosaurs that lived in the mountaintop basin were too scary for words. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui's attitudes, meanwhile, were the polar opposite of mine. *They* looked like they'd just finished up a satisfying walk in the park, and were chatting away about the dinosaurs they'd fought.

"Hah hah hah hah hah! Oh, how fun it is to trade blows with a foe willing to face you head-on! The first beast I vanquished was hardly worthy of note, but the second was both larger *and* possessed a bite strong enough to rival my own. Even I would have been in danger had it closed its jaws around me—though of course, such a thing could never be possible to begin with!"

"True indeed! Yours *was* the largest out of all of ours, Fel, but mine was a match for it in ferocity! It did not hesitate for a moment to assail an ancient dragon—in fact, it tried to *eat* me, of all things! It had remarkable mettle, truly. Lethal venom as well, apparently, but that would never have worked on me, of course. Gra hah hah hah!"

《Yeah, the ones you two were up against looked pretty nasty, but did you see mine?! I would've been seriously up a creek if it bit me, *and* its claws were crazy sharp to boot! I mean, if one of those had even *grazed* me, it would've opened me right up! Too bad I was way too fast for it to ever get the chance! Goes to show that no matter how strong of a bite you've got and how sharp your claws are, they're not worth squat if your enemy can just dodge 'em!》

《Sui's monster was super-duper strong too! It was reeeally fast, but Sui dodged like *this*, and like *this*, and then pew'd it and beat it! Sui's super strong too!》

Everyone was still riding the post-battle adrenaline rush, it seemed, while *I* was busy crashing, and hard. I just went around scooping up the dinosaur corpses as they did their little play-by-play post-battle review session. I ended up grabbing a decapitated acrocanthosaurus, a giganotosaurus that had had its gut torn open and all *sorts* of bits that I assumed were very important strewn across the nearby grass, a t-rex with a few very deep claw wounds and its head bitten *almost* all the way off, a carcharodontosaurus that had a brutal burn inside its mouth reaching all the way down to its throat, a carnotaurus that had had a hole melted clean through its torso, and, last but not least, an assortment of velociraptors that had all been split clean in half.

I did my best to not think about what I was doing while I collected them all. I really did...

Anyway, once that gruesome task was complete, we set off into the woods once more, this time (most of us) in the highest of spirits. We ran into one carnivorous dinosaur after another as we kept moving along, each of which was gleefully dispatched by one of my familiars.

That said, the human capacity for adaptability was once again proving itself terrifyingly potent. We'd been attacked by enough dinosaurs to make me want to stop and shout, "How many of these even *are* there?!" to the heavens, and over the course of those attacks, I'd gotten so used to ducking for cover the second a new one arrived that it was basically second nature. I'd just done it a second beforehand, in fact, when Dora-chan and Sui jumped to

intercept a t-rex that charged straight at us.

Seriously, though, why are *there so many of these things? It sure looks like they've all been eating one another to survive, so maybe they were made to breed quickly enough for their populations to stay stable in this sort of environment? Not that I'd know what makes an ecosystem sustainable to begin with, I guess. And one way or another, the fact that some of them have been trying to go for* me *feels really uncalled for.*

《Hell yeah! Chalk up another win for us!》

《Yaaay! We beat it!》

Dora-chan and Sui, it seemed, had taken their newest prey down. I went over to collect the departed t-rex—I'd say what number it was, but the truth is, I'd lost count some time ago. Then, a moment later, I heard heavy, thudding footsteps off in the distance.

"It seems we have another challenger," Fel said.

"And I do believe it's *my* turn," Gon noted.

"Correct. And mine after."

And even the senior citizens are acting giddy as could be. Ugggh... Could we please *go home soon?*

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

We walked on and on until finally, we emerged in a grassy clearing where something truly remarkable awaited us.

"Holy *crap*, that's a huge one," I muttered under my breath.

The long-necked dinosaur before me was big enough that it made the giganotosaurus from before look like it had been a kid by comparison—and to top it off, there were *three* of them in total. I, however, had some very helpful insider information this time: Long-necked dinosaurs like those were all herbivores! I could rest easy this time...or at least, I thought I could until I watched one of the long-necked dinosaurs bend over to snatch a t-rex—which had been in the process of eating a smaller dinosaur—up off the ground with its jaws, right before my eyes.





"Wha?" I grunted. A fun fact about humans is that when we are greeted with the *truly* unexpected, we often find ourselves completely incapable of reacting. That was the state I'd found myself in, and I sort of just vacantly stared until something even *more* shocking followed the first surprise.

Instead of eating the t-rex, the long-necked dinosaur that had grabbed it dashed it against the ground. The t-rex slammed into the earth with an earsplitting thud, then lay there, not moving an inch. And *then*, yet *another* surprise: the long-necked dinosaur leaned in to start chowing down on the t-rex's corpse after all.

"Oh, *no* friggin' way!"

But no, seriously—hold the phone for just a second! Weren't dinos like that supposed to be herbivores?! Why's it snacking on a t-rex, of all things?!

"H-Hey, why's that thing *eating* a t-rex?!" I shouted, giving Fel's back a few solid slaps as I spoke.

"Because it is a meat eater, I am sure," Fel bluntly replied.

I mean, yeah*, I figured* that *part out!*

"I had thought they might still stand at the pinnacle of this place's food chain," Fel continued.

"As did I," Gon added. "They have always been, and still remain, this region's mightiest inhabitants."

《Hot *damn*, those're huge! Now *this* is gonna be a real fight!》 Dora-chan said.

《Wooow, so big!》 Sui chimed in.

Does that mean what I think it means? You guys are seriously taking those on? Those*?!*

I could tell that my familiars were already hyped up for battle, and I looked on in utter dismay for a moment...

"Ah."

...until suddenly, one of the long-necked dinosaurs looked *straight* at me. Our gazes met.

Oh. Welp. I'm dead.

I watched in what felt like slow motion as that long, long neck reached out toward me. Then, right before I would've been eaten whole, something pulled me away, sending me plopping to the

ground on my backside.

"Stand back," Fel said.

"This is a task for us, my liege," Gon agreed.

《Yeah, just sit back and wait a minute! We'll have a real biggun for you before you know it!》 Dora-chan declared.

《Sui'll fight super hard, Master!》 Sui added.

My four familiars stood at the ready, eager as could be to take down this region's long-necked apex predator.

"Ha ha ha..." I weakly laughed. *Why're these things carnivores? Dinosaurs like that are* absolutely *supposed to be herbivores, right? Herbivorous dinosaurs don't eat meat, and even carnivorous dinosaurs don't shoot fire out of their mouths! All of the dinosaurs on this mountain are* completely wrong*!*

How was I supposed to do anything *but* laugh, honestly? Well, laugh, and blame Demiurge, since this was definitely his fault.

"Seriously, Demiurge, why did you *make* this place?" I muttered under my breath. A moment later, a voice rang out in my mind once again.

