Flung into a New World?
Time to Lift the 200-Year Curse!

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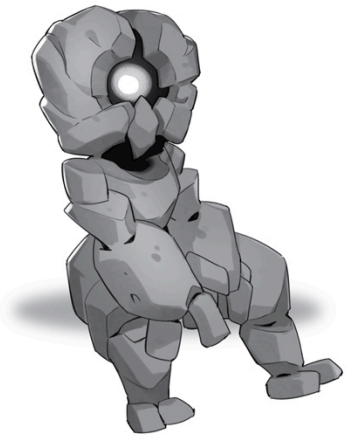
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6 Fluffy (?)
Water Dragon
7 Spider Boss (♀)
Gatekeeper of Hell
5 Karen (♂)
Phoenix
4 Akira Tennou (♂)
A man accidentally pulled into a hero-summoning spell
8 Shuri (♀)
Sentinel of the Underworld
2 Chai (♂)
Leader of the Dire Wolves
1 Koa (♀)
Queen of the Fenrir
3 Ai (♂)
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9 One Eye (?)
Clay golem made by Akira
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1. A Hero...? No, Not in the Slightest. I'm Just Akira Tennou, an Unremarkable Thirty-Five-Year-Old Janitor.

When something unexpected happens, your mind goes blank—that's what I'd always heard anyway. As it happens, that turned out to be true.

When I felt a tug on my consciousness again, I opened my eyes and found myself in a world of pure white. I spun around to scan my surroundings. Stark whiteness as far as the eye could see.

Where am I? How'd I get here? I thought, completely dumbfounded. *Come on, remember! Okay, I'm pretty sure I overslept this morning because my alarm didn't go off, right? Then my little sister teased me about it, and we ended up fighting all morning—which reminds me, she ate the limited-time-only pudding I bought at the Hokkaido Food Fair without even asking me! Dammit! How dare she rob me of the one thing I was looking forward to after work? I wonder how long the promotion will be going on? I'll have to look it up later. I hope it's still available—wait, what was I doing?*

Oh right... I went to work and ate lunch with the gang like always—that's right, there was a new part-timer working at the cafeteria. I finished work and was about to head home when mom texted me to buy some yogurt on the way home. Okay, I went to buy yogurt. I started to cross the road, and...oh, now I remember. I got run over by a truck. Those bright, blinding headlights were the last thing I saw...

There were four other people around me—maybe we were all run over by the same truck—and for some reason, we were now all floating together in the whiteness.

*Wait, what? We're...*floating*? How—huh? Everyone else just started glowing. Is something about to happen? And I'm...*not *glowing. Why not?*

"Ahh! What do we do? What do we do?!"

I heard a very flustered voice coming from somewhere. As for "where" that somewhere was, I couldn't tell. Pure whiteness still stretched out in every direction.

"Come on! We need to do something! At this rate, we're going to fail!"

It looked like they *had* failed: The other four figures were already beginning to fade, their bodies becoming translucent. Only I remained completely corporeal.

Actually, I'm the only one awake too... Are the rest of them sleeping? Or...are they dead? No, probably not—right? Oh, I don't know.

"Ahh... They're returning to the worlds they came from. Our summoning spell..."

"They would have become heroes... What a shame."

The... The worlds they came from? Heroes? Could this be like that manga my sister was obsessed with? What was it again...?

"What the hell are you doing?!"

Wha—?! Someone sure is angry, yelling like that. Oh, the other four vanished.

"Oh no, we've been found out!"

"Crap! What do we do?!"

"Huh...? There's still one person?"

"Wait, what?"

Huh. Guess summoning me wasn't part of the plan. They seriously didn't notice me? I was right next to the other guys the whole time... Feels kinda sad.

"How dare mere apprentices like you try to cast a summoning spell?!"

"Waaah..."

"How many times have I told you that such spells disturb the natural order?!"

"Crap, crap!"

"Oh no..."

Wait—I feel like whatever was holding me up just...vanished? Falling—I'm falling?! But where am I going?!

What's gonna happen to me...?

2. A Forest...? Trees as Far as the Eye Can See!

My eyes shot open. My body felt kind of sluggish and heavy. *What happened...? And more importantly, where am I?* I stood up and looked around, only to find...*trees, trees, and even more trees.* Not only that, but a good number were simply massive—any one of them would probably easily break the record on Earth for "oldest living tree" by several hundred years. Through the gaps *between* the trees, I could see... *Small tree. Big tree. Small tree. Small tree. Big tree—okay, okay. First things first, I need to calm down.*

Trees completely surrounded me. I turned in a full circle, affirming what I'd already guessed: *I'm in a forest.* On top of that, there was a strange, sluggish heaviness to my body—and on top of *that* was the fact that the forest seemed to be draped in thick, black shadows.

I'm gonna have to do something about this sluggish feeling—and those shadows aren't helping my mood either.

Assuming I was correct in declaring this a forest, just *where* was the forest, then? I tried to remember what had happened up until then.

Let's see... I heard some voices—apprentices, the angry voice had called them. I remember that much at least. They'd tried to cast some sort of "hero-summoning spell," and I think I must have been dragged into it by mistake?

Hero-summoning spells were the type of crap that always came up in the manga my little sister loved to read. Despite my complete lack of interest, she'd frequently plop down on the couch next to me and ramble on about her favorite stories and characters for as long as she liked, and somehow it seemed like I'd remembered at least some bits of it.

Usually, some dude gets summoned to a parallel world, becomes a hero, and has to fight the De— Wait a minute. Am I in a parallel world?

Umm... Does this mean I can never go home?

"You BASTAAAARDS!"

I was pretty annoyed, but shouting at the top of my lungs relieved some of my frustration. I took a deep breath.

There. That's a little better.

My little sister liked to say that keeping stress bottled up inside was bad for your health, which explained why I'd often hear furious screaming coming from her room when exam season rolled around. Turned out, she was right: It had definitely alleviated *some* of my stress. Now I could actually think.

Okay, I gotta take stock of my situation here. This is probably a parallel world. In those manga, there was something all parallel worlds seemed to have... What was it again? The go-to element for reincarnation fantasy... C'mon, me! Remember! Er— Magic! Right, they all had magic. And monsters! Crap, I shouldn't have yelled so loudly before!

I hastily scanned my surroundings. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any monsters sneaking up behind me. I looked around again, this time more slowly, but there still weren't any signs of life.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "No monsters for now at least... But I still don't feel too good."

Ever since I'd opened my eyes, my body had felt like something heavy was coiled around it. Even worse, it felt like it was slowly slithering *into* my body.

Am I just being stupid, though? No, that's definitely how it feels...

I scanned my surroundings again. The shadows seemed thicker and more widely spread than they had before. *Okay, for the time being, let's say I* am *in a parallel world. Just where am I, though?*

I wanted to call out for help, but I was surrounded by trees as far as the eye could see, and nothing else. If I was in the middle of some massive forest, calling for help seemed a little pointless. But at the same time, I was feeling worse by the second—worse than anything I'd ever experienced. I felt sluggish and nauseated.

Hang on. Sluggish and nauseated...? Isn't that what the lady said on the paranormal reality show I was watching yesterday? Is this like that "possession" thing? Are the shadows some kind of curse left by a vengeful spirit...? Ha ha ha, no way...right? It's not like parallel worlds have curses that are visible to the naked eye...do they?

I laughed quietly. "Nope. Absolutely not."

What was it they said in these situations anyway? "Begone, evil spirits"?

I shook my head. I wasn't sure it was quite the right phrasing, and if I said it out loud and nothing happened, it would be pretty embarrassing.

What did they call it in those novels? Purification magic?

I raised my hand so my palm pointed toward the *something* coiling around my body, and I awkwardly half whispered, half chanted, "Begone! Purify!"

What am I doing... I need to calm down. Vengeful spirits? I'm being an idiot. I mean, I don't know if this world even has *magic in the first place. Seriously... Uh, hang on. My body—it feels...lighter? There's no way, right?*

Still, I had to try. I faced toward the shadows in front of me and held out my hand. "**Purify.**"

It— It actually worked. So if purification works here—wait, does that mean it actually was *a vengeful spirit? Or an evil ghost? Ha ha ha, so I can use magic in this world, huh? Guess there's nothing wrong with a little escapism every once in a while...*

"Grrrr."

Apparently, escapism wasn't all it was cracked up to be. While I hadn't been paying attention to reality, something had crept up behind me.

3. A Dog... No, a Wolf?

Something menacing was behind me. I wanted to run, but escape was probably unlikely. Instead, I decided to turn around slowly—as to not provoke it—and figure out just what the growl had come from.

It's huge! Ah, this dog's got the shadows on it too... I wonder if it's okay? Actually, is *it a dog? It's damn scary looking for a dog. Maybe it's a wolf? Yeah, it's too big to be a dog. Okay, I've decided! It's a wolf!*

Happy with my arbitrary decision, I returned to the matter at hand. *So what do I do now? Fight the wolf? Ha ha ha, as if. That'd be way too reckless. So I need to get away somehow. Do I quietly walk away? Or do I run for my life? No, that's no good. That TV program said they'll attack you if you run away— Wait, maybe that was bears? Yeah...I'm panicking.*

I somehow managed to move my foot an inch, only for the wolf's expression to turn even scarier.

It growled again! Wait, growled? Do wolves growl? Oh, who cares! It's scary either way! I got dragged into a summoning spell, dropped into a forest, and now this?! This is the worst day of my life! Hang on...

I took another look at the wolf. It seemed unsteady on its feet for some reason, wobbling from side to side. It was incredibly thin too.

I wonder if it's okay... Oh, I must be the next meal! I see, I see... Right, time to run away.

I moved another inch, and the growling got even louder.

I guess running's not an option. Oh, it collapsed.

Something was definitely strange here. Once the wolf had fallen over, the shadows coiled around its legs began to spread, enshrouding its whole body in a black cloud. The prone wolf seemed to be in pain, its limbs flailing as it struggled in vain against the

shadows.

Hmm... Is this part of the curse as well, maybe? There sure are a lot of shadows on it... Is everything here cursed?! What kind of forest is this?! Actually, that's not the pressing issue right now.

I shook my head. *This is no good.* I was seriously starting to panic, to the point of being incapable of focusing on the more immediate problem in front of me.

I need to calm down. Again.

First, I needed to decide on a plan. I wanted to help the wolf even though it was still growling—or whatever sound that was. I loved animals. We had three dogs at home, all large breeds. They were adorable, always coming to the front door to greet me when I came home from work, and—

Not now. Focus, me! I'm scared, but I've got to help the wolf.

Gingerly, I approached the collapsed figure, and the growling intensified.

Scary! Scary! But I'm not gonna give up!

My last attempt at purification had seemed to work well, so there was no reason it shouldn't work again. *It'll be okay.* I reached toward the wolf, ignoring the way it shrank away from my outstretched hand.

"**Purify!**"

There was a flash of light, and the shadows concealing the wolf vanished.

Hell yeah! Success! Uh, so was it a vengeful spirit? Or was it a curse instead? Or—I'm... I'm not calm yet, am I?



4. Tamed...by the Wolf?!

Once the shadows were gone, I immediately focused on the next problem. Like many Japanese people, I was a neat freak—and the wolf in front of me was really, really dirty. How underweight it was kind of bothered me as well, but not as much as the dirt. Its fur was caked in filth, and matted too.

I wonder if being dirty doesn't bother it?

The wolf, for its part, was glaring at me just as menacingly as it had been before, though I thought its eyes were opened slightly wider.

Is it surprised perhaps?

What I was sure of, though, was that the wolf was very, very cute. As an animal lover, I wanted nothing more than to pet it. Even its ridiculous size was beginning to seem adorable rather than terrifying.

Ah, it's coming toward me! Is it gonna attack? Uh... Whoa. Whoa! It's baring its belly! A wild wolf! I'm kinda touched. Are wolves really this easy to tame in parallel worlds? Well, before it changes its mind... Ugh, I can't!

I was happy—really happy—that the wolf seemed to be willing to let me touch it, but I couldn't handle how dirty it was.

Maybe I can do something with magic? Were there any spells to get rid of dirt? Hmm... "Clean" should be fine, right? I'll give it a go and see.

I pictured the wolf getting cleaner and held out my hand.

"**Clean.**"

The dirt-encrusted fur was gone, replaced by a silky silvery coat. I'd succeeded—impressively so.

It looks really awesome now. Oh, it's looking at itself too. Wait, doesn't it look a little...? Yeah, it's definitely proud. You cutie, you.

It was still thin, which worried me, but there wasn't much I could

do about that right away. But seeing it properly, I realized it was a really beautiful creature. They say taking care of your appearance immediately makes you twenty percent more handsome, but in the wolf's case, it was more like eighty percent at the very least.

I'm kinda jealous.

The other thing I now realized was just *how* massive the wolf was. We were nearly at eye level, but I was standing up, while the wolf was sitting. And I was average height at around 175 centimeters tall, give or take...

Guess parallel world wolves are really big, huh. It'd be nice if I could grow a little too since I'm here and all. Just a little would be fine, please!

5. Nowhere to Go...So Let's Go Together!

I was surprised at what I'd been able to do with just my mind.

It's because there's magic in this parallel world. I couldn't use it in the other one. I wonder if there's, like, superpowerful wizards here and stuff? I kinda want to meet one... Nah, they'd be really scary.

Besides, it wasn't like I could just go find one, not while I still had no idea where I even was.

The wolf stretched out, loosening the previously dirt-and shadow-encrusted limbs.

Oh, are you leaving? Guess you don't wanna keep me company... I feel kinda sad. Hang on, what am I gonna do if you leave too? It's not like I was called here on purpose. So basically, I'm stuck here for no— Yeah, probably better not to think about it too much. If I ever meet those apprentices, I'm gonna punch 'em into next week.

The first thing I needed to do was figure out how to get out of this forest. The problem, I immediately realized, was that all I could see in every direction (besides trees) was the shadows.

It must be a really strong vengeful spirit. Or is it a curse? Yeah, I'm gonna go with curse. So if the shadows are a curse, that makes this a cursed forest, right? Ugh, that's a scary thought. No thanks! Wait, I'm already here... Get it together, me. Ah, the wolf left.

"Alone again..." I muttered, only to realize with a start that the wolf had stopped moving.

Is it...looking at me? Maybe it wants *me to go with it? Is it gonna show me the way? Not that I know where I want to go... But it's not like I have any reason to stay here either.*

I started running—and, to my surprise, immediately overtook the wolf.

Uh, I'm not usually this fast—and especially not on a rocky uphill

road. I decided not to question it. *Don't bite the hand that feeds you, or something! I think. I have to look on the bright side—especially now.*

The wolf watched me for a moment and started running again. Side by side, we dashed through the forest and soon came to a nearly vertical rock wall about ten meters high, which I scaled in less than four or five seconds. It felt good.

Yep, I'm not gonna think about anything too deeply. Just enjoy yourself, me.

We continued on in a decidedly uphill fashion, encountering several more sheer rock walls, all of which I scaled with ease. Finally, at the top of one particularly vertical scramble, a smooth cliff face loomed, and immediately in front of us, there was an entrance to some kind of cave. Despite how close we were, I couldn't see a thing. The inside was pitch-black—more so than it should have been. It was more of those shadows.

Curse, you're really freaking depressing, you know?

The wolf took another step closer but hesitated, looking back at me.

The curse must be troubling it.

"You wanna go inside?" I asked. It stared at me, unblinking.

Guess so... Oh, when it looks at me like that, I can't help wanting to help it!

Which meant one thing: time for more purification.

6. Inside the Cave Is...Death in the Shadows.

My purification spell failed. Well, rather than "failing," it just hadn't been enough to make a difference. The cave was huge, and purifying just the entrance hadn't made a dent in the darkness as a whole. The shadows still teemed just beyond the rocky arch.

Hmm...

I took a step inside and held out my hand, trying to imagine purifying a wider area instead of just what was immediately in front of me. There was another flash of light, and I found myself standing in the center of a shadowless circle about two meters in diameter.

Damn, this cave must be massive. From my new position, I could hear the faint sound of growling nearby. *So this must be the wolves' den... Wait, have I just hand-delivered myself as prey? Crap, I'm even stupider than I realized.*

My second round of purification had been somewhat more effective at least. The shadows nearby seemed fainter, and thanks to that, I could vaguely make out my surroundings. A few wolves like the one who'd led me here were sitting a few meters away, growling. Behind them loomed something else, but I couldn't make out what it was. From my current vantage point, all I could see was a huge, black pile. I lifted my hand again.

"**Purify!**"

It helped somewhat, and I could see a little more clearly than before. The mysterious black pile—it was wolf corpses. They'd been piled on top of one another until they resembled a small mountain, and the black was on account of the thick shadows shrouding each thin carcass. If not for the paws sticking out here and there, I wouldn't have been able to tell what it was at all.

Still...corpses. I feel kinda sick.

I took a reluctant step toward the ghastly mass, and the wolves in front growled louder.

Guess they're not gonna let me come any closer. Oh well, I tried!

The silvery wolf who'd brought me let out a short, sharp snarl, and the growling stopped.

Okay, what to do...

So far, my purification spell only seemed to work in the area directly surrounding me, but I didn't want to risk getting close enough to the pack of wolves to give it a go.

Hmm... I wonder if I can get it to purify anything I can see *instead? No harm in giving it a shot.*

This time, I visualized my purification spell reaching out and covering everything in view.

"**Purify!**"

Apparently, I *could* also purify a wide area.