< I just thought they were cool, to be perfectly honest! I'm sure you know how children in your world love to dream up 'the coolest dinosaur ever,' yes? Well, I must admit that I was rather youthful myself at the time, and was going through a phase where I'd convinced myself that 'bigger' meant 'more powerful,' with no exceptions. How very inexperienced I was! Ho ho ho ho ho! >

"Ho ho ho" yourself! This is so *not a laughing matter, and I know for a fact that you're brushing me off again!*

"Okay, look—I get the feeling that these dinosaurs don't exist anywhere other than here, and it sure doesn't seem like they're interested in leaving this place, but just think about what would happen if one of them *did* somehow, and found its way to a village! It'd be a bloodbath! What possessed you to make all these ridiculous monsters?" I said. Then, suddenly, a thought hit me and I jerked my head up with a start. "Hold on. I really don't want to consider this, Demiurge, but are there any *other* places with absurd monsters living in them? You didn't make any *more* crazy abominations like these, did you?"

A very, *very* long pause ensued.

< *Probably not.* >

"And why, exactly, did you have to spend *that* long thinking about it if the answer's just a 'probably'?"

< *A 'probably' is a 'probably'! Fare thee well!* >

"Hey, wait! That was just an 'I don't actually remember' sort of 'probably,' right, Demiurge? Right?! Demiuuuuuurge?!"

Chapter 8: The Dreariest of Dinners

Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui sat in a line in front of me, all of them looking very awkward. Nobody said a word.

My four familiars had worked in tandem to wipe the floor with the three long-necked dinosaurs we'd found in the clearing in the blink of an eye. *That* part wasn't the problem... I mean, okay, it was *sort of* a problem in a number of ways, but the dinos had attacked us first that time, so they'd had it coming. The *problem* had started when Fel declared that **"Out of all the monsters living in this area, these ones have the most acceptably palatable meat."**

"Ah yes, true. Their meat is a little tough, but not bad at all," Gon agreed.

Needless to say, the next thing I knew, everyone had been champing at the bit to hunt down more of them. They had all still been worked up from their battle, which made their enthusiasm harder to deal with than ever. The fact that the dinosaurs were so huge had made it easy to track another of them down as well, so we had ended up moving on to our next target without even a moment to rest. Before I knew it, the gluttonous quartet had hunted down four new long-necked dinosaurs to add to the initial three.

"What do you expect me to do with *seven* of these if their meat's only 'tough, but acceptable'?" I grumbled as I gathered up the spoils. "Oh, right! I guess I never appraised these ones."

I used my skill to take a look at the long-necked dinosaur's particulars.

【Supersaurus】

A monster endemic to a particular region that was modeled after a dinosaur native to the planet Earth. Ferocious carnivores with the

toughest skin out of all the creatures in the area they lived in. Their long, muscular necks enabled them to smash their prey against the ground with brutal efficiency. The apex predator of their native habitat. Extinct.

The info block my skill gave me seemed quite detailed this time, and I had to wonder if the conversation I'd had with Demiurge about the dinosaurs had something to do with that. I gave it a quick read through...then paused and cocked my head.

Wait. "The area they lived *in"? Like,* past *tense? Also, more importantly—*"extinct*"?!*

For a moment, it felt like time itself had stopped dead. I had most definitely just seen the supersauruses alive, well, and very much *not* extinct just a matter of minutes ago. Much to my displeasure, the logical conclusion that squared my skill's description with reality as I'd witnessed it was extremely easy to reach.

"So. Do you guys know why I'm mad at you right now?" I asked. I was pretty sure that Dora-chan and Sui knew that I *was* angry but couldn't figure out why, while Fel and Gon knew *exactly* what this was all about. "Fel, you can use Appraisal, so I think you could make a pretty well-educated guess! You too, Gon!"

"I, well..." Fel began before faltering immediately.

"Y-Yes! It appears that..." Gon said, trailing off just as quickly.

"I heard a yes in there! In that case, how about you explain it to Dora-chan and Sui?"

Fel and Gon both awkwardly broke eye contact with me.

《Yeah, seriously. What's the deal here? Bring us into the loop!》 Dora-chan said.

《Master's maaad! Tell us why, pleeease?》 Sui added.

"You see, err..." Fel stammered.

"The fact of the matter is..." Gon tried to explain, but was also unable to continue.

"Those long-necked dinosaurs you just killed were the last ones. They're extinct now," I explained.

《Wait... What?》 Dora-chan said, his mouth hanging open with shock.

《Huh?》 grunted Sui, who didn't seem to quite grasp the concept.

"They're extinct! Gone! Kaput! The species doesn't exist anymore! I know you probably don't understand what I mean, Sui, but imagine if you and every single other slime in the world just up and vanished. There wouldn't be any slimes like you left! Wouldn't that be awful?"

《Sui doesn't want that!》

"Right? And the thing is, that's exactly what's happened to these dinosaurs. You beat them all, and now there aren't any left anymore."

According to my appraisal results, the dinosaurs were endemic to this basin. In other words, you couldn't find them anywhere else. The seven supersauruses that my familiars had killed, clearly, had been the last ones left in the whole world.

"Extinct! You guys literally drove a species *extinct*!"

Species going extinct had been a *whole* problem back in my old world. After all, a species vanishing from its native environment could have serious effects on the ecosystem, and usually in a bad way. Considering the supersauruses were the basin's apex predators, the hyper-carnivorous madness that was the local food chain seemed like it could be thrown into even more chaos than ever thanks to their disappearance.

"And this is nothing new! You guys *always* overdo it like this!" I continued. It seemed my familiars could tell that I was *really* mad this time. They all looked rather chagrined. "Does the word 'restraint' mean nothing to you? Because it's super important! Having restraint's *always* for the best! But you never, *ever* even *try*!"

"I-I will admit that we did, perhaps, take our fun ever so slightly too far," Fel hedged. **"However, it was not an intentional choice on our part. It was momentum—a moment of excitement…"**

"Y-Yes, exactly. I see now that we've crossed a line, but who are we to resist our instincts?" Gon agreed.

《Y-Yeaaah, our bad. I thought we were just hunting like usual. Didn't think there'd be any extinctions involved,》 Dora-chan said.

《Sorry, Master,》 Sui apologized.

I'd really let them have it, and it seemed that I'd at least somewhat gotten through to them. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all appeared to be at least a little remorseful.

"And while I'm at it, Fel and Gon? You're the elders here! It's your responsibility to think these things through a little more, especially since you have the skills you need to figure this stuff out in advance."

Fel could appraise monsters, and sensing them at a distance was child's play for him. Gon, meanwhile, could fly up into the sky and survey the area with ease, not to mention having appraisal and sensory abilities as well, though not quite to the extent that Fel did. And of course, that wasn't even starting on the real root of the problem.

"And most of all, people call fenrirs and ancient dragons the ultimate apex predators for a really good reason! You *can't* let yourselves go all out like this!"

"I did no such thing."

"Nor I! If I'd gone all out, this whole basin and the mountain beneath it would be a stretch of barren wasteland."

"Shaddup!" I snapped. Fel and Gon snapped their mouths shut. "Even if you weren't going *all out* all out, when you hit the point where you're wiping out whole species, you've obviously gone too far! Being the strongest means you've *gotta* be conscious of how you use your power! You have to have restraint! Figure out what the appropriate amount of power is for any given situation, and don't go past it!"

I get that you're both hotheaded, but I also don't care! You cause problems like this every single time you get worked up over something, and it's an awful habit!

"As for you two, Dora-chan and Sui: Do your best to learn from the bad example that Fel and Gon set for you today! This is *not* the sort of behavior you should emulate when you grow up!" I continued.

《Like I'm not grown up already,》 Dora-chan grumbled. I pretended not to hear him.

"Fel and Gon, on the other hand, are already grown up, and I really wish you'd start acting like it! Just take a second to calm down before you decide what you're going to do, please! It'd be one thing if this was the first time..." I said, launching into a speech that dragged on for quite a while. I had quite a bit of resentment built up thanks to my familiars' habit of overdoing things, and it was all exploding out in the form of a full-blown lecture.

"Oh, enough of this! I tire of your ceaseless quibbling!" Fel eventually erupted.

"Quibbling, my foot!" I shouted back.

"What does it matter?! The beasts are slain, and nothing can be done to change that now!"

"How do *you* have any right to snap at *me*, Fel?!"

"I fully appreciate that what we've done today was less than ideal, my liege, but I must agree with Fel. There's no undoing what's been done," Gon chimed in.

"Oh, and now *you're* trying to brush this off too?!" I shouted. They'd looked a little repentant for a time, but before I knew it, the shameless expressions I was so used to had returned to their faces. "Were either of you even listening to me?! I sure hope you are now, because I'm not done yet..."

My lecture began all over again, but this time, it didn't land nearly as well. Fel and Gon were clearly both blowing me off—why should beings as powerful as *them* care about all of this petty stuff?—and around the time I happened to glance at the supersaurus corpse lying off to the side, the whole exercise started feeling pointless.

"Ugh. You know what? Whatever. We can't bring the supersauruses back to life. Extinct is extinct, like it or not..." I muttered. Fel and Gon responded with their own mutters about how it was "*finally* over," but oh, were they ever wrong about that. "Anyway, time for me to decide how I'll be punishing you for this one!"

"Wh-What?!"

"P-Punishment, my liege?!"

《What's that mean?!》

《'Punishing'?》

"We can work *that* out once we get home. We're going back to the capital!"

You know what? Sure, we drove the local apex predator extinct, but this place was a dinosaur-eat-dinosaur madhouse from the beginning. Having one species gone shouldn't make that *much of a difference. It'll be fine...probably.*

I did my best to reassure myself as I scooped up the last supersaurus and began the trip back to the capital.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

We arrived back at the capital, and touched down near the same rear gateway that we'd left through...where I found Willem waiting for me. His arms were crossed, and his scowl was intense.

Oooh boy. Here we go... Someone must've spotted Gon on the horizon and warned him so he could intercept us. What now?

"H-Hey! We're back," I said, doing my best not to look Willem in the eye as I spoke.

"So, can you tell me why I'm standing out here, Mukohda?"

Y-Yikes! Your tone of voice is freaking me out, Willem! "I'm, uhh, sorry," I replied.

"We've had this conversation before, you know?" Willem said. "I *expressly* told you to report in before you left town."

"I am so, *so* sorry!"

I really did feel bad about it. Sure, my familiars had rushed me out the door, but forgetting to drop by and let the guild know before I left had been a pretty big mistake and was totally on me.

Fortunately, I've got something for him that might make up for it! "But, umm, the place we went hunting this time turned out to be pretty unusual, and I brought a souvenir back for you! I think this'll work out well for the Adventurer's guild, in the long run," I said, keeping a very careful eye on the guildmaster to see if my offer was doing anything to offset his righteous fury.

"A *souvenir*?" Willem repeated.

"Right! I guess I should start by telling you about the place we ended up visiting..."

I gave Willem the short version of the story, telling him how we'd gone up to a mountaintop caldera where we'd found all sorts of dinosaurs to hunt. The further into the story I got, though, the paler Willem's face became.

"Again! You did it *agaaain*!" Willem wailed with such incredible pathos, I almost expected him to fall writhing to the ground. His shoulders shook with emotion. I asked him what he meant, and eventually, he collected himself enough to clarify. "There's a kids' book called *The Adventures of Hayden*. It's a collection of tall tales that just about any kid who grew up in an environment where they could get their hands on books would've read at one point or another. You know, full of the sort of stories that they read to kids in church to help 'em learn their letters. Anyway, all those plants and monsters you described sound *exactly* like ones that show up in that book. Nobody really knows when *The Adventures of Hayden* was written anymore, but it's broadly known that it's a flight of fancy—pure fiction from start to finish. Or at least, it was until *now*, anyway!"

Oh. You know, I had a feeling that not many people had been up on that mountain...but it was literally *something out of a storybook? I have a terrible feeling that this is about to get complicated.*

Hearing that I'd been to an uncharted locale no one had ever visited and fought monsters no one had ever heard of probably wouldn't have been too hard of a pill for Willem to swallow, considering our history. Hearing that I'd gone to a place described in presumably fictional storybooks and fought monsters straight from the pages of those fantastical tales, however... Well, let's just say that considering how it would land with him made me shiver.

"I'll be taking a *long, hard* look at the evidence you brought back," Willem continued. "I'll need to loop the higher-ups in on this too—this is something they'll need to make a judgment call on, no doubt about it. There's not a chance I'm doing all that alone, so you'll be coming with me to the guild to explain yourself. *Now*."

"Okay..." I weakly moaned.

And so I was escorted to the capital's Adventurer's guild, in the same sense that criminals were "escorted" to prison. My familiars,

meanwhile, acted perfectly innocent as they followed along behind me.

You four do know that this is all your *fault, right?!*

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

Willem, the adventurer guildmaster of Karelina, had dragged me along with him to meet with Bram, the capital's guildmaster (plus the assorted guild bigwigs who worked with him). Willem quickly filled the higher-ups in on what I'd told him, and the higher-ups went white as sheets before bringing me out to the capital guild's massive storehouse.

The butchering of the leviathan was nearly complete, and while it seemed that they only had a few little things left to finish up, the single most troublesome person I knew, Elrand, was unsurprisingly still around. He seemed to realize that something was up the moment I and the grim-faced guild officials stepped into the storehouse, and he excitedly trotted over, apparently to greet us. He probably would have gone through with it, circumstances and social niceties be damned, if it weren't for the fact that Moira—who was stuck to him like glue—gave him a solid whack upside the head the moment he made his move, shutting him up before he could even get started.

At that particular moment, however, Elrand was the least of my troubles. I was way more scared of the higher-ups and Willem, all of whom were currently silent as the grave...

"Well? Let's see them," Willem said with a very stern scowl.

"Right!" I yelped. "Oh—y-you mean, *all* of them?"

"All of them," Willem confirmed.

"The thing is, I'm, umm, not sure they'd all fit in here."

"Then start by bringing out as many as you can."

Eeek! Willem looked pretty intimidating even on a good day, and seeing him with a glare like *that* on his face was downright terrifying.

"O-Okay then, I'll start with one of each species," I said. I started pulling dinosaurs out of my Item Box, one after another.