Success. But seriously, how big is *this cave?*

My visibility had improved, so I attempted to use purification a few more times. With each cast of the spell, I was able to see farther and farther inside. Watching the shadows gradually lessen was kind of satisfying, but I quickly got bored from the repetition. Weirdly, my body seemed to feel lighter with each spell I cast.

Does magic have that kind of side effect? Eh, not like I'd know. And there's no point wasting my time worrying about the unknown! Come to think of it, I don't have any fatigue either, even after the hectic run up the hill earlier...

Get your head together, me! What did we just decide about worrying over things we don't know the answer to! I shook my head, trying to dispel the oncoming thoughts. *Let's just keep going.*

Finally, I made my way over to the corpse mountain. Despite my purification of the surrounding area, dark shadows still swirled over the grim heap.

The silvery wolf I'd met in the forest walked beside me, staring intently at the pile of corpses. I didn't know how to read wolf expressions, but I could still tell it was sad.

I really want to help it... Damn me and my pathetic animal-loving ways! I've gotta do something.

Steeling myself, I pictured the curse dispelling, visualizing the shadows vanishing even more forcefully than I had before.

"**Purify!**"

Yep... Magic sure is useful.

7. *Five* of Them...? Eh, Let's All Go Inside.

The shadows were enveloped in a flash of light before shattering into glowing shards and fading away. The numerous corpses, now fully visible, also glimmered with a faint light before disappearing into thin air. It was oddly beautiful, considering they were corpses and all. I waited until the light had faded entirely before turning to examine the remaining wolves. Four of them resembled the wolf who'd led me here, albeit slightly smaller. There was one other wolf —

Nah, no matter how you look at it, it's gotta be a different species than those things. Must be a dog?

Anyway, there was one dog too. It still looked pretty ferocious, but it was definitely different from the others. It was nowhere near as scary as the first wolf I'd met either. To be fair, when I'd met the first wolf, I'd been too panicked to really understand the danger I might have been in. My brain had already reached capacity, what with suddenly falling out of the sky and finding myself in a parallel world.

If I'd been as calm then as I am now, who knows what I might have tried to do? Yep, I'm glad everything worked out the way it did.

"You're all pretty dirty too, huh?" I said, and the canines actually looked somewhat ashamed.

Wait, can they understand me? You guys must be pretty smart. Oh yeah, wolves are supposed to be highly intelligent, I think. Well, let's clean them up a bit.

I cast my cleaning spell, and for the first time, I could get a proper look at the four now-beautiful wolves (and dog). Two of the wolves bore the same silvery fur as the first one I'd encountered, while the other two had coats of black and white, respectively. The

dog was mostly brown, with tufts of black fur sticking out here and there. With them all sitting in a line, I could see that the dog was about the same size as the smallest wolf. Suddenly, I realized they were all looking at the wolf next to me.

They seem a little nervous. Are they scared?

"Play nice, you guys."

They're all wagging their tails, so they must be friends. It'll probably be fine.

I was more worried about how underweight everyone seemed, but just like with the first wolf, there wasn't much I could do about it for the moment.

But what should *I do now?*

All my purification attempts had revealed the cave to be massive, just as I'd predicted. The area we were in must have been at least fifty meters long and wide, and two more openings seemed to lead farther in.

"Do you know if anything's back there?" I asked, gesturing at each of the two openings in turn. The wolf shook its head.

Guess it does understand me? Not like I can know for sure, though. I looked at the other wolves and the dog, and got the same response. *Well, whether they understand exact words or not, it looks like they can understand what I'm trying to ask at the very least. Not like I've got any choice but to rely on them anyway.*

Well, if I was going to stay here for any amount of time, I'd have to explore the rest of the cave first. Spacious though it was, there was no way I could settle down in what was essentially an entrance hall. What would I do if something attacked me? Loitering around the entrance was just asking for trouble. No, I needed to figure out if there was anything—or *anyone*—farther inside the cave.

Getting attacked is one thing, but getting attacked from behind? No thanks.

I picked one of the two openings at random and started walking.

Oh, the wolves—and dog—are coming too! Ugh, this is getting annoying. I'm just gonna call them "the wolves" from now on. Anyway, thanks, guys.

8. The Depths...Are Deeply Cursed.

The wolves and I wandered deeper and deeper into the cave. The farther we traveled along the wide passage, the thicker the shadows got.

Do curses thrive more in dark places? Or maybe... Maybe the source of the curse is at the end of this tunnel... I shuddered. *I'm not trained to perform exorcisms, you know?*

I purified the shadows in front of me as we proceeded, but even as I did so, the shadows returned. I flinched when I realized they seemed to be oozing out of the very walls.

Jeez, that's gross.

As the shadows swirling around us got thicker, the wolves breathing grew laborious and rough. Their legs started to shake too.

This is no good. I have to do something—but what? Every time I purify the shadows, they just come right back. I need to somehow stop the shadows from affecting us... What spell did they always use in those manga? Er... Barrier, right? But I think that was for protection against monster attacks... I dunno if it'll stop a curse.

All I could do for now was give it a shot, so I tried to visualize a barrier draping itself around each of us. But I quickly gave up. It was way too hard to form a mental image of barriers protecting six individually moving creatures. Instead, I pictured a single barrier, like a massive balloon, with all of us in the center. It would be pointless if any of the curse ended up inside the barrier with us, so I made sure to imagine the inside of the balloon being purified too.

Okay, here goes nothing!

"**Barrier.**"

Oh! For a second, I could see a thin, bluish membrane, but then it was gone. *Crap, I should check on the wolves!*

Hurriedly, I turned to them, but thankfully the shadows were steering clear of everyone, including me.

Looks like another successful spell. I wonder if it'll stop physical attacks too?

This was a world of magic, after all—magic even I could cast. A surprise attack from an unseen foe wouldn't be the most unexpected thing that could potentially happen.

I wonder if I can reinforce the barrier to make it stronger? No harm in giving it a crack. Let's see, I'll imagine it stopping both physical and magical attacks... This is hard.

I struggled to visualize the barrier absorbing all the different kinds of attacks.

What if I imagine it repelling them instead? That's a lot easier to visualize. Okay, so swords, katanas, knives, bullets, bombs, magic—if anything touches the barrier, it'll bounce right off. Huh? Somehow, I feel like the "repelling" part is more intense than the original attack in my mental image... What do they call it? Returning something with interest? Oh well. Probably not important.

"**Reinforce.**"

A thrumming sound echoed down the passage. Iridescent colors rippled through the barrier surrounding us and faded away just as quickly as they'd appeared.

Uh... It worked, I think? The wolves were staring at me. *Did I do something wrong?*

"I just reinforced the barrier, okay? Don't worry."

Somehow, I felt like they all looked a bit unsure.

Huh? Maybe I did *do something wrong... Did my reinforcement fail, maybe? Well, I won't know until we get attacked—and hopefully, that won't happen anytime soon.*

For the time being, I decided to continue on. With every step, the shadows grew denser.

I might have been right—the curse must be coming from somewhere in the depths of this cave.

The black mists obscured my vision, frustrating me, and with every step I repeatedly purified our surroundings. We walked for what seemed like hours, finally stopping as we reached the end of the tunnel, where a tall stone wall loomed before me. And right before my eyes, there was another opening. It seemed to lead even

deeper into the cave.

Jeez... This cave is way, way *bigger than I imagined.*

9. In the Depths of the Cave Lies...a Boulder?

When I'd first entered the cave, it had been full of those annoying shadows, so I hadn't been able to really tell just how big it was. Without realizing it, I'd wandered into a colossal cave system. We walked for about five more minutes and emerged into yet another rocky chamber. I couldn't see much—apart from shadows—but with a few rounds of purification, I could just make out quite a spacious area that was roughly the same size as the chamber where I'd met the wolves.

I think, at least. Can't tell for certain with all these stupid shadows.

I glanced at the wolves.

They seem pretty exhausted... Maybe being cursed weakened their bodies. I should have let them rest a little longer before I started exploring the cave. Sorry, guys.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem like a good idea to take a break here either. Why? The shadows, of course. No matter where I turned, all I could see were shadows. Their looming presence was gradually seeping into my skull, and I was also beginning to feel exhausted—mentally rather than physically, but still.

If we were going to take a break, I'd have to get rid of the shadows first. The purification I'd been casting up until now was fine and all, but I wanted to try purifying a far larger area in one go. Frankly, doing the same thing over and over again was getting really tedious. But I could barely see a thing beyond the barrier. Inky darkness swirled in every direction.

I'll have to figure out something using magic. Seeing in the dark is kinda like night vision, but what about seeing things you shouldn't be able to? Far Sight? No, that's not right. Clairvoyance? No...

I had no idea. For now, I decided to visualize being able to see in the dark and also being able to see *beyond* my physical location.

Ha ha ha... This is impossible. The dark vision part was fine, but the Far Sight—no, Clairvoyance—whatever it was, I couldn't form a mental image. *Okay, I'll think of something different, then. Something that lets me understand where I am in relation to my surroundings, even when I can't see them... Spatial awareness? Urgh... It's a vague image, but I think it'll work. And I don't want it to just affect the area around me, so I'll picture the magic spreading out and filling the space... Will that really work? Guess there's only one way to find out.*

"**Dark Vision. Spatial Awareness.**"

Crap!

It had worked, but the sudden appearance of a lifelike rendition of the chamber in my head had scared the living daylights out of me.

Well, I guess lifelike is better than cartoony, but still.

Focusing on the image in my head, I imagined my purification spell filling every nook and cranny.

"**Purify!**"

I couldn't help the self-satisfied smirk that pulled at my lips.

It feels good when things work out exactly as you wanted them to, after all.

Next, I'd have to do something to prevent the shadows from seeping back into the chamber.

"**Barrier.**"

It worked! Awesome!

Involuntarily, I struck a triumphant pose, before quickly readjusting in embarrassment.

My plan had been successful, and I could now see every inch of the spacious cavern. One thing in particular caught my eye.

"I didn't actually want to find this, but I guess I can't pretend I haven't seen it now..."

A massive black boulder dominated the center of the chamber. Dark, ominous shadows spilled out of it in waves.

Wait, can boulders curse things? I've never heard of a vengeful

boulder, at least not back in Japan. Is this thing the source of the curse or not?

10. An Evil Boulder...? Kind Of.

The wolves snarled in unison. The next moment, the boulder was right in front of me.

"Argh!" I threw my arms out to protect myself, even as some small part of my brain realized such a pathetic defense would be useless.

Crash.

A sound like a dull gong reverberated through the chamber, and pain—

Wait, what pain? I'm not hurt.

I hesitantly lowered my arms to try to figure out what had happened, only to see the boulder lodged deep in the opposite wall. It was also much smaller now for some weird reason. The boulder dislodged itself from the wall and began to move along it—almost like it was trying to stay as far away from me as possible.

What did I do, huh?! You're the one who flew at me... Oh, it must have been an attack? And then—ah, that's right—it must have hit the barrier. Seems like it works, then. Though the end result isn't what I pictured... How come it ended up lodged in the wall?

Now that I could see clearly, this chamber was even bigger than the one where I'd met the wolves. The opening we'd come through was close to one of the four corners of the rectangular room, and the boulder had fled to one of the top corners on the other side, which made it look even smaller.

It must be really scared if it went all the way over there. Actually, are malignant boulders even conscious? I tilted my head in contemplation and looked at the wolves, who returned my stare with adorably beady eyes. *Ah, I feel so warm and relaxed—I mean, reassured. I feel reassured.*

I took a step forward, and the boulder shot toward me once again. Now that I knew my barrier worked, I stood firm, wanting to

see what would happen as the attack landed. There was another crash as the barrier absorbed the blow, followed by a flash of light as it launched its counterattack—

Wait, what? Countless spears of light pierced through the boulder before vanishing a second later. *Er, are barriers even meant to be able to attack things? Crap—I didn't realize barriers were so terrifying.*

The boulder sank deeply into the far wall for a second time. When I'd first entered the chamber, the boulder had been nearly tall enough to reach the ceiling twenty-five or so meters above my head. After the second attack, it had shrunk yet again. Now it was only seven or eight meters tall.

I feel kinda bad. I mean, it did attack me first, but I think my attack was a lot harder. Who knew barriers could attack, though?

I glanced at the wolves again, but they looked just as confused as I felt.

Oh well. No point wasting my time worrying about it. Let's put barriers in the "ignore" pile for now.

The pressing issue, of course, was the ominous boulder. I strode toward the far wall of the room, no longer concerned about the possibility of attack. However, it didn't move at all, not even the slightest twitch.

Am I imagining it, or does this boulder seem more like a living thing than inorganic matter? It's giving off the same vibes as the wolves did when I first met them. A living boulder? Is that why it can curse things?

I squared my shoulders, summoning up every vestige of my willpower.

"**Purify!**"

The boulder glowed for a split second, the black shroud becoming thinner and thinner, but just as quickly, the light faded, and the boulder returned to its previous state.

Guess my purification spell is too weak for this...

11. Magic...Is All About Imagination!

I tried to purify the boulder a few more times, but every attempt ended in failure. Actually, the purification did seem to work, albeit briefly, but I couldn't get it to stick. Honestly, it was quite a sobering experience.

Well, I'm only a first-time mage after all. Cheer up, me. Right, magic usually comes in levels, doesn't it? Basic magic, intermediate magic, and so on. My magic has gotta be subbasic, then—especially considering I'm self-taught and all.

From what I could gather, the living boulder was afflicted with a powerful curse—too strong for the purification spell I'd been using up until now to have any effect. Therefore, I'd have to use a stronger purification spell.

A stronger spell? I don't even know how magic works... Maybe I can just imagine it being more effective?

I'd just been imagining the shadows separating from whatever they were clinging to and falling away, like dirt washing off clothes in a washing machine. It had been easy to visualize since I'd seen it all the time in commercials. But that mental image wasn't effective enough to work on the boulder. I'd have to actually imagine dispelling a curse—forcefully expelling a curse. I racked my brain, but although various curses and evil spirits I'd seen in movies came to mind, they were all way too different from the curse before my eyes.

I went back to the washing machine image. Before, the shadows had been like dirt or bits of food floating in the water. But the curse on the boulder was a stubborn stain, clinging to the fabric—like oil.

An oil stain! That's easier to visualize for sure. And I'll imagine the detergent lifting it out—no, pulling *it out. Just like the commercials.*

"**Purify.**"

A white glow obscured the boulder. Peering at it closely, I could just make out the shadows peeling away like ribbons from the boulder's surface before vanishing in a shower of fragmented light.

It's making a weird scraping noise... Maybe my spell was a little off? Well, as long as it gets rid of the curse, I'm sure it's fine. Yep, it's fine—right?

While I was fretting, the last ribbon of the curse peeled away and disappeared.

"Well, this is a surprise."

The evil, living boulder, it turned out, wasn't a boulder at all. Instead, before me lay a blood-covered bird.

So it was *an animal—that explains why it was giving off the same vibes as the wolves did.*

More surprising, though, was the bird's size—basically the same as a sparrow.

The curse-boulder thing was massive, and you're this tiny?! I think I'm more surprised about your size than the fact you're not a rock...

And then, of course, there was the way it was dripping with blood, although that scared me more than surprised me.

Is it gonna attack me again if I try to get any closer?

I didn't have to find out. Suddenly, the bird flew toward me, landing atop the finger I'd unconsciously extended.

Ugh, so much blood. It's creeping me out. The blood pulsed from a gaping wound in the bird's chest. *You did well to fly this far with a wound like that, birdie. Did... Did my barrier cause this wound? If it did, I'm really sorry.*

I had to close the wound somehow.

How do wounds like this heal? The cells regenerate, I think...

It was too difficult to picture. I trawled through memories of my own past injuries, but I'd never had blood gushing from a wound like this one.

I'll just have to try my best. Okay, imagine the cells regenerating and the skin fusing together...

I was extremely apprehensive about whether it was going to

work or not, but all I could do was give it a go.

"**Heal**, and **Clean**."

A faint pink light draped itself over the bird's chest, and the wound vanished. At the same time, its feathers shimmered as my cleaning spell took effect. With the blood and dirt gone, what was now perched on the tip of my finger was a very beautiful bird.

12. The Bird...Is a Little Disappointing.

It was a very pretty bird, to be sure, but at the same time, I felt a little sorry for it. Its breast and belly were a deep crimson, and its eyes were a beautiful shade of red too. But its most distinctive trait was the longer feathers on its back and wings, starting off as red but gradually changing to white at the tips. Here and there, slivers of gold sparkled as it moved. It was incredibly beautiful—but it was the size of a sparrow.

You're too small! You might be beautiful, but when you're this small, it just seems a little...I don't know, pathetic? If you were bigger, you'd be so impressive. People would stop just to stare at you! But you're sparrow-sized. Tiny. I can see you now, but still, it's kinda depressing.

Perhaps it read the disappointment in my expression because the bird started furiously pecking my finger. I'd never been pecked by a bird before. It was more painful than I'd imagined. Stealthily, I snuck my other hand behind its head and patted it softly. The bird's eyes narrowed as it nuzzled into my hand.

You're so cute! Crap, I'm getting too excited. Calm down, me.

Snapping back to reality, I surveyed the room. Thanks to my barrier, there weren't any shadows to be seen, so I decided to take a short break. I quickly spotted a small outcrop of rocks that resembled a seat (if you squinted a bit) and collapsed atop it. Mentally, I was exhausted. Being flung into a parallel world was one thing, but I'd also ended up somewhere that didn't resemble my past world in the slightest—thanks to the existence of magic. Anyone would be exhausted in my shoes.