A very, *very* long moment of silence followed. Willem and the bigwigs gawked at the dinosaur corpses in a state of dumbstruck paralysis. The whole storehouse wasn't deathly silent, to be clear—a certain individual was letting out a *very* disconcertingly bizarre, protracted bellow in the background—but I decided to pretend that it was perfectly quiet anyway.

More importantly...

I kept my eyes fixed on the floor, only moving them to occasionally glance at the guild officials and judge their reactions.

Could one of you say something*, please? This silence is killing me! My anxiety levels are really spiking over here! Say something! Anything!*

After far more time than I personally would've liked, I heard one of the bigwigs sigh.

"First a leviathan, and now this...?" one of them muttered.

"It seems he's set on dropping one problem after another on our doorstep."

"Hah hah—so these things were real all along! Who knew...?"

"Words fail me."

"Frankly, I would have preferred to never see them at all..."

All five of them had been left clutching their heads in their hands. Willem had pressed a hand to his forehead as well, and was muttering something to the tune of "He's seriously never going to learn to restrain himself, is he?" The prevailing mood was so grim it would've felt like I was attending a wake, if it hadn't been for you-know-who, whose energy level couldn't have been more at odds with everyone else's.

"C-Could it be? Are these *new species of dragons*?! Are they really?!" Elrand exclaimed as he frantically shook off Moira's attempts to hold him in check, then sprinted across the storehouse to the pile of dinosaur corpses. He'd started patting and prodding the deceased monsters before I knew it, already conducting a thorough external examination of them. He was, as ever, one of the most profoundly free spirits I'd ever seen.

"Not exactly, no," I said. "They're actually dinosaurs, not dragons... But then again, they're not *exactly* like the dinosaurs I

know and I guess they did have some dragon-like traits, so that might not be *totally* wrong, strictly speaking?"

"Oh, *joyous* day! I knew it, I just *knew* it!" Elrand bellowed. He started dancing around like a lunatic, which wasn't doing my impression of him any favors. He really couldn't have looked more like a crazed degenerate. "And there are so many different kinds! Why, this one looks just like an earth dragon!" he continued as he leaned in so close to a t-rex corpse, I almost thought he was going to nuzzle it with his cheek. "Oh, but now that I've touched it, its skin doesn't feel like an earth dragon's at all! And those teeth—they're completely different too! It's abundantly clear that despite the superficial similarities, this really *is* an entirely different species!"

Unfortunately for Elrand, his fetishistic ravings could only go uninterrupted for so long.

"That is *enough*, you fool!"

With a truly mighty *thwap*, Moira smacked Elrand upside the head and dragged him back to where he'd been standing when I first entered the room.

The capital's guildmaster, Bram, sighed dramatically. "Not a minute passes that I don't wish that maniac would pack up and return to his own guild, but alas, that's not an option just yet," he grumbled.

Wh-Whoa, harsh! I mean, don't get me wrong, he's absolutely a freak and I completely *get where you're coming from, but I don't think that the head of a guild should be talking that way about a guy who runs a branch of your own organization! Especially when that branch is in a dungeon city!*

"In any case, we'll be purchasing all of these, Mukohda," Bram continued. "Missing this opportunity simply isn't an option."

Considering they're basically a fairy tale made flesh thanks to The Adventures of Hayden*, yeah, that makes sense.* Objective proof that a story like that was totally true would be really hard to turn down. I certainly wasn't going to complain about his decision, of course.

"I, umm, would actually be totally okay with handing them over to the guild as a donation," I tentatively suggested.

"No. We can't accept that offer," Bram said. "The Adventurer's

guild prides itself on its integrity. These are completely unknown monsters, granted, and determining their worth will take time. It's possible that we'll end up having underpaid you in the long run, but you *will* be paid, one way or another."

"Okay, I guess," I replied. I didn't feel a need to argue the point *too* insistently.

Considering these were monsters of unknown worth, like Bram had said, it would take some time for the guild to have even a rough estimate of how much I was owed for them. After some discussion, it was decided that I would collect my payment for the dinosaurs sometime down the road when I returned to Karelina and could visit the guild branch there. I was totally fine with that arrangement, so I agreed without hesitation.

Once Bram had wrapped up his discussion with me, he turned to Elrand (who was still trying to force his way back over to the dinosaurs) and Moira (who was still holding him back for all she was worth). "Hey, Elrand! Listen to us for a minute! It's about those monsters," he said.

In the end, Willem was deputized to explain the situation to Elrand. It eventually became clear that the guild intended on asking Elrand to butcher the dinos, and the moment he realized that was where the conversation was headed, his excitement levels shot straight up to maximum. He was practically hyperventilating, even. It was the sort of display that made me question if it was *really* a good idea to entrust him with important tasks at all.

"*Ahhhhhh*, I *knew* you'd come through for me, Mukohda! You always, always do! The lengths you go to to make me happy are *unbelievable*, oh best friend of mine!"

Nobody's best friends with you here, thank you very much! That is not *a role you get to give people unilaterally!*

"I really am sorry for all the trouble, Moira," Bram sighed.

"Think nothing of it. I, for one, am sorry that your image of the elven race will be forever tarnished by *him*," Moira wearily replied.

Yeah, I know. He really is just that off-putting, but you don't have to worry—all of us understand that he's an exception among exceptions when it comes to elves on the whole.

There was still one thing that I had to tell everyone about. It would, after all, probably pose issues when it came to the dinosaurs' processing. "So, umm, one more thing. I think you might have trouble cutting the biggest ones up, even with something like an adamantite knife," I said.

The supersauruses had been apex predators surrounded by other dinosaurs with fangs and claws that could supposedly pierce through adamantite. It was safe to say that their skin would be the toughest out of all the dinosaur corpses I'd brought to the guild.

"A magic sword would have no difficulties, I would think," noted Fel, who'd seemed content to lurk in the conversation's background up till that moment.

"Yes, quite! Even if it happens to be made out of adamantite itself, the magical enhancements bestowed on such a blade should render it equal to the task," Gon agreed.

"Of course," Bram said, a look of exhaustion coming across his face.

Bram proposed an arrangement where I'd lease one of my magic swords to the Adventurer's guild, which I agreed to on the spot. I ended up letting them borrow Caladbolg, the sword that Elrand had found the most comfortable to wield. The full contract would apparently take a few days to write up, but the gist of it was that I would be paid eight hundred gold coins every month until the sword was returned to me.

This must be one of those "passive income streams" I've heard so much about. Yeah, I definitely see the appeal.

"You're really had it rough, haven't you, Willem? I sympathize," Bram said as he slapped the guildmaster on the back.

"Thank the gods *someone* understands," Willem moaned, practically on the verge of tears. The other higher-ups quickly moved in to comfort him. Meanwhile, the biggest dragon lover around was letting out ridiculous shrieks and coos as he ran rampant around the storehouse.

Yeesh. Talk about pure chaos... I thought. I couldn't even guess what sort of expression *I* was making, but it couldn't have been a good one.

“And? What of the meat?”

“You’ve been discussing the sale of the beasts, but you’ve said nothing of the portion that we’ll be eating!”

《Yeah, I wanna get a taste of those big ones! Make it happen!》

《Master, Sui wants to try eating them too!》

My familiars picked that moment to chime in. *Oh, right,* I thought. *There’s no way they’re letting this drop until they’ve tried the supersaurus meat for themselves.*

“H-Hey, umm, one last thing. Do you think you could butcher one of these for me right away and hand its meat over to me?” I asked as I brought out another of the supersauruses.

Bram sighed. “Fine,” he said. “We’ll do it, but we’re only buying the materials from *one* of them. Everything left over from the other’s going straight back to you.”

Between the leviathan, the other dinosaurs, and the magic sword’s rental fee, the guild was seriously strapped for cash. They’d have to watch their spending very carefully until all their investments paid off.

Anyway, I asked them to butcher the supersaurus as quickly as they reasonably could at my familiars’ urging, and noted that they could treat it as practice for the real thing if they wanted to. They agreed, and even said that they’d waive the usual butchering fee, which I certainly didn’t mind. Mister dragon lover didn’t mind either, to say the least—in fact, he was so worked up with motivation that he started shouting about how he’d “stay up all night, if I have to” to get the thing butchered for me.

The higher-ups and Moira looked exhausted, Willem was practically sobbing, and the freaky degenerate was very loudly over the moon. The scene was so painfully chaotic I could barely even bring myself to watch, and the second I had an excuse, I beat a very hasty retreat. Frankly, I thought I deserved congratulations for getting even *one* of the supersauruses butchered in a timely manner amid that whole mess.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"*Ahhh*, we're back at last," I said as I stepped into my rental home.

It had just been one thing after another that whole day, starting from the moment I stepped outside. Not only had I been brought to a place full of ravenous, man-eating dinosaurs for a hunt, I'd also been dragged to the Adventurer's guild the second I returned to the capital. It had been absurdity after absurdity, with the centerpiece to the madness being the fact that my familiars had gone slightly more overboard than usual and hunted one species of dinosaur, the supersauruses, to literal extinction. And what could have possibly driven them to commit such an unspeakable deed?

"I hunger. Prepare our meal."

"Well, of course—after all, we didn't even stop for lunch during our hunt today! Small wonder we're famished."

《Right?! Man, I can't wait to chow down!》

《Sui's hungry too!》

My familiars had struck up their usual chorus about how hungry they were, and their easygoing attitude told me that they'd already forgotten a certain warning I'd given them. *Well, that works, I guess.*

"You're all pretty hungry today, huh?" I asked.

"Indeed," Fel said. **"Today's hunt made for unusually good exercise, and I have worked up an appetite."**

"It did, didn't it? What a good hunt it was, and for the first time in so long!" Gon noted.

《Yeah, guess I worked up a bit of a sweat! Used plenty of magic too,》 Dora-chan agreed.

《Sui pew-pewed sooo many baddies! Sui's really hungry now!》 Sui added.

"Oh? Okay, then, I'll bring dinner out soon! You guys can just wait in the living room," I said as I made for the kitchen.

And, once I got there...

"I *told* them they'd be getting punished for this one. They really should've listened," I muttered as I opened up my Online Supermarket and purchased a huge quantity of a certain ingredient. I had a plan, and I was pretty sure that it would have even more of

an effect than serving my familiars a purely vegetable-based meal.

I made my purchase, then opened up the cardboard box that materialized in front of me. It was jam-packed with the items I'd bought: bags of perfectly ordinary sandwich bread. They were the sort of bread bags you could find in supermarkets all over Japan, each of which contained five slices of relatively thick-cut white bread. Serving otherworldly food was always a risk, but I knew that plain sandwich bread would only provide minimal buffs that wouldn't last long, so I figured it wouldn't be an issue.

I opened up the bags of bread, then piled dishes for Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui high with the stuff. In mere moments, I found myself standing before four towering bread mountains.

"All right, that should do it! Oh, but wait—can't forget my portion!"

I'd be having a slightly different meal. Instead of plain sandwich bread, I cut a few slices from a loaf of Theresa's freshly baked sourdough, which I had been storing in my Item Box. I also pulled out a bowl of vegetable soup loaded with Alban's extra-delicious homegrown veggies, and a side dish of simmered soybeans and tomatoes, which I'd cooked for myself in advance.

That soybean and tomato dish had been really easy to put together, by the way! The steps were to sauté some minced garlic in olive oil until it was fragrant, then toss in a few onions and cook them until they softened. Next, I added bacon and some boiled and drained soybeans, cooked it all a little longer, then threw in a can of whole tomatoes along with a few of the ultra-yummy fresh tomatoes from Alban's garden, which I'd simply chopped up into chunks. I seasoned it with a little salt and pepper, and crushed the tomatoes as it continued to cook. Once about half of the mixture's water content had simmered away, it was done!

Now this is a great dish! Plenty of soybeans, full of nutrients, and absolutely delicious on a slice of bread. Plus, it's packed with veggies and is super healthy! This *is the ideal food, as far as I'm concerned!*

"And now that my meal's squared away, I think it's time to show

everyone what we'll be having for dinner!"

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Hm? What's wrong, guys? Aren't you gonna eat?" I asked. I spooned some of the simmered soybeans and tomatoes onto a slice of Theresa's sourdough, then took a big ol' bite.

"You cannot be asking that in earnestness," Fel practically growled.

"Truly, my liege?" Gon asked.

《No, seriously, what *is* this?》 Dora-chan added.

《Masteeer,》 Sui moaned.

The gluttonous quartet had been presented with their plates of sandwich bread. Their response: complete bewilderment.

"What do you mean? That's your dinner," I said.

"Wha—?!"

"Huh?!"

《Hey!》

《Nooo!》

Bewilderment veered sharply into astonishment as the four of them realized what was happening.

"Have you already forgotten what I told you back on the mountain? This is your punishment, and you're just going to have to live with it." *No way I would ever sweep you wiping the supersauruses off the face of this planet under the rug!*

"Are you truly serious?"

"Ugh! I had thought that matter had been left to the wayside."

《He usually talks a big game about getting back at us, then feeds us the good stuff anyway.》

《Sui doesn't like thiiis!》

Heh heh! If you think I'm totally incapable of putting my foot down from time to time, you're dead wrong!

"You should just be grateful I'm not sending you to bed with no dinner, period," I said. A dinner of nothing but plain bread was better than no food at all, at least. "Suit yourself if you don't want to eat, though," I added. None of them had so much as sampled their piles

of bread so far. "I have a feeling you might change your mind when you start getting *really* hungry, though!"

These four stuff themselves to the point of bursting each and every meal, so skipping dinner's probably gonna feel downright impossible for them! Especially today, seeing as they were so caught up in their hunt that they skipped lunch.

Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan started moaning and groaning, while Sui seemed to be frozen solid. If this were a comic, this would probably be the part where a dark shadow fell over the background along with some sort of doom-and-gloom sound effect. They were so depressed, I could practically *hear* it.

Did I feel a little sorry for them? Yes, but I steeled my nerves and resisted the urge to give in. Instead, I ignored them and sipped my vegetable soup.

"W-Wait. Can we not eat the same meal you are having?" Fel asked as he watched me slurp my soup and munch on my simmered-soybean-and-tomato-laden bread.

I bet you think you've found your out, don't you? "Just so you know, this is vegetable soup and a dish of simmered beans and tomatoes. You guys never like eating your vegetables, and these dishes are both *full* of them. In fact, they're pretty much *entirely* vegetables," I explained.