I wanted to rest a little longer, but unfortunately, it seemed like my break time was up: Out of the corner of my eye, the wolves were

looking between me and the chamber's entrance in quick succession.

Yeah, I know. I've been pretending not to notice, but I can see it.

For a while now, the barrier encompassing the room had been rippling with strange, jerky pulses of light. I didn't really *want* to investigate what was causing it, but I didn't have much choice. Sighing, I approached the entrance to the chamber, taking care to stay inside the barrier, and peered out into the passage beyond. Black shadows were trying to force their way inside, and every time they drew near, there was a flash of light.

The barrier must be stopping them from getting any closer... I feel like the big flashes of light are a bit of overkill, though. Wait, the shadows disappeared? Oh, they're back again now.

The shadows tried to pierce through the barrier once again, and the whole process repeated. Now I'd seen it more closely, I realized the barrier was emitting beams of light that swept down the passageway.

That must be what's causing the shadows to vanish, but why is a barrier attacking in the first place? Come to think of it, my barrier attacked the boulder too. Does the barrier I put up around this room have the same counterattack mechanism? Hang on, I don't remember adding a counterattack feature when I visualized the Barrier spell. How odd.

I really need to find a teacher. This stuff's too hard for a first-time mage.

13. Ignore Your Problems...and Focus on Survival!

I peered into the passageway again.

Oh, another beam of light.

There were still too many things I didn't understand about magic—way too many. For now, I'd just put them all in my "ignore" pile. I had too much on my plate already. I went back to my rock and sat down to think. There was a lot on my mind—this world, this cave, the cursed shadows, magic. If I got hung up on every little unknown detail, I'd end up dying right here on this rock before I could figure it all out.

Heck, I don't even know for sure if the shadows are *a curse. They say if you think carefully, an answer will come... Nah. It's not gonna happen. Let's just call it a curse and be done with it.*

As long as my purification spells worked, it didn't really matter whether it was a curse or not—and if they stopped working, I could think about it then.

There was one thing I couldn't overlook, though. I couldn't tell for sure, but the wolves sprawled around me in various states of dozing seemed a lot healthier than they had before. When I'd first met them, they'd been unsteady, twitchy—now they seemed much stronger. The one random dog was the same too. I hadn't seen them eat anything, and they'd been right beside me the whole time.

How is it they've gotten better, then? I probably should try to figure that out, especially if they're gonna stick around, but...oh well. "Ignore" pile it is. Thinking about it isn't gonna get me anywhere.

I took a deep breath. It was time to reassess my current situation. What I needed right now was food, water, and a safe place to sleep—all the essentials to survive.

And I'm gonna survive, you hear me?! I'm not gonna let myself

be smothered to death by all the things I don't know!

One thing I had to find was a secure base, and this cave seemed like a strong candidate. If I extended the barrier all the way to the entrance, I'd be able to sleep safely—the barrier would attack anything that tried to enter while I was asleep. First, though, I had to deal with the shadows. The passageway was still flashing with beams of light, meaning the shadows were still seeping out from wherever they were coming from. To start with, I wanted to purify the entire cave. Mostly, it was to give myself peace of mind—I'd never be able to fall asleep if I could still see shadows on the other side of the boundary.

Nope, definitely gotta get rid of those shadows—but I can't purify the entire cave if I don't even know how big it is. I wonder if my Spatial Awareness spell will show me an image of the entire cave system? No harm in giving it a shot.

"**Spatial Awareness.**"

It kind of worked, but the image in my head was mostly obscured by shadows, making it impossible to see just how far the cave system extended. What I could see, though, was that there were more chambers dotted throughout the caves—not just the two I'd visited. I couldn't make out anything else.

No good. What if I try to visualize the cave from the outside?

"**Spatial Awareness.**"

This time, nothing happened.

Guess I can't use it for getting a full picture—it only works in smaller areas.

To get the image I wanted, I probably needed something more like Far Sight or Clairvoyance.

Which one's gonna be easier to visualize? Far Sight's for seeing distant objects clearly, right? It's not really what I'm aiming for... I want a spell that can let me see the cave from a bunch of different angles. Lemme give Clairvoyance a shot, then. I'll imagine being able to move around freely and scout from above— Oh, like a drone!

The footage I'd seen on television had made it seem like drones could move around wherever they wanted and see anything with ease. I focused on a memory of some of the footage I'd seen—a

beautiful sunset on some television show—and cast the spell.

"**Clairvoyance!**"

Argh! Crap, that scared me.

A monitor-like screen had suddenly popped into existence right in front of my eyes—and on it was an image of a rocky mountain.

Success! I nearly wet my pants, but success!

14. Purify! ...And Payback.

I examined the image on the screen. It seemed to be moving—a live image rather than a still one.

I wonder if I can move it around like a drone too? It would be nice if it was a little higher— Oh, it moved! Awesome!

It seemed like I could change the angle with just my thoughts.

Clairvoyance is just like having a real drone, huh? I always wanted one of these... Hey, me! Focus!

I was getting a little too excited about my new spell, but somehow I managed to suppress the urge to start exploring my new world from overhead and returned to the matter at hand.

I willed the clairvoyance-drone to move even higher, until the entire mountain was projected on the screen. It, too, was shrouded in shadow, but I could more or less make it out from this far away. I also spotted what I thought was the opening I'd entered through, but it was no larger than a speck. Then, I prepared to purify the entire mountain. From my new vantage point, visualization was easy.

I'll picture a dome covering the whole mountain as well as the surrounding area, then purify the whole area in one go. Come to think of it, though... In Japan, we usually say "returning curses," not "dispelling" them, right? Kinda like "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" or something? So if I purify the shadows, is it gonna just return the curse back to the one who cast it? Eh, no point worrying about it. If they end up cursed by their own curse, it serves 'em right. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

"**Purify!**"

There was a soft tug like something draining from my body.

I guess that's mana, or whatever they call it. I felt a little nervous, but it didn't seem like the loss of mana had affected me in any way. *No problems there. I suppose.*

The monitor now showed a clear image of the mountain and its

surroundings without even a hint of black to be seen.

"**Barrier. Reinforce.**"

After going to all the trouble of purifying the area, it would be pointless if the shadows just came back. After casting my spells, I watched the monitor for a few minutes, but nothing changed.

"Looks like it worked."

It didn't work. When I checked the monitor again a few hours later, the shadows had somehow made their way *inside* the barrier.

How?!

The answer revealed itself quite quickly. When I'd wrapped my current chamber in a barrier, it had covered the floor too. When I'd cast Barrier on the mountain, though, it had been a dome. I hadn't protected the ground. The shadows were seeping up from the earth. They were going *underneath* the barrier.

I felt grossed out and more than a little annoyed.

I'll purify it again—and this time, I'll make it bigger.

I imagined a dome covering the mountain and its surrounds again, as well as a large part of the surrounding forest.

I don't want to see shadows every time I step outside.

Investigating underground, though, was another matter entirely. Clairvoyance let me look down from above, which wasn't going to help much, and Spatial Awareness wasn't going to work on solid earth either.

Wait a minute! I don't actually need to see underground, do I? I can use Clairvoyance to tell me how big the barrier needs to be and just extend it underneath the ground too. As long as the barrier's completely closed off, nothing's gonna be able to get through.

Letting go of all notions of seeing underground, I visualized four massive stakes driving down into the earth. It was easy to picture, so I visualized them extending down farther and farther, until they were at least five times deeper than the mountain was high. Next, I visualized the barrier stretching out from each stake, connecting them all in a giant cube. I did the same with the aboveground side of the barrier, extending the mental stakes until they towered over the mountain and connecting them in the same manner. The final

image in my mind was that of a giant, semitranslucent cube, half buried in the earth below.

Yep, this'll work! Let's go!

"**Purify! Barrier! Reinforce!**"

The shadows oozing out of the ground had really unsettled me, so for good measure, I made sure to strongly visualize the curse flying back toward whoever was responsible for it.

I wonder just who is *causing the curse, though... Oh well. If they don't want to be cursed, they can just buy an amulet or something! Sucks to be you, but this curse is going right back where it came from!*

15. Relaxation...and Unrest.

It was time to take a proper look around the cave. The first room I'd entered, where I'd met the wolves, had three openings. One connected to the passage that led to the chamber where I'd found the bird. Another—the one I hadn't taken—revealed another passage, eventually leading to another chamber around the same size as the "entrance hall." The final opening led outside. The newly discovered chamber also had two openings—the one I came through and another on the far side of the nearly rectangular room. The second opening led not to another passageway, but directly into a final chamber, with no other openings to be seen. The cave system had only one entrance, as far as I could tell, which offered a degree of reassurance from a defensive standpoint. Also, when I used Clairvoyance to reexamine the surrounding area, I realized the cave system was quite close to the mountain's summit. If anything wanted to attack me, it would have to run up most of the mountain first.

Well, I ran up this mountain too, didn't I... Pretty easily, at that. Huh? Maybe this cave's not so safe after all? Eh, it'll be fine. It's only got one entrance, so I'll be safe enough.

I returned to the innermost chamber—the one where I'd met the boulder-slash-bird—and resettled on my rock seat. I wasn't physically tired. My body was brimming with a strange, powerful energy, and even my exploration hadn't made a dent in it. Mentally, though? I was exhausted. Today had been, without a doubt, the most chaotic day in my entire life.

What time is it? I've got no idea... I've found a safe place to sleep at least. Next, I need to—

I sighed.

It's because I've spent my whole life in the safety of Japan until now, I guess.

I couldn’t stop worrying. As soon as I stopped moving for even a second, anxiety took over my mind. Since I’d first opened my eyes in this new world, I’d been ignoring problems left, right, and center and focusing only on what was directly in front of me. I knew myself too well—knew if I stopped moving forward because I was stuck on some stupid problem or another, I might never start again. It was just my nature.

Safety is the most important thing. I need to make sure this place is safe.

My hands were shaking. Looking back at everything that had happened, it was only natural, really. Scary things were scary, parallel world or not. I couldn’t think straight.

What should I do? Seriously, what do I do? I want to go home... I want to go home... I want to go—

I snapped back to reality. There was something on my legs—something warm, something heavy. I looked down and found the silvery wolf—the first one I’d encountered—had placed its head on my thighs, eyes closed in apparent comfort. I stroked its head, and a low, contented rumble reverberated from its chest.

I chuckled. “Aren’t you meant to be a wild animal?”

At my voice, it looked up, staring at me with those cute, round eyes.

Oh, you’re too cute!

“Guess it can’t be helped. There’s no point thinking about it, right? No point worrying or getting depressed.”

I felt calmer now thanks to the wolf currently resting its head in my lap.

It’s trying to comfort me, I think... Ha ha ha. I’m getting comforted by a savage beast.

16. Friends...Need Names.

What the—?

I woke with a start as my body began to tip forward—without realizing it, I'd fallen asleep. I stretched my arms above my head, resulting in a tremendous series of popping and cracking sounds coming from my back.

Okay! Before I get started on the next batch of survival essentials, there's something I gotta do first.

I looked down at the wolf, who was still using my thighs as a pillow. "Hey, you. Are... Are you gonna stay with me?"

The wolf lifted its head and looked at me solemnly, as though it could sense the sheer hope in my tone.

Your face is still kinda scary, but even so, you're really cute. My eyes don't lie! I've got twenty-twenty vision! Not that it's relevant.

The wolf responded with a short, nonthreatening growl.

Yep, can't tell what that means! I'll just assume you want to be friends. Don't ever leave me!

If we were going to be friends, though, it would need a name.

"Can I name you?"

Another growl.

Nope, don't know what that means either—but I'm not gonna let you leave! Okay, I'm gonna name you!

I started with the first wolf I'd met, the largest of the pack. She was female, it turned out. Her silver fur was beautiful and a little long, but not quite "longhair" long. She was relatively scary-looking—no, she was actually incredibly ferocious-looking—but still adorable. Distinctive, deep-red irises peered up at me.

I quickly examined the rest of the animals. The two wolves with the same silvery coats as the first were a male and a female.

Maybe she's their mother?

The black wolf and the white one were both males, as was the

solitary brown dog. I couldn't determine the bird's gender.

Okay, how do I name them? It's not like I can ask their opinion. Well, I could, but I won't understand the answer.

I turned back to the first wolf.

Those red irises—such a vivid red too. How about I make up a name using kanji? Yeah, that sounds like a good plan!

I named the first wolf Koa, taking the sounds from the kanji for "heart" and "scarlet." The smaller female silver wolf was Soa ("sky" and "scarlet") and the male became Hio ("scarlet" and "cherry blossom"). I named the black wolf Kurou, using the kanji for "black" and "cherry tree," and the white wolf Shion, combining the kanji for "white" and "sound." As I gave each wolf their name, I checked for any signs of displeasure, but none were obvious.

Looks like it's settled, then! Next!

I moved on to the singular dog. He was pretty big too—not as large as the wolves, but if he stood on his hind legs, I'd definitely be shorter. His fur was brown, so I named him Chai, using the kanji for "brown" and "great."

Finally, there was the red bird. It really was a pretty bird, so it needed a pretty name. I went with Karen, taking the sounds from the kanji for "red" and "flames."

I knew my decision to unilaterally dole out names was a little selfish, but I didn't think anyone seemed too unhappy. A little bewildered maybe, but not upset. I'd been so absorbed in the process of coming up with names I'd lost track of time. It had definitely taken quite a while, though.

I think I just wanted to avoid reality for a little longer... Oh well. Now they've got names, I guess it's time to move forward...

No, maybe just a little longer.

17. Outside the Cave... Let's Make Some Water!

There was still a lot I needed to do if I wanted to have any chance of surviving. With Koa and the others in tow, I headed out of the cave. Now I had a base, my next priority was finding a source of water.

Water, I knew, was more crucial than food. Humans could survive without food for two or three months as long as they had water—but without it, they usually died within a week. Unfortunately, during my exploration of the cave system, I hadn't found anything remotely resembling a water source.

Which is a shame—having access to water inside the cave would have been really handy.

So, the animals and I were heading on an adventure. That said, since Koa and the others already lived here, it probably wasn't much of an adventure for them—

Wait a minute. Instead of wandering around blindly looking for a water source, can't I just ask them?

As far as I could tell, they were a highly intelligent bunch, and they seemed to understand the general gist of my questions. I looked to the side, only to find every single one of them staring back at me.

Scary. That's scary.

I pulled myself together, trying to ignore the goose bumps on my skin.

"Koa, can you take me somewhere where there's water?"

Koa turned her gaze away from me and down the mountain.

We've gotta go down, huh? That's what I was worried about.

When I'd climbed up the mountain—in my panicked state—it had been unbelievably easy, but the thought of descending again

terrified me. I mean, it was basically a sixty-degree incline the whole way up, broken only by a smattering of even steeper cliffs. Kurou and Shion took the lead and set off running.

Come on, me. Just gotta try my best to keep up with them. They... They definitely understood what I meant by "water," right? Right?

We came to the edge of a steep drop, and I jumped, Koa flying into the air beside me.

Oh, this is awesome! I'm running along a mountain without even thinking about it—down *a mountain, at that! If I jumped off a cliff in Japan... Well, that'd just be committing suicide, I guess.*

I caught up to Kurou and Shion without any difficulty. I wasn't even short of breath.

My body has definitely changed somehow... Eh, probably nothing to worry about. I'm much faster now, and that's the important thing.

We kept running, even after we passed through the barrier I'd erected earlier. Apparently, there weren't any water sources on this side of it. I purified our surroundings as we ran, getting closer and closer to the water...

We are *going toward water, right?*

Finally, we arrived.

I guess it's safe to assume these guys do understand me.

They'd led me to water, so they obviously understood human language to some degree, even if they did seem confused by my questions at times.

It's hard to tell just how *much they understand.*

Anyway, they'd led me to water, and I was horrified at the sight of it. Shadows bubbled up and out of the lake in front of me like some kind of demonic soup, and the adjoining river was in the same condition.

No thanks. There's no way I'm drinking shadow-flavored water.

Nevertheless, one way or another, I still needed to secure a water source. I could try to purify the lake, but even if I did, the formerly cursed water wasn't going to be particularly appealing. Kurou, perhaps sensing my hesitation, tilted his head curiously.

You're too damn cute! Come here, you— No. Come on*, me. Focus on the water problem! Stop trying to avoid reality!*

I tried my best to resist, but it was a losing battle. Before I knew it, both my hands were ruffling the fur on Kurou's head. He looked incredibly confused.

Sorry, boy. The shadow lake just got me down a little. I just need a little bit of comfort!

Water. I needed water. But the water I'd found—there was no way I could stomach it. Suddenly, Koa pushed her way between Kurou and me.

What's up? Is something wrong?

To my surprise, she pressed her head against my hand and started nuzzling against it. Forgetting about the water entirely, I began to stroke her head. Actually, for some reason, everyone came up and let me stroke them.

Was I really giving off such a depressing vibe? Guess so... Oh well. Thanks, guys. Time to face reality!

The shadow-lake water wasn't going to cut it, so we left, slowly retracing our path back toward the cave.

"**Purify. Purify. Purify.**"

With every step, shadows swirled out from behind trees and under rocks.

It's no good. Shadows everywhere, and no water—well, no drinkable water. I miss the spring water in Japan... It was so delicious...

"Water, water..."

Splash. Splash.

In the end, it turned out I could just conjure water with magic.

18. The Search for Food... Oh, Not Again!

I'd secured an endless source of water.

Magic sure is useful, huh?

Useful, but mysterious. There was still too much I didn't know about how it worked.

Still, after conjuring the water, I had a bit of a spring in my step as I moved on to my next objective: food. To avoid a repeat of the last tragic expedition, I first tried to conjure up some food in the same way I had water.

"Gyudon!" Unfortunately, no matter how vividly—and deliciously—I visualized my desired beef bowl, nothing happened.

Maybe cooked food's a no-go. What about raw ingredients, then?

"Cabbage!" Nothing happened.

"Chicken!" Still nothing.

Well, if cabbage didn't work, chicken wasn't going to either. Now I just look stupid!

My animal friends were watching me suspiciously—warily, even. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

Okay, take a deep breath.

I couldn't conjure up food with magic, which meant I'd have to find some. Fruit or berries would be the obvious choice—I was too scared to even think about eating wild mushrooms. And I was in the middle of a forest, after all. Surely there had to be *something* edible nearby.

I started by exploring the area around the mountain, but I couldn't find a single fruit tree or berry bush within the barrier. Stupidly huge trees everywhere, but none of them bore fruit. There were smaller trees too, but again, I didn't spot a single fruit or even a flower. I was beginning to get annoyed.

What the—?

I jumped, surprised by Hio's sudden headbutt.

What's wrong?

He looked me up and down—I probably looked pretty flustered—and nodded once. Then, he, Shion, and Kurou took off at a run, passing through the barrier and quickly vanishing from sight.

Hey! Where are you three going?!

I looked at Koa in confusion, but she merely returned my stare with another nod.

I don't know what the nodding means! No way—they haven't left me, have they?! Please, anything but that...

Sensing my confusion, Koa looked distressed. I'd become somewhat capable of distinguishing between her expressions, but the one she had now was the one that meant, *I'm upset because neither of us can understand the other*, which wasn't much help in figuring out what was going on.

I wasn't sure what to do. I wanted to wait for Hio and the others to return, but realistically, there was every chance they weren't coming back. I had to solve my food-supply issue sooner rather than later too. After I'd recovered from some of the shock of the wolves' sudden departure, I decided to start exploring again.

They'll come back. I'm sure of it.

I discovered one of the cave's secrets!

I wanted to shout it at the top of my lungs, but I managed to restrain myself to screaming it inside my head. I couldn't blame myself, really. I was, after all, a boy at heart, and I was *exploring*—I mean, who wouldn't do the same?

I'd found another opening. The cave system we'd been in was near the summit, but this one was close to the foot of the mountain.

Don't just rush in, me. Don't do it. No matter how enticing it is, it's too dangerous.

Instead, I cast Spatial Awareness, and a clear rendition of the inside of the cave appeared inside my mind. It was a strange sensation, one I'd yet to grow used to. I carefully studied the new image inside my head. It was a big chamber—I'd thought as much,

but now that I could see it clearly, it was even bigger than I'd imagined. At the end of the chamber, a tunnel sloped upward. I followed it inside my mind to arrive at a second chamber.

This one's pretty spacious too... Oh, another tunnel. And up we go... Yep. It's a three-story mountain. Oh, wait—four-story. The caves we were in yesterday are on top of these ones.

My heart raced with excitement as I made another discovery—some chambers *below* the ground.

I discovered a secret basement! "The Secret Below the Caves..." Even just saying it sounds awesome!

However, my excitement quickly vanished as my Spatial Awareness revealed an ominous black mass on the lower of the two basement levels.

Not another bloody curse!

19. The Food...Comes with a Side of Curse.

Another black mass. It gave off the same impression Karen had when I'd met the bird in boulder form—which meant there was every chance this was also a living creature.

Come to think of it, I wonder if there're monsters in this forest too? Like the ones my sister used to talk about.

So far, I'd only come across the wolves, a dog, and a bird. I hadn't met a monster yet.

Unless... Are Koa and the others monsters? Hmm... What are monsters anyway? They attack humans, right? And heroes have to fight them to get stronger. Wait, maybe that was demons? Oh, this is too hard. Anything that attacks me can be a monster. Koa and the others didn't attack me, which means they're not monsters. Oh, but Karen attacked me... Well, that was probably the curse's fault, really.

I glanced at Karen sitting patiently on my shoulder, like it had been since I'd first healed it. Adorably tiny, beady eyes looked back at me.

Nah, you're too cute! There's no way you're a monster!

Something was probably trapped inside the new black mass I'd just discovered, but I'd have to figure out how to get underground before I could help it.

I whipped around. Noises like trees shaking in a storm were coming from beyond the barrier. There was a flash of movement, and my eyes landed on three figures running toward me—the three wolves who'd left earlier.

And they're pulling something along with them—something cursed. Oh, gross! And terrifying. What the hell is it?

I had a bad feeling about this. I was happy Hio and the others had returned, of course, even if they had brought a massive cursed

meal back with them.

They knew I was looking for food, so they went hunting just for my sake? I should be grateful, even if it is cursed. Okay, me? Even if it is cursed!

The three wolves wagged their tails excitedly, clearly looking for praise. Obviously, I stroked each of their heads in turn.

You cute little rascals! Okay, calm down, me.

After all the trouble they'd gone to, there was no way I could refuse to eat the weird beast. First, I had to purify it—*really* purify it—from head to toe. I imagined a vacuum sucking up even the tiniest specks of dirt. The curse itself was really beginning to piss me off, so while I was at it, I made sure to *really* focus on the idea of the curse flying back to whichever jerk had cast it in the first place.

"**Purify!**" I yelled, as though trying to pack all of my irritation into the word itself.

Perfect.

There wasn't even a whisper of a shadow on the creature now.

Good job, me.

This creature wasn't like the ones I'd encountered so far.

So this is a monster—probably.

It looked like a boar but with four prominent, massive tusks. The beast itself was massive too.

It's gotta be like... Oh, I don't know. It's huge, though. And definitely filling. Er, hang on a minute. Who's gonna butcher this thing?

The wolves would probably just dig straight in. Chai too. I wasn't too sure about Karen, but if it was a carnivore, it was probably used to eating raw, unprocessed meat.

So I'm the only one who can't eat it like this... So I'm *gonna have to butcher it?!*

My panicked gaze landed on Shion, who was staring at me expectantly. I sighed.

Okay, okay. I'm gonna eat it, all right? I'm gonna butcher it, and then I'm gonna eat it! Gratefully! It can't be too hard, can it? I can do anything if I put my mind to it! It'd be easier if I knew the first thing about butchering, though!

20. Butchering... I Tried My Best.

Okay, calm down. For starters, I'll try chilling it. I need more time to think, so I'll chill it so it doesn't go bad. It would be a waste if it rotted.

For a mental image to create the spell, I decided on a carton of strawberries inside a refrigerator. The premium strawberries I'd splurged on last payday were still sitting inside my refrigerator at home, never to be eaten.

I was looking forward to them. Shame.

"**Refrigerate.**" A quick touch of the beast's skin told me I'd been successful. Maybe *too* successful—it was a little closer to "frozen" than "cold."

Oh well. Next! Oh, next comes butchering...

I'd do it out here rather than inside the cave. There was a good chance I'd fail, and I didn't want to imagine the ghastly scene if I did.

So what do I need to do? The blood and organs are gonna be the biggest problem... Oh, bloodletting! I have to drain the blood! You have to cut off the head and hang it upside down from a tree... That's what they did on that historical drama I watched at least. Why did I watch such a gory show anyway?

The *real* problem was whether I'd be able to do it or not. I had a sneaking suspicion I'd never be able to sleep again even if I did succeed. No, I'd try to work something out with magic first.

Blood is mostly water, right? What if I try to remove all of its water content... Nah, it'll probably just turn into jerky.

I tried using Spatial Awareness to look *inside* the creature, but it immediately made me queasy, and I dismissed the spell before I could see anything else.

What if I end up seeing inside its stomach or heart? Ew.

Even my brief foray had already left me with too many realistic

images in my mind.

Okay, calm down a little. Pull yourself together, me. Blood... Blood vessels. That's easy enough to visualize. I'll picture the blood vessels being pulled from the body. If they come out on their own, it'll be a lot nicer for me. Picture the blood vessels sliding out of the body... Sliding... Nope. This is the stuff of nightmares. Rejected. Disgusting.

I took a deep breath. What I really wanted was to get the blood vessels out of the carcass, *without* needing to see them.

Hey, now there's an idea—I'll vanish them! Oh, but where would they go, though? I'm not sure I can visualize that... But teleporting them might work. I'll teleport them outside of the body and burn them. Yep!

I placed my hand on the boar-like monster again and focused on just the blood vessels, a task which immediately proved more difficult than I'd imagined. There were a lot of blood vessels in a body, including tiny capillaries, and the vague glimpses I'd seen of the monster's insides didn't help at all.

Okay, maybe I don't need to know where all the vessels are anyway. I'll just imagine them all teleporting outside the body and burning to ash. Let's give it a go.

"**Teleport. Incinerate.**" A pile of ashes appeared on top of the boar-monster-thing.

Oops. I should have teleported them a little farther away.

"**Clean.**" The ash vanished.

Next came the organs; I'd get rid of them the same way.

Organs, organs. I gutted a fish once, but I think land animals are kinda different... What organs are there? Heart and stomach, those are easy. And... What else is there?

Suddenly, I remembered the anatomy model from my high school science classroom. It had looked like a weird toy to my childish mind, and I'd spent ages taking random bits out and putting it back together before my teacher had lost it at me. It had been a human body, obviously, but I thought I could remember it well enough.

Okay, let's see—brain, eyes, heart, intestines, kidney...

"**Teleport. Incinerate.**"

Cool, it worked. Next time, though, I'm definitely closing my eyes.

Definitely.

Even though I'd only seen them for a split second, I was pretty sure the mountain of organs was going to be burned into my mind for all eternity.

Next, I used a blast of wind magic to split the carcass into two neat pieces, though I then realized I'd forgotten to skin it first.

I'll just cut out some of the inside meat for now, annnnd—done!

It hadn't gone quite as I'd expected it to, but somehow or other, I'd successfully managed to butcher the weird boar-monster-thing. I was too scared to eat it raw, so I decided to cook it using Incinerate—forgetting, of course, how the spell had immediately turned the organs to ash. My steak became a beautiful pile of gray dust.

Idiot.

I sliced out another steak and tried again, this time visualizing the meat being well-done. And with that, I secured my first meal (albeit with a few errant burn marks).

I had a lot of nightmares that night.

21. Day Two...Didn't Go as Expected.

Fluffy and soft—the two best sensations in the world.

I remembered falling asleep on the rocky floor, but when I awoke it was to find Koa wrapped around me, her belly as my pillow. It was the happiest I'd been since arriving in this world. For breakfast, I ate some of the leftover meat—not that I had any other breakfast options of course. It still tasted good, with no edge of rot or decay. My attempt at butchering had apparently gone pretty well.

Still, I am a little surprised it tastes this *good—after all, it did come pre-cursed. Looks like I won't starve at least. I really want some salt, though... Come on, me! Don't be greedy!*

Shelter, water, food—I'd secured them all. As for other needs (aka a toilet), I was just going outside for the time being, though I wanted to figure out a more decorous solution soon. I'd been using Clean to make the area spotless after I finished my business, but I'd feel better if I could somehow make a proper toilet inside.

That's a low-priority problem, though. First, I need to focus on making this cave a bit more habitable.

The most obvious issue, of course, was the ominous lump of shadows in the basement. I needed to figure out just what was going on down there if I wanted any real peace of mind in my new home.

So I started by making my way to the third floor of the aboveground levels of the cave using the new entrance I'd discovered yesterday. One unusual feature of this cave was the way the rocky walls glowed, emitting their own faint but constant light. It wasn't anywhere near as bright as outside, but it was enough to let me see my surroundings.

I hadn't noticed it at all yesterday, until I'd woken up in the

middle of the night to use the toilet. I'd opened my eyes expecting to see a pitch-black cave, only to see all the walls glowing instead...

Crap, that scared me. Really scared me. I didn't make it outside... Let's try to forget about it.

The barrier I'd erected yesterday was apparently still working as intended, and no new shadows had managed to creep in during the night.

I wonder how long it'll keep being effective? Do spells just stay forever after you cast them? Eh, guess I'll just have to wait and see. If the barrier breaks, I'll worry about it then.

From the third floor, I moved to the second, and then the first. To my great relief, I didn't come across anything concerning. The first floor had the highest ceilings; I couldn't say for certain without anything to measure it, but by my rough estimate, they were about twice as tall as any of the other chambers.

Unfortunately, with my investigation of the aboveground levels complete, I now had to move on to the basement. For some reason, the first basement level had even higher ceilings than the floor above it.

I wonder why... Is there something down here that needs this much space? God, I hope not.

The first basement level was just a few giant chambers, with no other tunnels apart from those leading up and down. There was something odd about the chamber, but I couldn't figure out what it was, so I decided to ignore it for the moment.

That left the second basement level. A large part of the wall was covered by a thick curtain of black shadows oozing out of the ground below it.

Ugh, gross—

"Argh! **Purify!**"

The shadow cluster had suddenly separated into two individual masses, one of which came hurtling toward me.

I expected it to attack, but what's with the splitting-in-half thing?! I reflexively tried to cast Purify, but I didn't have time to visualize anything, so it's not gonna wor— Huh?

The mass was glowing—the same light that had appeared when

I'd purified the other animals.

Hold on a sec. My sister always said visualization was essential for magic to work, but maybe she was wrong... Whatever, now's not the time!

The shadows shrouding the mass faded away, revealing...

Nothing...? That's unexpected.

Out of all the things I'd dreaded might be hiding within the lump, "nothing" wasn't one of them.

Wait, no—there is something... Uh, seriously?

It was a spider—or rather, spiders. There were around twenty of them altogether, each no larger than my pinky nail.

You're telling me these *were what I was worried about?*

The other half of the mass, once purified, revealed five more of the pinky-nail-sized spiders, as well as one larger spider about the same size as a five-hundred-yen coin.

You must be the boss—Spider Boss.

Unlike any of the spiders I'd seen on Earth, Spider Boss had wings—a little on the smallish side for its body, but they moved fast enough to make up for it. The smaller spiders gathered around Spider Boss and stared at me in unison, as though evaluating me. It felt a little uncomfortable.

Are these guys monsters? Back in Japan, spiders were always considered useful to have around, provided they weren't too poisonous. Could these spiders be the useful kind? I thought, purifying the remnants of the curse still clinging to the wall.

Guess I'll just have to wait and see.

22. Magic... I'm Kinda Starting to Understand It.

There was a flutter of wings, and Spider Boss landed on my head. I managed to somehow suppress the urge to swipe it off. The smaller spiders jumped onto Chai's back—apparently, they couldn't fly.

I wonder if Spider Boss is their parent?

The swarm of baby spiders scuttling across Chai's fur made him look like he had fleas. He froze for a moment—whether from shock or fear, I couldn't tell—but seemed to recover a few seconds later. Neither Spider Boss nor the squadron of baby spiders showed any intention of getting down from their respective perches, so I decided to take them along with us.

They're kinda weird spiders, though.

While I inspected the rest of the second basement level, I thought about what had happened during the spider's attack. I'd unconsciously cast Purify, but my mind had been blank. Frankly, I'd just yelled it out of reflex.

Until this point, I'd assumed visualization was essential when casting magic and been working under that premise when casting spells. However, maybe I'd been wrong the entire time.

Let me try casting a spell without forming a mental image first. What should I try? Hmm...

"**Fire.**"

Nothing happened.

"**Water.**"

There was a splash, and a puddle appeared at my feet.

Huh? Hmm...

I imagined a ball of fire and tried again.

"**Fire.**"

A fireball materialized in front of me, bobbing in midair—exactly as I'd pictured it.

Not the kind of thing you want to see in the middle of the night—it looks just like a will-o'-the-wisp from those old ghost stories.

Wanting to see what would happen if my words and mental image weren't synonymous, I visualized the puddle of water and said, "**Fire.**" A second fireball joined the first, bobbing gently in circles around me.

From the results of my experiment, it seemed like when creating a new spell, I needed to visualize the outcome while assigning it an incantation. But when casting it later, if I tried to visualize something else—or nothing at all—the incantation would take precedence, which was why the second fireball had appeared despite me visualizing water.

If my hypothesis was correct, magic was going to become a lot more convenient to use. To be honest, constantly having to picture my desired result while casting was a little draining. For the time being, I'd have to keep putting my theory to the test; if I got the same result a few more times, I'd actually have learned something about how magic worked.



Leaving the fireballs floating around me, I continued my exploration of the second basement level, discovering another chamber beyond the first. It seemed to be completely empty, with no other openings beside the one we'd come through—

Huh?

The fireballs had begun to flicker, like they'd been caught in the—

Wind?

I curiously examined the nearby wall, discovering a thin fissure in the rock face. I peered through it, but it was too dark; I couldn't see a thing.

I wish I had a torch...

Using Spatial Awareness, I was able to determine that a huge cavern sat on the other side of the wall, thankfully devoid of any curses.

Nice.

I peered through the crack again, imagining a large fireball appearing in the cavern.

"**Fireball.**"

Crap, I was meant to say "Fire"! And I visualized it and all... Now I've got two of the same spell. I gotta be more careful in future.

Unfortunately, the fireball I'd pictured had been *too* large. Blinding light spilled out of the fissure as though I'd conjured the sun itself, and I couldn't see a thing.

Okay, I'll make the fireball a bit smaller this time...

Fine-tuning my spells turned out to be harder than I'd anticipated. After three more rounds of minute adjustment, I was finally able to conjure a suitably sized fireball. Out of all the magic I'd cast since arriving, this spell had exhausted me the most. Through the fissure, I could now make out some shiny rocks, different from the ones that made up the cave.