A look of pure despondency came across Fel's face. He was the biggest carnivore out of all of us.

"Plus, I made these for myself, so I didn't prepare the sort of portions that you guys eat. I could serve some to you, yeah, but I only have enough for each of you to have the same serving size that I usually eat. If you're fine with that, then sure, you can have some!" I added.

Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui weren't nearly as opposed to veggies as Fel was. They'd looked a little hopeful at first, but when they realized how little of the dishes was available, they joined Fel in the pits of despair. A single human-sized serving could *never* satisfy them.

By the time I finished my meal, my familiars had finally resigned themselves to their fates and started sadly chewing their way through their piles of bread.

How do you like that? Not very tasty, I bet! It'd be one thing if you at least had some jam to put on it, but plain, unaccompanied sandwich bread is about as bland as a meal could be!

My familiars were almost completely expressionless as they ate, only speaking up to ask for drinks. Apparently, the plain bread had dried out their mouths. I agreed, and filled up their drinking bowls—with water, of course. Judging by the looks of disappointment on their faces, they'd been expecting soda, or something similarly sweet.

Sorry, but that's not an option. This is a punishment, so there's no way I'm giving you drinks that you'd enjoy that much!

Sui let out a sad little 《Masteeer...》 when it realized it'd be getting plain water, and I *nearly* caved on the spot, but I somehow managed to stay strong.

See? Even I can be harsh when the moment calls for it! Bwa ha ha ha ha... Okay, no, the laughter's too much.





◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

“Delicious...”

“It truly is...”

《Nothing beats meat, all right...》

《It’s sooo yummy...》

Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui almost seemed moved as they munched their way through the pork bowls I’d served them for breakfast. I bit into a rolled omelet from my own entirely different, much lighter meal (which also included miso soup with wakame seaweed and tofu, a rice ball stuffed with simmered bonito and seaweed, and lightly pickled cucumbers, by the way) as I watched them. It was kind of shocking how differently they were behaving, compared to their usual routine.

“What’s the deal, guys?” I asked.

The gluttonous quartet turned to glare at me in unison.

“That should be abundantly clear. It was your act of cruelty last night that brought this about.”

“I appreciate that a punishment is a punishment, my liege, but last night crossed a line.”

《Ugggh. I think I’m gonna have nightmares about that stuff for days!》

《It wasn’t yummy at all...》

Looks like last night’s sandwich bread dinner really had an impact. “‘Act of cruelty’? Of course it wasn’t nice—it was a punishment! And besides, why’re you giving me this after you all came to apologize first thing this morning?”

They really had, surprisingly enough. The moment I had woken up, all four of my familiars had apologized for what they’d done the day before. They had also sworn to never drive a species to extinction again, and to do their best to not go overboard in general in the future. Fel and Gon had even promised to act their ages and consider the circumstances before springing into action. That, naturally, was the only reason I’d served them the usual for breakfast.

"I wasn't expecting it to work quite *this* well. I'll have to keep that technique in my back pocket for the next time they fly off the handle," I muttered to myself. My familiars all twitched.

"D-Do not. I have no desire to ever have such a meal again."

"I could happily go the rest of my life without repeating the experience of eating that food as well. It was entirely flavorless! Well, no, it had a certain sweetness when chewed thoroughly, but nothing else to recommend it at all."

《It was like the more I chewed, the drier my mouth got! That was torture.》

《Sui never wants to eat it again!》

Fel's fur was standing on end, Gon had a vacant look in his eyes, Dora-chan's expression had gone *completely* blank, and even Sui somehow looked like it was about to break down in tears.

"Was it really *that* bad?" I asked. "Even worse than a veggie-heavy meal?"

"That would have been preferable, if only just. Much as I loathe the flavor of vegetables, they do *have* flavor."

"Agreed. It would still be your cooking, my liege. Yesterday's dinner, on the other hand..."

《I mean, sure, I like meat *best*, but it's not like I won't eat vegetables from time to time.》

《The veggie meals you make are super yummy, Master.》

I'd learned a valuable lesson: In spite of their carnivorism, the gluttonous quartet would still take vegetables over nothing but plain bread.

Those four seem downright traumatized. Seriously, though? Is a single all-bread meal really this *powerful?*

Anyway, my familiars ended up eating about twice as much that morning as they usually would, and making enough extra pork bowls to keep up turned into quite the trial. They were the same quick, simple dish as ever, but my familiars all seemed to savor every bite like it was the most delicious thing they'd ever tasted, and I couldn't stop myself from quietly chuckling at their behavior.

Extra: Wintry Treats from Northwestern Japan

One day when I opened up my Online Supermarket to stock up on seasonings, I found a colorful banner plastered across the top of the menu. It read "Winter Specialties from the Hokuriku Region, on Sale Now!"

"Oooh, Hokuriku specialties, huh? Come to think of it, I remember getting some really good oysters when I went on a trip to the Noto peninsula."

They had been pretty small, as far as oysters went, but they'd been plump and incredibly flavorful. I remembered having them raw, grilled, in hot pots, and even cooked into rice, all of which had been delicious as could be.

"Whoops! Just remembering them's making me drool. I sure could go for some oysters right about now. Raw ones, in particular..."

Seafood in this world, fish and shellfish alike, was host to some *really* nasty parasites that meant that eating it raw was absolutely out of the question. Like, when I say "really nasty," I mean "very likely fatal."

"Maaan. Wish I could have some oysters..." I muttered as I glanced over the list of items available in the event...until my eyes fell on one particular entry. "Wait, seriously?! They're selling *those*?!"

There it was: an entry for fresh, in-shell oysters straight from the Noto Peninsula.

"Oh man, for real? Now *that's* tempting," I said. All I had to do was push one button, and I'd have the oysters I had just been dreaming of. I wanted them. I mean, I *really* wanted them. I wanted to eat my fill of raw oysters for the first time in who even knew how long. "Should I go for it? But then again, it's practically guaranteed that Fel and the others will throw a fit if I eat them on my own... But

I want them *so bad*... Oh man, they have sashimi too?!"

I'd been so fixated on the oysters, I almost missed the luxury assortment of sashimi listed right next to them.

"And there's even yellowtail in it! Winter yellowtail's the best—it's fatty in the most perfectly delicious sort of way! Wait, what's this...? They have a yellowtail shabu-shabu set too?!"

Yellowtail shabu-shabu? Oh god, that sounds so *good!*

Now my attention was fully fixed on the yellowtail section...but not quite enough for me to miss what was listed right next to it.

"*Crab*! They have snow crabs!"

Raw crab, grilled crab, crab shabu-shabu, crab hot pot... My dreams of seafood were rapidly expanding. It all sounded so delicious, it was driving me crazy.

"Agggh, I wanna eat all of it, right now! I *have* to! Hell, I'm *going* to!" I shouted. All that delectable-looking Hokuriku seafood had me worked up into a frenzy. *That's it—tonight's dinner's gonna be a Hokurikan seafood spectacular! I've made up my mind!*

There was just one problem I'd have to deal with: *them*.