Ore, maybe? Unfortunately, I couldn't tell what color they were; the fireball was still too bright.

23. Spider Boss...and Nonslip Flooring.

Suddenly, Spider Boss leaped from my head, disappearing through the fissure. A minute later, it returned, clutching a small silvery rock.

You've got a lot of initiative, hey?

It seemed like it was waiting for me to take the rock, so I gingerly picked it up. It was around the size of a ten-yen coin.

I think *it's an ore? So this is what's on the other side of the fissure.*

"Thanks, Spider Boss."

Crap, I called it "Spider Boss" out loud. Oh well. It should be fine... Right, I haven't named these guys yet! Well, apart from Spider Boss... Sorry, but you just give off a "boss" vibe! What about the baby ones, then? Hmm... Wait, wait. It'd be stupid to try to name them before I can even tell them apart. They're all the same size, same color, same species... Hang on, am I ever *gonna be able to tell them apart?!*

The fissure was too thin for me to enter, so I used Spatial Awareness to scan inside. Happily, there weren't any more fissures or holes inside the ore chamber as far as I could see, which meant—

I've done it! I've conquered the entire mountain!

I slid the lump of ore into my pocket. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with it, but it was a precious gift from Spider Boss, so I'd have to keep it safe.

We began our ascent to the surface. Along the way, I picked up a bit of fallen rock. Now that I thought about it, the impression I'd had of caves was that there'd be chunks of rock constantly tumbling from the ceiling, but this was the first bit I'd seen.

Maybe the rock this cave is made of is extra sturdy? If so, I'm

probably not gonna be able to do much with it...

My plan was to start searching for other people, using this cave as my base. It was a pretty decent cave—as far as caves go—but it was also incredibly, well, rocky. The floor was bumpy and rough, and I'd already stumbled too many times to count. At some point, I was going to trip and plummet headfirst down one of these tunnels. The very thought of it terrified me.

Especially at night! Scary!

But fixing up the cave wasn't going to be easy—it was solid rock, after all. If the surface had been wood, I could have improvised some kind of file to smooth out the lumps. I built a set of shelves once on a whim. I kept getting splinters, so I'd retaliated by filing it down until it was smoother than glass.

"I need to start transforming this place into a slightly safer home, huh..." I muttered, fiddling with the rock in my hand. It nearly slipped out of my grasp.

Huh? It's smooth! But it was rough a second ago.

I held up my hand to inspect the rock. It was indeed smooth and was now surrounded by a pile of what looked like gray sand.

I filed down the rock with magic? That means I'll be able to renovate this place with magic too! Magic sure is useful.

For some reason, Karen and Spider Boss were looking at the now-smooth rock with what I thought was fascination. The wolves—as well as Chai, who usually hung back from the rest of the group—approached for a closer look too. A much, *much* closer look.

What's up, guys? Never seen a smooth rock before? Guess they're not that common in nature.

With my new discovery, though, I'd be able to make the cave a little more comfortable. For starters, I made every surface in the current chamber as smooth as the stone. One of the baby spiders leaped from Chai's back to investigate the newly smooth wall—and immediately slid down to the floor below.

Uh...for safety's sake, I should try to make the floor a little less *smooth than the walls.*

A bit later, it was all set.

Spider Boss! Baby spiders! No running on the floor! God, that was close. You're lucky I didn't step on you!

24. Forest, Forest, Forest...Human?

I dispelled the monitor, cutting off my drone Clairvoyance spell in the process.

It's been five days now, I think. Yeah. Five days.

Now that I had a base of operations, I wanted to search inside—and outside—the forest for signs of life. *Human* life. True, I had Koa and the others to keep me company, but I wanted to find another human, even if only to learn a few things about my new world.

Someone—anyone—just give me some information, please!

With that slight desperation in mind, I'd started my search, sending my Clairvoyance drone speeding across the sea of trees. It had been quite thrilling, to be honest. I wasn't quite sure *how* fast the drone was moving, but in terms of kilometers per hour, it definitely rivaled even the most expensive drones back on Earth. The shadows thriving in the forest beyond my barrier impeded my vision a bit, but I was fairly confident I hadn't overlooked anything. I'd spotted several animal-ish figures over the past few days, as well as some darker patches of shadows dotted here and there throughout the forest, but I hadn't found what I was looking for.

"No people today either."

Indeed, I hadn't come across even a whisper of human life. I hadn't expected to find a city—seeing as how I was in a forest and all—but I'd been hoping to spot a village or even a single house. To my disappointment, the drone hadn't picked up anything of the kind. The monitor showed forest—endless forest. Plus, not only were there no people, there was too *much* forest—no matter how far the drone went, it never reached the edge.

With an unpleasant feeling in my gut, I tried sending the drone upward—above the mountain, as high as it could go, until I could

barely make out anything at all. Nothing but trees. A sea of green in every direction, as far as the eye could see.

I willed the drone to gradually descend while slowly circling the area around the mountain, searching desperately for some kind of road or unusual clearing, but it wasn't to be. There were two things I now (reluctantly) understood: one, I was smack-dab in the middle of an impossibly massive forest; and two, it was highly unlikely that this forest was inhabited by humans.

I hadn't given up entirely, though, even after five days of disappointment. There were still many directions I hadn't checked, so all I could do was hope for the best.

However, no matter how hard I tried, there was one ominous thought I couldn't shake: *What if there aren't any other humans in this world?*

I hadn't considered it before now, but in the end, this wasn't Earth. It was entirely possible that humans might not exist here.

No! Pull yourself together, me. There's definitely people living in the places we haven't searched yet! I've just gotta keep trying.

On days like this, there was only one thing to do. I threw myself to the floor and started to roll around.

Sometimes you just need a little bit of floor therapy!

Rolling around on the nice smooth floor was quite relaxing, actually. It wasn't uncomfortable, thanks to my transformation magic, and the cool stone helped soothe my overheating, overworked brain.

It had only taken two days of people hunting to send me into a funk. To distract myself from my gradually worsening mood, I decided from the third day onward I'd start renovating the cave while checking on my drone through the handy monitor.

I'd quickly figured out what had caused the suspicious feeling I'd had about the first basement level: The walls were full of ore—not the silvery ore from the bottom level but a golden one. When I'd used Transform to smooth down the chamber, it had left chunks of the gold-colored ore scattered across the floor.

Maybe it doesn't conduct magic very well or something?

I'd piled all the ore in one corner to deal with later. When I first

began moving the ore, Chai started shaking. I did too, plagued by nightmarish thoughts of something lurking behind the chunk I'd just picked up. Ultimately, nothing had emerged, so I wasn't sure what had set him off.

Transforming the floors was much harder than the walls. I'd visualize the floor becoming just a *tiny* bit smoother, and yet, it would immediately morph into the world's most dangerous slippery slide. I briefly considered using it as a kind of skating rink to move around the cave but quickly gave up on the idea after having a foreboding vision of falling over and breaking my tailbone.

Nope, I've gotta figure out how to make these floors less slippery.

My next attempt left the floors resembling sandpaper.

I'm not very good at fine-tuning my spells, huh...?

After a few more blunders, I managed to turn the floors into something similar to the tiles you'd see in an apartment building lobby. It was still a *little* slippery, but not enough to be a problem.

I think.

Remembering how the spider had slid down the wall, I also adjusted the walls until they had a similar texture to brick.

Plus, bricks are meant to be rough, so who cares if they feel like sandpaper?!

My next project was the one I was most proud of: staircases connecting each of the four aboveground levels. They had turned out even better than I'd imagined.

The first three levels already had tunnels connecting them together, so I'd been able to use Transform to simply reshape the upward slopes into stairs. Connecting the third and fourth floors, however, had been closer to "excavation" than "renovation." Starting from the side of the room, I had used wind magic to cut out individual slabs of rock in a gradually upward direction, teleporting each slab into neat piles in the third-floor chamber.

It took a while, but eventually, I was able to connect the new staircase to the fourth floor. Plus, through the whole process, I got better at using Teleport, and I could now teleport things with more precision and move them farther than before as well.

I was especially grateful for my new mastery of Teleport when it

came to butchering monsters. I'd light a fire first, and teleport the blood vessels and organs right into the middle of it, eliminating any possibility of once again seeing something unpleasant. The smell of roasting organs wasn't appetizing either, though, so as soon as they were in the fire I used Incinerate to immediately reduce them to ash.

Not everything I tried to Teleport had gone perfectly, though. For instance, there was the time I'd accidentally teleported one of the slabs of rock onto the fire I was using to roast my dinner, turning the meat into sludge. Or the time I'd gone to resume my staircase excavation only to discover a dripping pile of organs in the center of the room. There had been a few more minor disasters before I was able to solve the issue—namely, by specifying what I wanted to move, as well as where to, before casting the spell. Apparently, if I just said "Teleport," there was a chance the spell would default to the last desired destination.

The sight of the ghastly mountain of organs I'd stumbled across on the third floor had been like a scene from hell.

25. The Rock...Gets a Magical Upgrade!

I decided to put my "unable to find humans" problem in the ignore pile for the time being. Thinking about it too much caused me to feel panicked, and I still had a lot more work to do in the cave. From the outside, it still looked like a rocky mountain—and definitely not like anything even remotely resembling a house—but on the inside, it was shaping up far better than I'd dared to hope.

I was particularly pleased with how the ceilings had turned out. I'd had the mental image of unfinished concrete as I'd transformed them, and that, combined with the natural gray color of the stone, had given the rooms a cool, minimalist aesthetic.

With all the surfaces now finished, though, the faint glow emitting from the rock itself was more conspicuous than ever. It would have been one thing if it was just the ceiling, but the walls and floor were glowing too. It wasn't bright enough to prevent me from getting to sleep, so I'd been happily putting off dealing with it—that is, until a recent midnight bathroom trip, when I'd suddenly turned a corner and seen a ghost.

Well, it had actually turned out to be Shion, merely given a ghostly glow on account of the light, but I'd only figured that out after a few minutes of screaming. A faint light, as it turned out, made things even scarier than just being in the dark.

The next day, I began trying to get rid of the unwanted illumination. I experienced a few disappointing failures, but ultimately, the solution was simple: I just needed to visualize a light bulb turning off. Once I figured that out, the rest was easy, and before long, I'd eliminated the glow from all the floors and walls, leaving just the ceilings. I was able to adjust the strength of the glow too, but fine-tuning it was too difficult, so I decided to deal

with it at another time.

Much to my satisfaction, I now had a (semifinished) grand mansion with four aboveground stories and two more below. I'd renovated the second basement level, carving out an archway between the main chamber and the one beyond the fissure. Now they were properly connected, I'd be able to use the spacious main chamber to process the ore in the adjoining one. I'd then teleported the golden ore down from the level above—well, I'd tried to anyway.

As I'd discovered earlier, magic didn't seem to work on the gold-colored ore, and all of my attempts at teleporting it failed. I then tried using wind magic to cut it into smaller chunks and carry it down by hand, only to discover the ore was much stronger than I'd expected. The same spell I'd used to cut out slabs of stone only left the ore with a few tiny nicks.

While trying to think of a method that would allow me to cut the ore into carriable pieces, I remembered the diamond cutter I'd once seen on TV, and—despite several vague apprehensions—I somehow forced myself to give it a go. It worked perfectly. Maybe a little too perfectly, in fact. The ore was cut into suitably sized pieces, but the edges were incredibly sharp. Luckily, it turned out I *could* use Teleport on the much smaller pieces, so I was able to move them down to the second basement level without slicing off a finger.

With the ore gone, I'd started turning the first basement level into a food storehouse. The wolves were constantly bringing back all kinds of monsters for me, and I was getting a lot better at butchering them too.

I still can't look at the organs, though... Oh well. Doesn't bother me!

Actually, after seeing them fighting over a raw kidney, I'd recently realized the wolves had started tearing out the larger organs before dropping off their kills for me. After I'd recovered from the shock, I'd remembered reading something about offal being a crucial source of vitamins and minerals for carnivores.

Oops. Guess I should stop incinerating everything.

I'd also become pretty handy at skinning the monsters using a knife I'd shaped out of stone. I'd thought it would give my

butchering work a little bit more of an "adventure" vibe. However, the knife was surprisingly sharp, and I had to rely on Heal more than a few times.

I'm surprised I didn't lose a finger doing that either...

I had yet to figure out how to process the raw hides so I could turn them into something useful. I'd tried and failed a few times, incinerating what was left of the ruined attempts. It was a shame to let them go to waste, so I'd need to figure out a solution soon.

The first basement level had originally consisted of four decently sized but scattered chambers, but I'd removed the walls and turned it into one giant space. Then began the trial-and-error process of figuring out how to turn the huge chamber into a food storehouse—which was when I'd discovered a really handy feature of my transformation magic.

By visualizing my magic pouring into every nook and cranny of the rock, I became able to reshape it like clay, freely expanding the room or adding new walls. The first time I'd willed a new wall to slide up out of the floor, the wolves had started growling ferociously. They'd quickly settled down and hadn't reacted since, but I still wasn't sure what had caused their reaction in the first place.

Maybe they were frightened when the rocks started to move on their own? I should have given them some warning... Sorry, guys.

Renovating the storehouse had also given me a slightly better understanding of my own use of magic. As a self-taught, first-time mage, I was quite satisfied with what I'd been able to achieve. However, using magic—transformation magic in particular—took a lot of concentration. I found myself tiring quickly, and working for more than a few hours at a time was impossible.

Still, I kept at it, taking breaks where necessary, until the storehouse was complete—in an architectural sense, at least. It had five uniformly sized rooms connected by neat archways tall enough for Koa (and therefore all the others) to pass through them comfortably.

I still wish I could figure out how to make doors, though. Nothing I've tried has worked.

As for the aboveground floors, I hadn't finished anything except

smoothing out the floors, walls, and ceilings as of yet. I was still spending a fair bit of time checking on my Clairvoyance drone throughout the day, after all.

People can survive in the harshest conditions, you hear me?! Even in a world with no other humans!

...I wonder if there're any talking animals here?

26. The Kings

The Kingdom of Empras.

The man still kneeling before me had just finished his report: Something strange is allegedly occurring in the forest.

Unusual but ultimately inconsequential. Before long, the entire forest will belong to me. It is nearly within my grasp. Fighting back now is futile. Why do they bother? Fools.

"Offer more blood. Strengthen the spell."

I couldn't help but sneer as I watched the mage scuttle from the throne room.

Soon. Soon, this entire world would fall right into my hands. The beast kings of the forest, mighty though they once might have been, were now but a thing of the past. It is likely most were long dead. True, perhaps some remained, clinging to the last vestiges of life, but they too would bow to me and spend the remainder of their short lives offering their power to my rule. For is there no greater privilege than to belong to the king of this world?



The Kingdom of Entall.

A change in the forest? The occurrence—whatever it was—had happened too far into the forest's depths for the scout to confirm, but he swore to have seen a faint flash of light.

What could it mean? Is... Is the forest finally dead?

When the Kingdom of Empras had committed that most heinous crime and cast its Magic Eye over the whole forest, all order had collapsed. Many of the sacred beasts had vanished, replaced by swarms of insentient monsters and archbeasts. By what means they had brought such an evil spell into existence? And how were they managing to sustain it, even now? The rumors spoke of sacrifices—living sacrifices. I could not be certain of their truth, but it was well-known that Empras is a cruel land for all creatures but for humans.

"If Empras claims dominion over the forest..."

Then their king will become the ruler of the world.

And as to what that means for our country...

The Kingdom of Orgamit.

I could hear gasps all around as the man finished his report. It had been close to two hundred years since Empras had first moved to seize control of the forest. Over those two centuries, we'd born witness to the forest's gradual decline.

So for such a sudden change to occur now... What does it herald?

Once upon a time, two other kingdoms had bordered Empras—until two hundred years ago. It was said they'd both crumbled overnight, their citizens vanishing without a trace. At the time, hushed whispers had spoken of a colossal blood sacrifice, enough to give birth to the Magic Eye that even now exerted its power over the forest. But no one had given much real credit to the rumors. For how could anyone truly believe someone would willingly trade tens of thousands of lives for such a spell? Who would dare to violate our world with such monstrous evil?

But it seemed we'd been wrong. Empras *had* dared—and we'd done nothing but watch.

27. Barrier! ...More Powerful This Time.

What the—?

I'd been on the verge of falling asleep when the sound had started, something like fireworks—or gunshots. If not for Koa, I probably would have screamed. I realized, once I'd recovered from the shock, that I was clinging to her in fear.

Am I just a scaredy-cat? Nah, come on. I mean, who wouldn't be scared when some stupidly loud noise starts up when they're about to fall asleep?! Anyone would be scared! So I'm *not a scaredy-cat!*

I sighed. Reassuring words were a little hollow when they came from your own head.

I gotta pull myself together. My sister used to heartlessly mock me every day! I didn't let it get me down then, and I certainly don't have the luxury of letting it get me down now!

The traumatic memories gave me some clarity—anger-fueled clarity, to be sure, but still effective—and I snapped back to reality, forcing myself to breathe deeply until my heart stopped threatening to burst out of my chest.

I have to go outside and figure out where that noise came from... Hang on, it's the middle of the night. I'm not gonna be able to see anything.

I waited for a while, but nothing happened.

Let's just wait a little longer... Jeez, I'm tired. I'm sure it'll be fine if I leave it until tomorrow. I wore myself out more than usual with today's renovations. I still can't figure out how to make anything out of the hides either. It's depressing... Screw it. I'm going to sleep.