"How much sashimi would I even have to buy to fill my familiars' stomachs? Would that even be possible...? I have a feeling they'll complain about me not serving meat if I try to," I said to myself. I browsed a little more, and quickly found the word I was looking for. "Aha! They *do* have meat!"

I'd always thought of the Hokuriku region as being a seafood hotspot, but as it turned out, they had a variety of meat as one of their local specialties as well.

"Noto peninsula beef *and* pork, huh? Okay, this is starting to sound like a plan! I'll get some seafood for them, and bulk their meal out with this meat as well!"

Though not too *much bulking, of course.* I knew exactly what sort of trouble I'd be in if I accidentally fed them too much Earth food and raised their stats past the point of reason. *I'll throw in some dungeon beef and pork too, just to be on the safe side.*

"I guess dungeon beef steak would be good? And as for the dungeon pork...well, you can never go wrong with cutlets."

Steak and pork cutlets were among the gluttonous quartet's all-

time favorites, so I couldn't imagine they'd complain if I served them those. Making steak *and* frying cutlets for a single meal did seem like it'd be a bit of a pain, but...

"It's all for the sake of Hokurikan seafood. I'll do anything for my oysters!"

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

"Bwuuuh?! Wh-What in the world is *this*?!"

"Oooh, impressive! Tonight's dinner is lavish indeed!"

《Hot damn, no kidding! And *all* of it looks great!》

《Wooow! So much meat and fishies! It all looks really yummy!》

"Heh heh, doesn't it? I found some awesome stuff in my Online Supermarket, so I decided to splurge a little!" I explained.

My familiars' eyes—which were wide with shock—were glued to the spectacular spread of food I'd laid out on the table. I'd served mountains of dungeon beef steaks and dungeon pork cutlets, plus beef *and* pork steaks I'd made using the Noto peninsula meat from my Online Supermarket. I'd seasoned the Japanese steaks very simply with just salt and pepper, since I wanted the flavor of the meat itself to take center stage. Then, of course, there was the assortment of sashimi and the yellowtail shabu-shabu, plus the raw crab, grilled crab, shabu-shabu style crab, *and* crab hot pot. Every last one of them looked drool-inducingly delicious.

"By the way, I made enough dungeon beef steaks and dungeon pork cutlets for you to have seconds, but this is all I have for the Online Supermarket stuff, so you'd better savor it!" I warned, pointing out the dishes in sequence.

"What?! You would serve us meat this clearly delectable *without* a chance to eat more of it?" Fel indignantly replied.

"Buying enough of it to fill you guys up would be problematic in all sorts of ways, so that's all you get for today. That's why I made extra dungeon meat dishes, just to make sure you'll be satisfied."

"Hmph. I would certainly hope we will be."

"I'm sure you wouldn't mind treating me to a beer as well, would you, my liege?" Gon hopefully asked. "Beer and cutlets are, after all,

a match like few others!"

I guess he would *ask for that, wouldn't he? Fried food and beer's a match made in heaven, after all.* "Okay, but just a little," I said.

"Hah hah hah! Cutlets and beer—a feast indeed!"

《Hell yeah! Cutlets are the best. I mean, everything fried's the best, really!》 Dora-chan said.

《Sui loves the steak *and* the cutlets!》 Sui chimed in.

Everyone was ecstatic to learn that they'd be getting more of their favorite foods than ever...which meant that everyone was playing *precisely* into my hands. *Heh heh heh...*

While the gluttonous quartet was fixated on their steak and cutlets, *I*, of course, headed straight for the seafood.

"What to try first...?" I said to myself, hesitating for a moment before finally reaching for the sashimi. I dabbed a bit of wasabi on a piece of yellowtail, swished it through some soy sauce I'd poured into a little dish, and popped it into my mouth. "Oh, *man* that's good!"

The fish was fatty and *jam*-packed with umami. It was an explosion of pure, fishy flavor.

"Perfect. This is *perfection*!"

It had been so long since I'd had any sashimi, and my first piece in ages was so delicious, I was actually moved. Not quite moved enough to stop me from grabbing a second piece of yellowtail right afterward, though. My expectations for the rest of the sashimi assortment had been raised, and I went for a raw oyster next, which I dressed with a little ponzu—a shellfish classic.

"Ahh! *So* good!"

The oyster's flavor was like the seaside itself, with a creamy richness to complement it. It was the best. I really couldn't describe it in any other way. The rest of the platter was delicious as well, from the sweet, slightly sticky shrimp to the light and refreshing flounder.

"Raw seafood just can't be beat! Sashimi's an addiction that all Japanese people have, I swear!" *Of course, there's still one bit of raw seafood I haven't tried yet.* "Time for some crab!"

How long had it been since I'd had crab sashimi? I hadn't exactly

been able to afford splurging on something that fancy very often back when I was an office worker. Now, however, I found myself facing a plate absolutely full of glossy, faintly red crab legs.

"Heh heh heh, do I dare? Should I eat a whole leg's worth of crab in just one bite?"

I dared. I dipped the rather sizable piece of crab in a little soy sauce, then popped the whole thing into my mouth in one go.

"Oh wow, it's so *sweet*! Now *this* is what happiness tastes like!"

Crab sashimi is a perfect food. It was so delicious that I'd eaten a second *and* a third crab leg before I snapped back to my senses and realized what I was doing.

"Whoops! That was close. Can't fill myself up with sashimi when there's so many other things to try!"

I still had to prepare the yellowtail and crab shabu-shabu, the grilled crab, *and* the crab hot pot, then sample all of them. I moved on to the yellowtail shabu-shabu first, which I tried with a little ponzu.

"*Mmmh!* That's another one for the 'delicious' list!"

The time the fish spent being swished through the piping hot shabu-shabu broth had lessened its fattiness just enough to give it a completely different flavor profile. It felt like I could keep swishing and eating for ever, and for quite some time, I did exactly that. Swish, eat, swish, eat, and on, and on.

"What could I possibly call this other than 'delicious'? 'The best,' maybe?"

I felt like sticking with the yellowtail for a while longer, but I couldn't give in to temptation. There were still so many other foods left to try.

"Next up: crab shabu-shabu!"

This was, as a matter of fact, the very first time I'd tried crab prepared using this method, and I was incredibly excited to give it a taste. I swished a crab leg through the simmering broth, then popped it into my mouth.

"So sweet! *And* tasty!" I exclaimed. The crab was half cooked, half raw, and all delicious in the sweetest, most umami-rich way possible. "Not dipping this in any of the sauces was the right call for

sure. Man, it's *so* good!"

How on earth is crab this *tasty, anyway?* I wondered. Needless to say, the grilled crab and crab hot pot were both just as delicious. For that matter, the whole *meal* had been incredible.

"What could possibly be better than a feast's worth of food where everything is so good it's out of this world?" I idly mused. *Hokuriku seafood can't be beat!*

By that point, I'd spent enough time waxing poetic about how good the seafood was that I'd finally caught my familiars' attention. They tore themselves away from their meat mountains for long enough to sample the sashimi and the shabu-shabu as well.

"Hmm. This is not unsatisfactory by any means, but meat remains my preference," Fel said.

"Mine as well," Gon agreed. "It tastes quite nice, certainly, but it's hardly filling, is it?"