A problem greeted me as I opened my eyes the next morning: shadows. Faint tendrils of the curse had somehow made their way

inside the barrier. I was flooded with irritation as soon as I saw them. My mood only got worse as the baby spiders, upon noticing the shadows, scuttled from the cave as fast as their tiny legs could carry them.

Scaring me is one thing, but how dare you scare my friends?! You —

Calm down. Deep breaths, me. Be calm.

First, I'd have to purify the curse-shadows inside the barrier. I decided to try to reinforce it again too—and extend the area while I was at it. When I'd sent the Clairvoyance drone high above the mountain, I'd spotted a lake in the distance—possibly the same one I'd come across in my search for water.

I could really go for some fish. Ocean fish are the best, but at this point, I'll happily settle for freshwater. Yeah, it'll probably come pre-seasoned with a bit of curse, but it should be fine so long as I purify it. Plus, the more curses I purify—heck, one day I might even get used to dealing with 'em without wanting to gag.

I cast Clairvoyance, sending the drone toward the lake. It was a little farther away than I'd realized from the previous bird's-eye angle. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to purify it from so far away, but all I could do was give it my best shot. I pictured my mana flowing from me, shooting out in a long, thin beam toward the lake. Then, I visualized mana spreading out from the central beam, stretching out up and down and from side to side. I imagined it draping over the forest like a veil, and penetrating deep into the ground beneath, until I was left with the mental image of a giant, half-buried sphere, with both the mountain and the lake nestled safely within its embrace.

Holding the image firm in my mind, I moved on to purification—*deep* purification.

Like cleaning mold out of a bathroom.

I pictured bleach slowly soaking into a thick patch of black mold, strangling the life out of it until the barest touch would scrub it away. Mold was an obstinate foe, one I grappled with every year on the battlefield of annual spring cleaning. Of course, I also made sure to focus on the now-loosened shadows being sent back to whoever

was responsible for them.

That's what you get for scaring my friends, jerk!

"**Purify.**"

Next came the barrier. It seemed like the newest crop of shadows had made their way inside via the water. A few creeks and streams dotted the forest inside the barrier, and apparently shadows that hitched a ride on the currents could pass right on through—for now.

I think an oil strainer will work for this—like the carbon filter my mom would use for cooking oil.

Instead of oil, I pictured the curse-ridden water flowing through the filter, separating the black dregs from the pure liquid. I was a little nervous about whether it would actually work, so I revised my imagined strainer to include a three-layered filter—just to be safe.

Maybe a five-layered one instead... Nah, too complicated.

The filtered curse, of course, would need to be returned to its maker too, so I attached a daily filter clean-and-return function to the mental image. Obviously, the returned curses would have to be a little stronger than the original ones—I couldn't truly call myself Japanese if I didn't make sure to reciprocate a gift with something slightly more valuable after all.

Crap, I forgot to add anything when I purified it, though... Oh well. Too late now. But from now on, until this jerk quits it with the curses, everything's going back doubled!

"**Barrier.**"

The morning was cool, with a refreshing breeze. I stood for a moment, breathing in the invigorating air. Suddenly, I remembered the loud noises from last night.

What was that anyway?

I had a good look around the cave and the mountain outside, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary, and all of the animals seemed normal too.

Oh well. Nothing to worry about, I guess!

28. To the Lake... Yeah, I Should Have Guessed.

From the overnight shadow invasion, I now knew water was somewhat resistant to purification. Still, I wasn't going to let that stop me from investigating the lake. It was quite a distance from the mountain—not a problem for me now, thanks to my new athleticism, but still a bit too far away if I ever needed to get there in a hurry. We arrived to find the lake still teeming with black patches of shadow, just as I'd predicted.

Dammit! Stupid bloody curse!

I tried a quick Purify to no avail. For the time being, I closed off the lake and adjoining river inside another barrier, hoping to at least prevent the shadows from spreading further.

Water purification, huh... How can I clean up the lake? The filter's working on the river upstream because the water flows through it, but I don't think it's gonna work on a nearly stagnant lake. Crap, I can't think of anything. Come on, come on. Shadows, curses, clean... Clean? Dusting! What if I imagine using an electrostatic cloth to gather up dust? The ones back home would attract all the dust like a magnet! I don't know if it's gonna work, but I guess I'm about to find out!

"**Adhere.**"

It worked...? It worked!

Countless globs of shadows now clung to the surface of the lake like pools of oil. Apparently there'd been more shadows under the water than I'd thought; I could barely see the lake through the black.

Gross! Very, very gross. Now to purify it— No. Return *it.*

When it came to magic, I was quickly discovering that (apart from a few exceptions) my only limit was my imagination. Most of

the spells I'd attempted had been successful; I had no reason to think my returns weren't the same. Still, I hesitated slightly at the thought. I'd been sending a lot of the shadows back where they'd come from, but it was only now that I started considering what kind of problems my returns might end up causing. But when I looked at the lake again, an old saying crossed my mind.

You reap what you sow.

I didn't need to worry. If returning the curse *was* causing any problems for whoever had cast it, it was exactly what they deserved. The wolves, Karen, the spiders—all of them had been hurt by the curse. That was all that mattered to me. The curse had hurt my friends, and since that was the case, I wanted nothing more than to package up every last speck of shadow and send them all back with a nice big bow. I didn't know who was causing the curse, but it didn't matter. As far as I saw it, no matter which world you were in, one thing remained unchanged: Actions had consequences.

So return to whence you came, curse.

"**Counter-Curse…Plus.**"

Radiant light pulsed across the lake for a fleeting moment before fading away to reveal crystal clear water. The sunlight sparkled where it reflected off the surface, and for the first time since I'd arrived in this world, I found myself appreciating the beauty of nature.

The few tendrils of shadows that had remained in the downstream river were quickly carried away by the current, passing through my barriers and out of my scope of concern. I quickly reinforced the filter barrier I'd applied to the upstream part of the river, this time visualizing a five-layered filter, just to ensure the lake stayed clean.

And with that, my work was done. It would be a while before I could be certain my spells were working as intended—and whether any fish I caught would come curse-free—so for now, I decided to head home.

I was smack-dab in the middle of my renovation— *Wait,* is *it renovation? Doesn't that only apply to already-constructed houses?*

Maybe this is "building"...? Oh, who cares. Renovation's fine.

Anyway, I was continuing with my grand renovation project. I started off the day's work by remodeling the first floor, turning it into a kitchen and dining area. I expanded the space, making sure it was wide enough to comfortably accommodate all of us for meals.

I think it's too *wide now, though. Oh well.*

The next room was one I'd been wanting for a long time—a bathroom. My Clean spell was fine and all, but nothing could beat a long soak in the tub. I shaped a large bathtub out of rock—again, maybe *too* large. It was spacious enough that the wolves could easily fit inside with me, were they so inclined...

Hopefully all this space doesn't go to waste! Hint, hint.

I could conjure water with magic and heat it too, so I could now bathe in luxury whenever I pleased. Throughout the day, I also got a *little* better at changing the brightness of the rock-emitted light, although smaller adjustments were still beyond my reach.

Finally, I came to my final project of the day, something I desired more than anything else: a toilet. I prepared a small room next to the bathroom, and visualized the rock reshaping into a classic, Western-style toilet. And I'd been successful—or so I thought. I got quite a shock the first time I tried using it, on account of it suddenly flushing all by itself. Somehow, I'd accidentally made a self-cleaning (well, magic-powered cleaning) Japanese-style toilet—with *all* the bells and whistles. Once I'd recovered, I proceeded to install toilets on every level of the cave.

It was perfect—well, almost perfect. I had yet to figure out how to make doors. Still, handy access to a toilet was an invaluable relief.

I wonder if I should make toilets for the animals too... Hmm.

29. A Comfortable Home...Needs Wooden Floors.

Before long, I finished remodelling the rest of the aboveground levels. I divided the fourth floor into two large rooms. It had started off as just one room, but it had been *uncomfortably* large, so I summoned up another wall to split it right down the middle. For now, these were our bedrooms (although in reality, we all slept together in just the one). Still, the animals might prefer to have their own space later, so I left the second bedroom for future use.

Bedrooms, of course, needed windows. I had considered making a few holes in the walls to let in some light, but unfortunately since I hadn't figured out how to make doors (let alone shutters), they couldn't really be considered "windows." They'd just be holes, and holes would mean rain—and bugs. So I'd given up on the idea until I made an accidental discovery while playing around with the ores: glass.

Well, something like glass anyway. I learned I was able to manipulate the silvery ore we'd found and stretch it into long, thin sheets. I was able to make the sheets translucent too. It was an incredible discovery, especially considering I'd mostly just been messing around with the ore on a whim.

I stretched one piece of the ore into a large sheet of (imitation) glass and tried affixing it into a hole I made in the ceiling of the bedroom. The result was a perfect skylight, and in spite of how thin it was, the glass seemed incredibly strong. Next, I tried to make an even bigger skylight—another perfect result. A little carried away by my success, I proceeded to install windows on every level of the house—along the staircases too. The value of my house skyrocketed (according to my personal evaluation system, but still).

While fitting the final window, I suddenly realized that throughout

my entire renovation project, without exception, at least one of the animals had been by my side.

I'm glad for the company, but... Um, are they actually really worried about me? I know I'm a beginner in magic and all, and I wouldn't stand a chance if we got attacked, but this is just a little renovation, you know? Maybe they think I'm gonna mess up and put us all in danger... Well, to be fair, that's not impossible. I'll be careful! I promise!

My countless experiments with manipulating both rock and ore had given me a basic ability to determine the strength of different materials as well. The silvery ore was a better conductor of mana than the gold one, and rock was the best conductor of them all. It seemed like the easier it was to manipulate a material with magic, the more fragile it was. Of the materials I had on hand, the gold-colored ore was the hardiest, followed by the silver-colored one, and then plain rock.

After finishing the fourth floor, only the second and third remained. However, I was all out of ideas for what to turn them into. Between the first floor and the fourth, everything I'd wanted—a bedroom, a kitchen, a dining room, a bathroom, and a toilet—was already done. For now, I left them undecided—but not undecorated. I'd already remodeled both floors so each was just one giant chamber. On a whim, I created huge carved pillars (using the leftover slabs of stone from making the staircase) and placed them at regular intervals throughout the rooms.

A huge stone chamber with huge stone pillars... It's like I've wandered into some ruins. Ancient *ruins.*

Spurred on by the alluring call of adventure, I got a little carried away again and changed the windows in the room into long, thin slits like you'd see in an old castle. It wasn't until I finished that I realized just how creepy the rooms now were. It was, without a doubt, an entirely unnecessary part of the overall renovation project.

My next objective was flooring. I smoothed out the stone so that tripping would no longer be an issue, but what I really wanted was the sense of warmth that only wooden flooring could give. There

was a forest right outside, so getting the lumber wasn't going to be much of a problem. While I worked on gathering the wood, I hoped to come across another of the high-priority items on my list: ingredients.

Since I'd arrived in this world, Hio, Shion, and the other wolves had been supplying me with food daily, so I wasn't concerned about starving or anything. However, my wolf-supplied diet was entirely meat—and I was really, *really* starting to crave vegetables. Traditionally, forests were meant to have fruits and berries (not that I'd been able to find any of those either) rather than vegetables, but surely I'd be able to find some sort of vaguely food-like foliage, at the very least.

Figuring out whether they're edible or not is another matter entirely... Oh well. I'll work something out. And seasoning! I really want something I can use for seasoning! Plain meat is starting to drive me crazy. Even just salt would be fine, please!

30. Koa, Queen of the Fenrir

— From the Perspective of a Fenrir Mistaken for a Wolf —

Master was examining the trees. Master, who released me from the imprisonment of the Magic Eye and who bestowed me with a name: *Koa*. A Fenrir monarch has never recognized another as their master, but I had no regrets. From my position at Master's side, I was constantly draped in his overwhelming mana. It put me at ease.

Two hundred years had passed since the Magic Eye appeared over our forest and shrouded us all in its foul cloak of dread. No human should have possessed the power to cast such magic—and yet, someone had. Whatever evil method they'd used, the end result was the same. We were under attack. My blood boiled at the sheer memory of it.

Our attempts to purify the curse worked only fleetingly, and constantly supplying our barriers with mana quickly exhausted our dwindling reserves. We all felt our magical power gradually weakening. The weaker creatures began to fall, massacred by others who'd lost all presence of mind, and those who still clung to their last shreds of sentience ended their own lives rather than undergoing the same deterioration.

Over the centuries, I witnessed nearly all of my comrades meet their ends. I, too, was beginning to feel the ominous tug at my consciousness when I suddenly felt a presence in the forest. A human.

Kill.

Hatred and rage swirled within me, the vibrant emotions temporarily dampening my ever-increasing loss of self-control. I

raced through the forest with but a single thought: *Kill. Kill the human.*

I could see it. The foolish creature had its back to me; apparently, it felt no need for caution. I made to pounce, sink my claws into that back—but I staggered. The call of oblivion grew stronger, and I could do little more than fight against it. Slowly, the human turned around, and our eyes met.

Kill! I need to kill it!

But my body had lost all strength. I could barely move, much less attack.

How weak I've become... Pathetic. An enemy within my reach, and I'll die without tasting even a drop of their blood.

Despair flooded my mind, but even now, I glared at the human and growled: a meaningless final stand. I collapsed as the last remnants of strength faded from my body, cursing myself.

I will not *lose my mind. Die though I may... I cannot lose...*

I felt myself giving in to the allure of mindlessness, unable to fight back any longer—but suddenly, something changed. The weight lifted from my body, and the disgusting phantom that had long been coiled around me vanished into nothingness.

Purification magic?

Regardless of where the spell had come from, it would work for but a moment. I readied myself for the shock of the curse returning, but it never came.

What... What happened?

I looked again at the human, and a shiver rippled down my spine.

Immeasurable magic poured out of the human, magic unlike anything I'd ever felt. I hadn't noticed it earlier on account of my overwhelming anger. No human should be capable of possessing such power. This creature's reserve of mana was so overwhelming that even I, monarch of the Fenrir, couldn't begin to guess at the true extent of it.



Our eyes met again, and I realized the human's magic was pouring into *me*. It permeated every fiber of my wounded body, healing me from the inside out. I, a Fenrir, was lying before them—assuming a position of submission—but for some reason, I felt no aversion to showing obedience to this human.

A Fenrir monarch has never recognized a human as their master, but this human... Perhaps he is worthy of my fealty.

Suddenly, I was clean. All of the grime had disappeared, and before I realized it, I'd returned to my proper, noble form. Master's magic was overwhelming, and yet more subtle than any I'd ever seen or felt. A power greater than that of the beast monarchs had appeared in the forest.

And now, I stood at Master's side, a most suitable position. However, said Master was currently doing something quite strange to the trees...

31. Chai, the Dire Wolf

— From the Perspective of a Dire Wolf Mistaken for a Dog —

I'd known full well the risk of attempting to take refuge in the Fenrir Queen's lair. I'd been prepared to die. But she'd allowed me to stay, if only to keep tabs on my continued existence. I couldn't say how many years passed since then, how many days I'd spent doing nothing but fighting against the power of the Magic Eye that threatened to swallow my conscience whole.

How many more days do I have before I lose myself entirely? I can't even stand up anymore. Perhaps my mind is already gone. Perhaps the time has come for me to choose an honorable death.

I couldn't allow myself to become a burden to the Fenrir any more than I already was. Ordinarily, I'd never even be permitted to breathe the same air as them; they'd already given enough.

I felt the last threads of my conscience slipping away, my eyes drifting closed for what was likely the final time—but just before the light faded entirely, they snapped open.

Something's here.

A strange presence had filled the den. My weary eyes landed on the source of the presence, and exhaustion gave way to despair.

The Fenrir queen had brought a human into our safe haven, which could only mean one thing: she, too, had been lost. The queen was as good as dead, as were we all. The few remaining Fenrir growled, but the queen responded with a short snarl, commanding them to be silent.

Commanding? She's... She's still got her senses?

Confusion swamped my already-dulled brain, but I could do nothing but watch, watch as a strange, warm light filled the room

time and time again. Each time it washed over my decaying body, the unpleasant heaviness—a heaviness I'd been carrying for decades—faded more.

How... How can it be disappearing?

Finally, as clarity returned to me, I realized what the light was—purification magic. Far, far more powerful than any I'd ever seen.

And the human cast it for our sake? It's not here to destroy the forest?

Humans were the enemy, but this human's magic felt like a warm embrace as it enveloped me, healing beyond measure the affliction I'd carried for decades.

After beginning my new life as one of Master's subjects, I came to realize that this human's magical abilities did not follow the known laws of our world. Master constantly cast barriers and all manner of other conjurations that required a continual supply of mana with apparent ease. At first, I assumed that he suffered from some affliction of the mind and kept myself on guard for when the barriers would eventually fail.

They never did.

Is Master some kind of divine being?

I couldn't fathom how else he could be conjuring barrier after barrier without dying of mana exhaustion. In fact, I couldn't even detect the slightest depletion of his mana, even when he extended the barriers significantly. Master's magical abilities frightened me.

I'd never seen a human display apathy upon discovering a vein of mithril ore. Humans always reacted to mithril in such a strange, excited way—but not Master. Then there was the orichalcum; hundreds of nodes of the ore, and he'd moved them with *magic*. Orichalcum—an ore nearly entirely resistant to magic—and he'd willed the nodes from one chamber to the next like it was as simple as breathing. I'd instinctively recoiled in fear at the sight of it.

Perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps Master is not a human at all. After all, his magic is far more powerful than I've ever seen or even heard of.