《Yeah, I get that. Meat's way more satisfying, *and* it's tasty to boot,》 Dora-chan added.

《Sui thinks this is yummy, but Sui likes the meat better too,》 Sui chimed in.

Friggin' carnivores. You have no idea how much of a treat all this Hokuriku seafood really is!





“I would like another helping of otherworldly meat to be added to my portion in lieu of more fish.”

“Oh, I’d like that as well!”

《Thirded!》

《That meat was sooo good!》

Did you really think it’d be that easy to trick me into giving you seconds? “Nope! Not happening. I told you right at the start that there wouldn’t be any more of that stuff,” I firmly replied.

“Tch! I thought he would be more easily fooled,” Fel muttered under his breath.

“I *can* hear you, Fel,” I said, shooting him a glare.

“I said nothing,” Fel flagrantly lied.

“Oh? I guess you can do without seconds of the steak and cutlets, then.”

“What?! I said no such thing! I demand more!”

“Hey guys, hear that? Fel says he doesn’t want his seconds! Think you could eat them for him?”

“But of course!”

《You really gotta ask?》

《Yaaay, Sui’ll eat!》

“Okay, then—extra-large helpings of steak and cutlets for everyone but Fel!”

“Do not play these games with me! I will have seconds! I *will* have them!”

Afterword

Hello! This is Ren Eguchi. Thank you very much for purchasing *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill Volume 16: White Fish Meunière and the Leviathan's Wake*! It's all thanks to my readers that this series has remained in publication for such an incredibly long time, and I couldn't possibly be more grateful.

For a variety of reasons, I've been unable to update the web novel version of this story recently. I understand that many readers have been worried about me, and I both apologize profusely for causing you concern and greatly appreciate all the words of encouragement that so many of you have sent me.

Now then—volume 16 takes us to the capital city! It's somehow just so like Mukohda's party to finally take a trip to the capital not for its own sake, but in the hopes of getting a leviathan butchered. Then, without sparing Mukohda even a moment to do some sightseeing, his familiars hustle him away to go hunting! The nasty locales they end up visiting are exactly the sort of places you'd expect his party to steer toward, as well, and I hope you enjoy the hijinks they get up to there.

I reported in the previous volume that a second season of the anime had been greenlit, and I'm sure some of my readers are very curious about how it's been progressing. Rest assured that production is continuing at a steady pace! Please look forward to it!

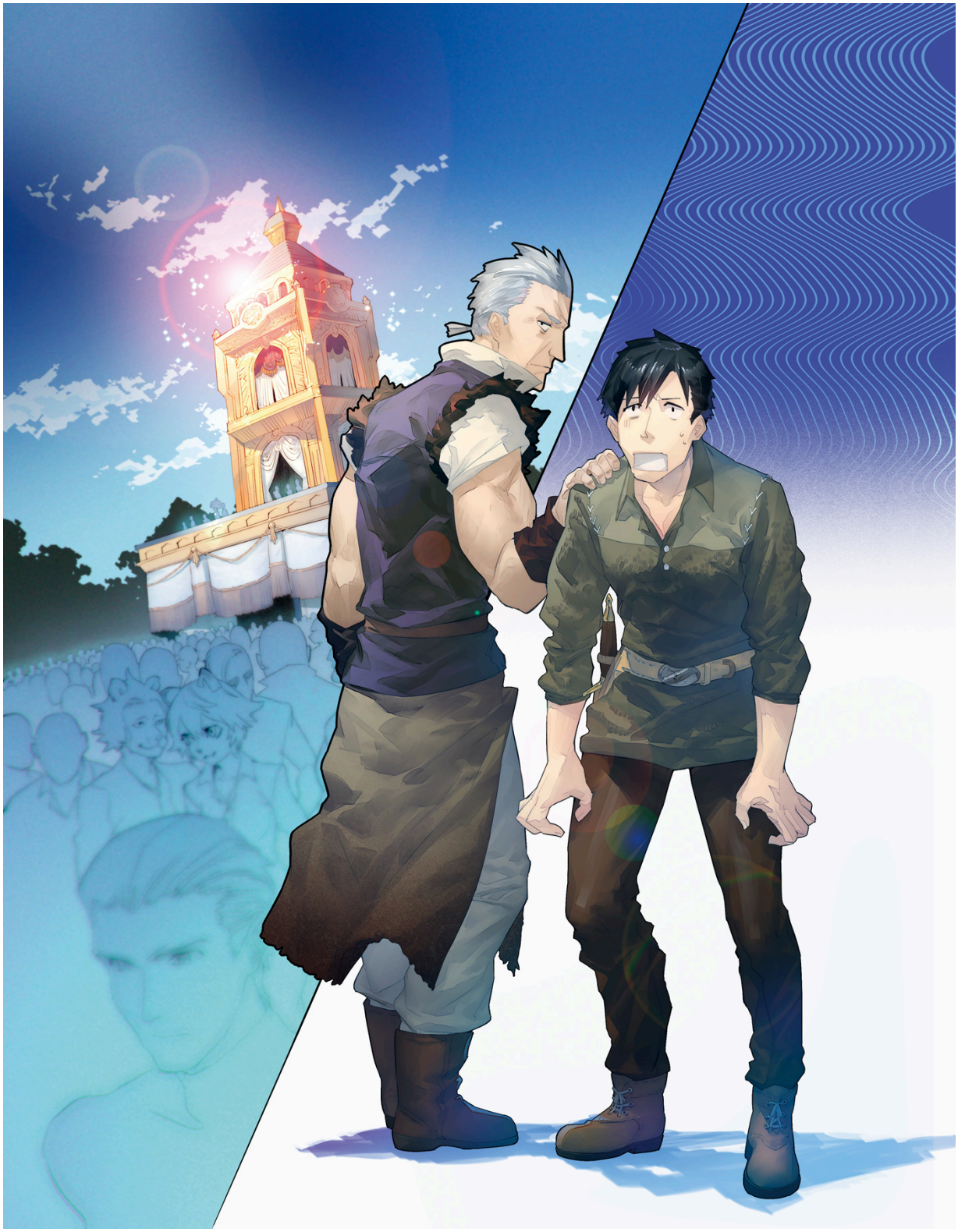
To my illustrator Masa-sensei; Akagishi K-sensei, who's drawing the main comic adaptation; Momo Futaba-sensei, who's handling the spin-off comic; the staff at Studio MAPPA and everyone else involved in the production of the anime's second season; my editor "I"; and all the other good people at Overlap: Thank you all so much for your help and support!

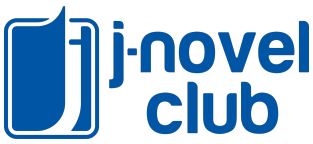
Finally, I hope you'll continue enjoying the laid-back, heartwarming adventures of *Campfire Cooking in Another World with*

My Absurd Skill! I look forward to seeing you again in volume 17!









Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill: Volume 16
by Ren Eguchi

Translated by Tristan K. Hill Edited by Adam Fogle

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 Ren Eguchi Illustrations by Masa
Cover illustration by Masa

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2024 by OVERLAP, Inc.
This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: September 2025