In truth, I often found myself feeling frightened. However,

whenever Master stroked my head, warm mana flowed into me, and all was forgotten. For no matter how terrifying his power might have been, the thought of leaving this warmth was more terrifying by far.

32. Working with Wood...Is Harder than Expected.

Trees spread out before me in every direction—giant trees, as I'd come to expect from this forest. The tree immediately in front of me, however, was in a somewhat unusual state. I wanted to outfit the cave-mansion with wooden flooring, so understandably, I'd started by trying to turn one of the trees into planks, visualizing something I'd seen in a TV segment about lumber yards.

I'd screwed up a little, though. The tree had turned into planks, planks that now stood where the tree had been—that is to say, towering *vertically* over me. For now, at least. I wasn't sure how long they'd stay that way. From what I'd remembered of the segment, wood had to be peeled, dried, and then cut to the required thickness in order to be usable—simple, I'd thought. I'd even patted myself on the back for remembering that drying the wood was crucial for preventing it from warping or cracking. So with those thoughts in mind, I'd cast Transform on the tree—and ended up with the current uneasy totem pole. The bark was peeled, for sure, and the planks had been dried and cut to a suitable thickness, about twenty-five centimeters or so. I'd been successful, apart from the fact that the planks were still standing upright.

Okay, so maybe *I can't consider this a success. I forgot the first damn step—cutting down the tree! The segment even showed them cutting down the trees and transporting them to the lumber yard, you idiot!*

I sighed. *Now how am I gonna get these planks down?*

The tree had already been converted into dozens of planks, so I probably only had one shot at figuring out how to get them all laying down safely. If I screwed up again here, they'd likely tumble over.

First, I have to cut it at the roots, I guess... Maybe with wind

magic? One powerful slice through the base? Eh, I'll give it a go. Once they're severed, I'll picture them lying in a neat pile, and move them with Teleport before they hit the ground. Should work, right? Only one way to find out!

After signaling for Koa to move to a safer distance away, I sent a sharp disc of wind hurtling toward the base of the plank-tree. As soon as the spell left my hand, I pictured the neat pile of lumber I desired and cast again.

"**Teleport.**"

Magic is great. You can do anything you want as long as you can imagine it. Sure, sometimes focusing on visualization is hard, but still —magic is awesome.

Unfortunately, the result wasn't as awesome. The planks were too tall to lie flat in the crowded forest. Instead, they'd gotten caught on random branches and on top of the smaller trees, meaning my desired pile looked more like an abstract sculpture.

Oh yeah... I picked this tree specifically because it was so tall. Of course it wasn't gonna fit lying down! Next time, cut the planks to a proper length before trying to teleport them, you idiot! Don't you dare forget!

Eventually—with more than a few additional failures—I managed to fill one of the fourth-floor bedrooms with five trees' worth of (suitably sized) planks. I was tired. More tired than I'd expected to be.

Come to think of it, I feel like Koa kept looking at me with disapproval... Hopefully it was just my imagination. Anyway, now I've got the planks, all I need to do is lay them down! Simple. Take a plank, and lay it on the ground.

Or so I'd thought.

Since when was laying flooring so damn hard?!

The problem, of course, was laying the planks down without any gaps between them. Accurately Teleporting one plank next to another, without leaving even a millimeter of space between them, was incredibly difficult. Either that or I was just hopeless when it came to precise magic.

I didn't realize I was such a sloppy person...

Because the rooms were so spacious, I'd avoided making the planks any shorter than absolutely necessary, a plan which had backfired magnificently. The planks were incredibly heavy, and since I couldn't use magic to lay them with the precision I needed, it meant I had to move them by hand—and not just once either. I'd fix the gap at one end of the plank only to find I'd inadvertently made another one on the opposite end. Weight hadn't been an issue when moving them with magic, but now? I glanced at the mountain of planks on the other side of the room.

Nope, no way. It'll take weeks *to do it all by hand!*

"Really, what I want to do is move them from a distance, so I can see exactly where they need to go..."

I looked at the wood again thoughtfully.

How do people move big things? In Japan, we'd use a crane or something. Like at a container yard. Maybe I can come up with something similar.

I wasn't confident in how accurate my memories of cranes were, so I decided to instead rely on an image of my beloved claw machines in the local arcade. The plush toys became heavy planks, lifted by a steady, joystick-controlled arm.

"**Ascend,**" I said, and the first plank floated into the air. I moved my outstretched palm to the left, and the plank followed.

Ha ha, this is fun! Can't believe it actually worked.

"**Descend.**" The plank lowered slowly as I made minute adjustments, trying to ensure there wouldn't be even the tiniest gap. It worked perfectly.

All right! With this, I can lay each plank perfectly on the first go! Now there's just the rest of the planks... This room sure is big, huh... Yep. I feel kinda dizzy.

33. Clay Dolls...Are Scary. Really Scary.

As a rule of thumb, I preferred to avoid encountering terrifying phenomena first thing in the morning.

I woke up to see a plank moving of its own accord. I was proud of myself for not screaming, albeit only because my throat seemed to have closed up in fear. Actually, looking closer, it wasn't just one plank but several. The giant pile from yesterday had shrunk significantly too.

Another curse? Or a ghost? Ugh, not a ghost! Rejected! No ghosts allowed!

I wanted to go back to sleep, but I knew it would be impossible. Reluctantly, I got to my feet.

"Oh... The clay dolls."

Not ghosts. Thank god.

Ghosts or not, the sight unfolding before me was still undeniably supernatural. Although the planks weren't moving of their own accord, they were still moving—or rather, they were being moved by the dolls I'd made out of clay last night. I'd been messing around with some of the rock (which became as malleable as clay once my magic flowed into it) and before I knew it, I'd ended up making a somewhat humanoid doll, about sixty centimeters tall. Pleased with my first attempt, I'd gotten carried away and made nine more. The clay dolls were one-eyed, inspired by the one-eyed goblins in Japanese folktales. I'd removed the light from the rest of the rock and left only the eyes glowing. I hadn't realized it at the time, but those single, giant, glowing eyes were actually a pretty creepy feature.

Presently, nine of the clay dolls were working together to transport and lay the flooring.

Oh, there are no gaps either! Nice. They're fast too.

Koa and the others had apparently already been woken by the construction work and been watching the clay dolls suspiciously. However, all of their stares turned to me as they realized I was awake. I slowly averted my gaze, staring up at the ceiling.

Don't ask me, okay?! I don't know what's going on!

While I (silently) pleaded my (feigned) ignorance, the clay dolls continued their work.

Seriously, how come they can move?

I picked up the tenth doll, the only one that wasn't moving.

It's definitely the one I made last night. I liked it so much I ended up making a bunch more, but— Ah. That's right. I was thinking about that old picture book.

It was something from my childhood—a fairy tale, about some elves who snuck into a shoemaker's shop at night to secretly help him work. I'd remembered the book while making the dolls and wished for some elves of my own. My flooring project had turned out to be a lot harder than I'd imagined, and I was exhausted. I vaguely remembered wishing for a couple of robots to help out too, among other things. In the end, I'd made nine more dolls with those thoughts in mind.

Ah, and when I went to bed, I said something like "Jeez, it'd be nice if the floor was finished by the time I wake up"... Seriously?! Is that what caused this?! And the first doll's not moving because I wasn't thinking about the book yet... Did I actually create moving dolls with just a random thought, though? Well, it's not like there's any other explanation...

"Stop working! Assemble!"

Crap, they actually assembled! So they do *take orders!*

Nine clay dolls stood in front of me in a neat line.

You know, they've got a certain charm. The glowing eyes are still creepy, though.

Closing my eyes, I focused on the unmoving doll in my hand, visualizing a helper robot.

"**Move.**"

Gently, I placed it on the floor, where it promptly stood up and

joined the line of other clay dolls.

It moved... It moved! It can actually move!

"Welcome to the team," I said, grinning at the newest addition. With another quick command, the clay dolls resumed their work.

Okay, so I can make clay dolls that move. I'll have to keep that in mind. Everything seems fine, so I won't bother worrying about it. It's not like I know how magic works anyway. Although, I do wonder... Out of the ten dolls, how many of them are fairies and how many are robots? Hmm...

34. The Knight

— From the Perspective of the Commander of the First Knight's Brigade, Kingdom of Empras —

"Did you hear?" A voice called out, making me pause in my rush down the hallway.

"Yeah," I replied, turning slowly. I knew what he was talking about. The castle itself seemed to pulse with unease, echoing with whispers of the subject in every corridor.

The king had received another report—and had slaughtered the unlucky messenger where he stood. My opinion, though not one I could voice, was that it was a meaningless death. I'd end up a slave before I finished the sentence—if I was lucky. If I wasn't, I'd meet the same fate as the messenger. Either way, my life would be over.

When the first change had been observed in the forest, the king had assumed it to be the last pathetic stand of those who still dwelled within. He'd ordered that the Magic Eye be strengthened and considered the matter closed. However, the result had not been as he'd expected.

A tiny crack had appeared in the magestone.

It was barely visible to the naked eye, but still, it *had* appeared. I pitied the poor mage who'd discovered it. How unfortunate he'd been, having to inform the king of the one thing that would anger him most. Another pointless death.

And now it seemed as though the Fourth Brigade had been summoned, in all likelihood to receive the order to investigate the forest. The power of the beast kings still dwelled within those trees as far as I knew. We'd managed to maintain a firm hold on the surrounding area for decades, but as for the forest itself? We barely

controlled a tenth of it. Moreover, an investigation would probably lead them right into the forest's depths. What would happen to the knights of Empras if the forest fought back? I shuddered at the thought.

I couldn't begin to guess at what was truly going on. The magestone was much stronger now than it had been when they'd first discovered it—and yet, something existed out there powerful enough to damage it. The kings of the forest had been lashing back at Empras ever since the Magic Eye first appeared, but their power had never been great enough to have any effect on the magestone. Besides, this attack was far too sudden for it to have come from them. Had something awoken? Something more powerful than the kings of the forest? But what was more powerful than a king? A god?

Had a god awoken in the forest?

The Magic Eye was supported by a single magestone—an artifact unearthed from some ancient ruins, or so the story went. With the magestone, they'd been able to develop the multilayered spell conjuring the Magic Eye and been able to maintain it for the past two centuries. The stone is said to contain an incredible amount of mana. Many mages tried and failed to discover its secrets, and countless lives had been lost in their quest for understanding.

Our king had seized the magestone's power, wielding it as he pleased. First, he'd used it to halt his aging—or rather, to slow it down. According to rumor, he *was* still aging, but much, much slower than any other human. And then... Then, he'd begun the quest to become the king of the world. Using the magestone, he conjured multiple Magic Eyes, sacrificing tens of thousands of lives to strengthen the spells. Many kingdoms had fallen already. Once he'd conquered the forest, nothing could stop him from conquering the world. Everyone in this kingdom believed in that future—the magestone's power assured it.

Now, however, that future didn't seem as certain.

What have we awakened...?

35. Exploring the Forest with...Spider Boss? Baby Spiders?

My accidentally created helpers were unbelievably capable, and before I knew it, the fourth floor had been entirely decked out in wooden floorboards. I quickly prepared more planks for the second and third floors and left them to it, pleased with the craftsmanship of their work—and only a little peeved about how shoddy my own had been in comparison.

They don't need me to help—in all honesty, they'd probably prefer *it if I didn't.*

With little else to do for the time being, I decided to resume my exploration of the forest. I bid farewell to Soa and the other wolves as they went off hunting, only Koa staying to keep me company.

I gotta find some vegetables... Seasonings too.

The atmosphere changed as I moved farther away from the mountain, weaving my way between the colossal trees. The tall trees cast even taller shadows, darker here than those closer to the cave. The curse was still affecting them somehow. I visualized light penetrating the trunks, flushing the curse from every tree inside the barrier.

"**Purify.**"

Warm light enveloped the trees. It felt somewhat softer or gentler than usual. After a few seconds, the individual veils of light floated into the air, amassing into one large ball above the tree curtain—before shooting away into the distance. I craned my neck, looking toward the direction it'd gone in. It was the first time I'd seen something happen to the light after purification. I usually found myself blinded, and by the time my vision returned, the light would already be gone.

I wonder if it's gone back to the source... Ugh. That's kinda scary.

I surveyed the forest again. It seemed more vibrant than it had before, which hopefully meant that the curse was truly gone.

That's one good thing, at least. Still... These trees are really *damn tall. Even if I do manage to spot a fruit, I'll never be able to get it down.*

I peered up into the branches of the tree right in front of me, only to find them laden with reddish fruits: the first fruit I'd seen since arriving in this world. The real problem was whether they were edible or not—and moreover, whether I'd even be able to get one down to check.

I hemmed and hawed over the problem for a few minutes until a flash of movement pulled me back to reality. Spider Boss was climbing the tree. Actually, a *lot* of Spider Bosses were climbing the tree.

Wait, a lot *of Spider Bosses? How many are there... Eight? Eight Spider Bosses?! But— Hang on, are these guys the baby spiders? Yeah, no wings, so they must be—You've grown a lot since I first met you! I thought you were Spider Boss for a minute! Ha ha... Um, that's quite a growth spurt you guys have had in the past few days...*

By the time I recovered from my shock, the baby spiders had returned with one of the fruits—eight spiders, each the size of a five-hundred-yen coin, carrying a bright red fruit the size of a cantaloupe. It was an unusual sight, to say the least.

Thanks, guys. But seriously, you've grown a lot. Really, really fast...

Shaking my head, I cut into the cantaloupe-sized fruit using a knife I'd made out of the silvery ore and pried out a piece of the flesh within. Now all that was left was to try it. Steeling myself, I put the chunk into my mouth and chewed. It was crisp like an apple but juicy and sweet like a peach.

"Damn that's good!"

It was the first thing I'd eaten other than meat in days. It was deliciously ripe, and the sweet nectar was more satisfying than anything I'd ever tasted. After we'd all had our fill, the baby spiders started up their work once more, retrieving dozens of the fruit—

Uh, how am I gonna carry all of these back?

When I'd been dropped into this world, the only things I'd had with me—besides my clothes and shoes—had been my phone, my wallet, and the black cloth bag I'd had over my shoulder. I'd brought the bag along today, thinking it could be of some use if I *did* manage to find something—but, unfortunately, I couldn't fit more than a single one of the cantaloupe-sized fruits in it.

It'd be great if this bag was like a certain robotic cat's pocket... I'd be able to carry anything around.

I nearly fell to one side as the bag became lighter all of a sudden. Frantically, I looked inside, only to discover that the rather large fruit was nowhere to be seen.

"Um... What?"

36. The Forest Sure Is Endless... Uh, Spider Boss?

It's like I turned this old shopping bag into a magic one, I thought, tossing one fruit after another into the now seemingly bottomless pocket. *Thank you, unnamed famous robot!*

In total, the baby spiders had retrieved thirty of the large, red fruits. Looking up, I could still see more red between the leaves, but they were apparently finished for now.

Maybe those ones aren't ripe yet? Either way, I've still got more than enough to last me for a while.

I was currently following the baby spiders through the forest, Koa by my side. The baby spiders leaped from tree to tree like a squad of tiny ninja. A little *too* tiny—I was having trouble seeing them. Eventually, I had to ask them to move to some of the lower branches, which they seemed to understand. Thankfully, the spiders seemed to know where they were going, because I had no idea.

We continued through the forest until suddenly one of the spiders dropped down in front of me, forcing me to stop. Frantically, I scanned the surrounding trees for signs of danger but instead spotted a leafy thicket a few steps away. The spiders had apparently resumed their harvest. In the thicket, I could see a few cabbage-like clusters of leaves, one of which the spiders were carrying out. Like the fruit, it was quite big, around the size of a basketball. I looked at the baby spiders again.

You guys sure are strong... Maybe too strong.

I peeled off one of the vegetable-like leaves from the cluster and tried it. It wasn't bitter, like I'd been dreading, but had a subtle sweetness. The texture was perfectly crunchy too.

It's not quite *the same as cabbage, but it's not like lettuce either. It's kinda in between? It's hard to describe... Oh well. Either way, it's*

delicious.

Sensing my approval, the spiders started harvesting again, one cluster after another vanishing into the depths of my bag. There were quite a few thickets around, making for a bountiful harvest. By the time the spiders had finished, I'd counted at least fifty of the clusters disappearing into my bag.

I feel like they might rot before I can eat them all... I've gotta figure out some sort of preservation spells when I get home today.

We'd walked quite far from the mountain by this point—apparently, fruit-and vegetable-producing trees were less common than I'd hoped. What we came across more frequently, though, were monsters. A fair number of them had attempted to attack, but Koa had scared each one off with no more than a short growl.

You're the best, Koa! Even if your growl scares me too!

Next, the spiders led us to a grove of trees bearing fist-sized, greenish-yellow fruits. The one they fetched for me had an acidic, invigorating scent, similar to that of a lemon. I was also presented with another fruit from the same tree, this one was greenish blue. It was odorless, making me think it a little strange that they'd brought me an unripe fruit, but I dropped it into my bag anyway. Again, the spiders took this as a sign of my approval and got to work harvesting. Soon enough, I had about fifty of the newest fruit too, roughly evenly divided between the two colors.

Three varieties today, huh? Not bad. Probably a good time to call it a day.

I returned home to find the other wolves waiting eagerly. As always, they'd split up for hunting and were waiting to present their spoils. Shion and Chai sat beside a pile of five monsters, whereas Soa and Hio had brought back seven. Kurou, who'd gone hunting alone, proudly showed off his two kills as well. They'd been bringing back more and more monsters with each passing day, but today's spoils were especially abundant. I patted them all in turn, surreptitiously checking for any signs of injury as I did.

Looks like you all stayed safe today too... Whew.

The wolves (Chai included) tended to eat somewhere between one and three monsters a day, depending on their size. They

sometimes tried some of my cooked meat, but primarily they ate it raw after I'd removed the blood vessels and hides. I now left the organs inside because I'd remembered how nutritious they were said to be, though I made sure to remove them from any carcasses they hadn't been able to finish by the end of the day.

It didn't take very long to butcher all the carcasses, thanks to all the practice I'd had lately. I'd finally figured out how to skin the monsters (albeit untidily) using magic, which helped the work pass quicker. The first serving always went to the wolves, of course. After skinning the first carcass and casting a cautionary Clean on the meat, I Teleported it onto the wide sheet of wooden boards that served as their feeding area.

Dinner's up, guys.

Next, I butchered the remaining monsters, putting some aside for today and teleporting the rest to the food storage area in the basement. The hides I put aside too. I hadn't been able to figure out how to turn them into anything useful yet.

Finally, once my work was done, I called out to Spider Boss, wanting to check if the other baby spiders had grown as much as their siblings. But—

Spider Boss...? You've grown a lot too...

37. Expanding the Storehouse... Wait, Don’t I Know This Flavor?

Spider Boss’s transformation was even more alarming than the baby spiders’ had been. It was now around the size of a watermelon, and its translucent wings now stretched out farther from its body, giving it a somewhat mystical, imposing appearance.

Despite being, y’know, a spider and all. Also, are you all gonna keep *growing? How big are you gonna get?! Everything’s bigger in this world, from the fruit to the wolves. Wait, the basement level I found you guys in—it had much higher ceilings than the others. Ha ha ha... No way, right? Right?!*

I decided to deal with the spider problem later. Right now, I needed to get the food storehouse up and running.

Before today, the only food I’d been eating—and therefore storing—had been meat. I’d outfitted one of the storerooms with a chilling spell, essentially turning it into a walk-in refrigerator. The idea had come to me after I’d accidentally installed the self-cleaning feature in my rock toilets. The toilet flushing itself had scared the crap out of me, but it had also taught me something: By pumping my mana into the rock while using Transform on it, the functions I visualized (like a self-cleaning feature, for instance) would keep working even after I finished casting the spell. With an image of my trusty refrigeration back home in Japan in mind, I’d poured mana into the rocky walls of one of the storerooms, resulting in a very handy walk-in fridge to store all the excess meat.

Today’s harvest hadn’t been limited to meat though. Now I had fruits and vegetables to deal with too—and a lot of them at that. If I simply chucked all the cabbage-like vegetables in the chilled storeroom, they’d lose any semblance of freshness long before I could eat them all. I briefly considered turning one of the other

rooms into a freezer, but I was pretty sure that leafy vegetables didn't take too well to being frozen. There was probably some household hack for storing leafy greens in a freezer without their quality being affected, but if there was, I didn't know it.

It now fell to me to figure out a way to store my bountiful harvest without any impact on freshness. I started by removing everything from my bag, which was an incredibly strange experience in itself. It still looked like the same worn-out bag to me, which made pulling a market stall's worth of produce from it all the more uncanny. Curious to see what would happen, I turned the bag upside down, resulting in an avalanche of fruits and vegetables.

I feel like a whole lot more came out than went in... Weird. I was sure *I counted them pretty accurately. Oh well. I've got other problems to deal with right now.*

I wanted to preserve freshness—in other words, I wanted to keep the fruits and vegetables in their current state indefinitely. Unfortunately, visualizing a *lack* of change wasn't as simple as it sounded. I needed to figure out the right mental image, or I'd never be able to cast the spell.

But how do you imagine something being preserved? Chilled food isn't gonna work—it looks exactly the same as it does at room temperature. Oh, what about hot food, then? With steam rising from it... Yep, that might work. So maybe a bowl of freshly cooked white rice— Oh, but what about a calendar? Maybe that's a better way to capture the passage of time... Ugh. This is hard.

I went with the rice. What I really wanted was indefinite preservation, after all. A calendar flipping from 2018 to 2118 was still an indication of time passing—even if the food didn't spoil in the process—but what I wanted was for time to stop entirely. Which probably meant something like—

"**Chronostasis.**"

A blinding light enveloped the room for an instant before fading away. Looking around revealed no obvious changes, so I would just have to wait and see if the spell had worked as intended.

Guess I'll just leave it all in here for now... I really, really hope it worked.

I conjured up some roomy stone shelves and started loading the cabbage-like clusters neatly onto one. If the spell *had* worked, I'd be able to organize my supplies by type, rather than needing to keep track of what needed to be used first. Just to be on the safe side, I reinforced each shelf with an extra dose of Chronostasis too.

With the new shelving, the food storehouse was gradually starting to resemble something out of a high-end, high-turnover restaurant. It was still a little lacking variety-wise, but in terms of volume, I was more than satisfied with what we'd harvested in a single day. I was grateful to the baby spiders. Shocked, but grateful nonetheless.

I spent the rest of the day experimenting with my newly acquired ingredients. The greenish-yellow fruit's flavor was somewhere between a lemon and an orange. When squeezed over a slice of meat, the juice gave the plain, heavy protein a surprisingly refreshing taste, bringing a tear to my eye. The cabbage-like leaves had tasted delicious on their own, but were even better when wrapped around a chunk of meat.

I'd give anything for some yakiniku sauce, though...

I peeled one of the greenish-blue fruits and was surprised to find that, despite being odorless when whole, it actually had a vibrantly bittersweet aroma.

Can't hurt to taste it... Huh, it's kinda like a strawberry? No, that's not quite right... Hmm.

It was an unusual fruit, all in all, similar to an apple texture-wise but with a bittersweet scent and a flavor vaguely similar to strawberry.

It's tasty...but it kinda makes my mouth confused.

38. The Floor Is Finished...and the Forest Is Wide.

The clay dolls worked quickly, and within three days the floors were finished, without a single misaligned gap to be seen.

Is it just my imagination, or does the flooring look a lot nicer now than when I was doing it? Yeah... It's not my imagination, is it?

The clay dolls were even more capable than I could have possibly imagined. Floorboards covered every millimeter of the ground. They'd even filled in the gaps at the edges of the rooms and around the circular columns, using a sharp stone to make minuscule cuts to the planks. While I'd been a little mystified as to where they'd learned the technique, I hadn't seen any potential issues arising from their newly acquired knowledge, so I'd made them a couple of knives out of the silvery ore to make their work a little easier.

After finishing the final room, the clay dolls had made their way back to the bedroom and lined up along the wall, like soldiers awaiting orders. On a whim, I'd made them their own shelf instead. Looking at the neatly organized dolls gave me an oddly satisfied feeling.

And after waking up in the middle of the night to find ten glowing eyes staring back at me like something from some horror movie, I'd also revised their design slightly so that their eyes no longer glowed when they weren't moving.

My own fault for basing them on goblins, but still.

Now that the floors were finished, I wanted to do a bit of remodeling. First, I shrank the size of the entrance rooms on the first and fourth levels and outfitted both with an inbuilt cleaning spell to prevent any dirt from getting inside the house. Now I could finally take my shoes off before going inside, which I promptly did.

So much better... There's no greater feeling than freeing your feet

after a hard day's work.

Next on my list was a bed. Right now, we were still all sleeping in a huddle on the floor, but I wanted a specific place to sleep. Of course, Koa and the others would need beds too. I went out to the forest and transformed some planks, a task that took no time at all thanks to all the practice I'd gotten while transforming enough flooring for the whole house. I could now polish the planks as I made them too, giving them a glossy, elegant finish. I teleported the planks into the bedroom and called the clay dolls to attention. After seeing their handiwork with the flooring, there was no point trying to make a bed myself.

I cleared my throat and held out my hand.

"Make a bed."

The clay dolls started moving, but it wasn't in their usual, energetic way. Instead, they bumbled around, seeming kind of confused.

Huh? Maybe they don't know what a bed is... Or maybe they can't make anything apart from floors?

I decided to take another shot at it, visualizing the process of building a bed a little more clearly this time. Unfortunately, it turned out that it wasn't the easiest thing to do.

Who would've guessed it'd be so hard to imagine a bed? Okay, lemme think. Imagine a wooden rectangle... Let's see, about two hundred centimeters long and one hundred sixty centimeters wide. That's queen-sized, I'm pretty sure. Yep, just like a big wooden picture frame. Add some legs, so it's around sixty centimeters tall... And then there's a lot of wooden slats on top, slightly lower than the sides—oh, and a plank or two down the middle for support.

I managed to string together a perfunctory image of a slatted bed frame, albeit without much confidence. Shrugging, I transformed the planks into a more suitable size.

It'd be nice if the clay dolls could think for themselves... I'm pretty sure they could adjust my blueprint to make it work. Oh well. Time for attempt number two.

"Make a bed."

The dolls sprang into action.

Guess I can't just tell them what to do—I need to visualize it too. Good to know. Hopefully my crappy image is *gonna be good enough... Well, the first bed can be for me. If it somehow turns out well, I'll get them to make more for the wolves. Good luck, guys!*

I looked again at the clay dolls, who, despite their more energetic movements, still seemed vaguely disoriented.

Seriously... Good luck.

I all but fled from the bedroom, figuring that the clay dolls would probably work better alone. That's what I told myself anyway.

With them working on the beds, guess I'll head into the forest and enjoy a little escapism—I mean, exploring.

I picked a direction I hadn't ventured in before and set off. I was hoping to find something I could use for thread, preferably sooner rather than later. The clothes I'd been wearing since arriving were pretty worn out by now. Washing them every day would only make them wear out faster, so I'd been casting Clean on them instead. Still, they weren't going to hold up for much longer.

My guide-slash-chaperone for today was Spider Boss, who was jumping through the trees at a slightly more confident pace than the baby spiders had the previous day.

Not sure "pace" is the right word, though... Gait? No, that's even more wrong, somehow...

Anyway, Spider Boss was leading the way. As we'd set off, I'd told it I wanted to find thread, gesturing to a frayed strand dangling from one of my sleeves.

I hope it understood what I meant...

I don't think it understood what I meant.

I surveyed our destination: a nest of giant, squirming worms.

Why did you bring me here, Spider Boss?!

39. Giant Worms...Make a Lot of Thread.

The worms turned to me in unison.

Scary. That's scary. I wanna leave now. Why am I even here? What did I ever do to you, Spider Boss?!

While I busied myself panicking, Spider Boss picked up one of the worms and carried it over, dropping it at my feet. It was over a meter long and made me want to run a kilometer in the opposite direction.

Come on, me. Spider Boss wouldn't have led me here if it wasn't safe, right? There's no way these worms are dangerous... Right?

"Argh!" I flung my arms over my head as something came shooting toward me from the worm.

It's attacking! Crap!

I waited for something—for my barrier to react or for pain—but a few seconds passed without either occurring, so I hesitantly lowered my arms, only to find that they were covered in countless strands of white—

"Thread?!"

Curtains of silky string hung from each of my arms.

I see, I see. Thread, huh? I did say I wanted thread. I just didn't think it would come in the form of an attack...

To tell the truth, I'd been hoping for something like a cotton plant rather than a thread-spinning insect, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

It'd probably be a lot harder to make cotton into usable thread too... Yep, just gotta convince myself that's true.

I looked down to find that Spider Boss was gathering up the thread with fidgety, vaguely anxious movements.

I wonder what's wrong with it?

I decided to take a couple of the worms back to the cave for efficiency's sake, saddling Chai and Kurou (who'd also come along) with one insect each. While the worms were actually riding on top of the wolves, I still shuddered at the sight of them clinging to their fur like some horror movie parasites. With a start, I realized that Spider Boss seemed to be giving instructions to the worms—and that the worms seemed to obey, sitting obediently on top of the vaguely displeased wolves. It was an odd sight.

As soon as we got back to the cave, I made the worms a room on the second floor, dumping a large pile of leaves we'd gathered from around their nest in one corner for food. Next, I planned out the things I'd need to turn the strands they produced into usable thread. The first thing I needed was a pole to reel the thread around, which was simple enough. The second thing was some more clay dolls. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't bring myself to touch the worms—or their thread—any more than absolutely necessary. I made two more of the clay dolls this time, setting them to work with the image of spinning thread.

Welcome aboard, friends!

The clay dolls immediately started sorting through the previously made thread.

When the dolls approached the worms for the first time, I was amused to see that the worms looked a little scared.

But they're so cute! How can you be scared of them?

I'd given the insect-duty dolls three eyes instead of one—two in the usual places, and one in the center of their foreheads, just like the oni from Japanese folktales. I'd been obsessed with legends and folktales when I was younger; apparently, that obsession was making a comeback. I watched for a while as the clay dolls began to reel the thread around the poles. Round and round and round and round the poles...

I'm dizzy. But it worked! I have thread! Smooth, silky, beautiful thread.

However, I still needed to figure out how to turn it from thread into clothes. I could probably ask the dolls to do it for me, but that meant coming up with a mental image of weaving or knitting first,

and I didn’t have the first clue how either worked. The only mental image I could come up with was a twisted bundle of knots.

This is harder than the bed... I’ll figure it out later.

Wha—? You’re done?!

Apparently, I’d struggled more building a bed in my mind than the one-eyed dolls had building one in reality.

Go Team One Eye!

It was just my type of bed: sturdy frame, low profile, and great ventilation thanks to the slatted base. They’d even made beds for each of the wolves too.

Um, hang on... I don’t have a mattress. Isn’t it gonna hurt more to sleep on a bunch of slats than it did to sleep on the floor?!

I hurriedly asked the dolls to start filling in the gaps between the slats with more planks.

I screwed up with the mental image a little. Sorry, guys! My bad.

The clay dolls got to work—apart from one, who came over to where I sat on the floor and patted me on the back encouragingly.

Um... What?

40. Chuearenie, Also Known as Spider Boss

— From the Perspective of a Rather Large Spider —

Once again, I found myself observing the golems as they worked. Today, they were laying long rectangles of wood on top of a large frame, also made of wood.

It was a most unusual spectacle. Golems, by their very nature, were but a weapon given life by human hands, a tool they developed to defend themselves from monsters and archbeasts. However, these golems were unlike any I'd seen or heard tell of before. Unlike their more fearsome brethren, these golems had been made to a somewhat charming size—and, rather than seeking out enemies, they've been building something since early this morning.

Much like every other spell Master has woven, these creatures were beyond my understanding.

Even so, how could he possibly be maintaining so many golems at once? Creating a single golem requires a significant amount of mana, and sustaining their continual activity requires a great deal more. Furthermore, despite their charming size, I could sense an abnormally large pool of gifted mana in each of Master's golems—and he'd made more than ten of them. *How?*

There was something else I could detect in the golems too: an unnatural sense of *free will*. Golems were meant to take orders and follow them as instructed; that was their purpose. A lump of inorganic material that couldn't—*shouldn't*—be able to do anything but follow commands. Yet for some reason, these piles of inorganic rock seemed to have minds of their own. Even now, two of the

golems, having just successfully placed another of the longer pieces of wood, turned to one another and slapped their respective open palms together. A gesture of satisfaction, perhaps. Another golem is attempting to shave some wood to size—with a *mithril* knife, at that—but it doesn't appear to be going well. Another of the creatures comes to the first's aid, and it lowers its head in response. I assume it to be an expression of gratitude.

Satisfaction and gratitude are not emotions I should be able to sense from inorganic matter.



Master's power is beyond even my reckoning.

The strangest thing about Master, of course, was his magic. Without fading or faltering, it pours into the forest, into his barriers, and even into us, and in turn, my own lost power was slowly returning to me. Years upon years spent protecting my brethren left my own magic as but a withered remnant of what it once was, but as Master's warm, gentle magic flowed into me, I could feel it begin to grow once more.

While this pleased me, I couldn't help but worry. Maintaining the barrier necessitates a constant contribution of mana in itself, let alone what he freely gives to us. However, my worries have yet to be answered, and Master continues to scatter his power around as though the concept of exhaustion does not apply to him. To worry for him seems an altogether foolish endeavor. Indeed, Master's powers likely surpass even ours—we, the monarchs of this forest.

When Master expressed a desire for thread, I introduced him to the Suwasowa beasts. I didn't consider for even a second that they would have attacked him. Thankfully, Master's barrier did not allow their deadly venom to pass. It has no effect on those of us who lived in the forest, but for a human, a single drop of their venom can be a death sentence. It can even breach a magical barrier should the caster be lacking in ability.

Of course, their venom couldn't possibly breach *Master's* barriers—and why would they even try? After all, they too could sense the attack magic woven into his mana shield. But I'd underestimated the Suwasowa. It had been prepared to die when it had unleashed that attack. In the end, the counterattack spell hadn't activated, and all was well. Still, a chill ran through my body at the memory, for the Suwasowa hadn't been the only thing in the firing range; if the barrier *had* responded with force, I had no doubt that I, too, would have been annihilated from a single blow.

I'd witnessed a glimpse of one such counterattack a few days prior, when something had attempted to breach the barrier in the dead of the night. The barrier had responded with force, a beam of pure light cutting through the black sky that entranced me with its beauty. For it truly was something beautiful—and something that I

hoped to never, ever have the opportunity to experience for myself.

41. The Clay Dolls...Seem to Be Maturing of Their Own Accord.

The object in my hands looked, for all intents and purposes, like a ball of thin yarn, albeit with a single wooden pole down the middle. I glanced at the worms, who were happily chewing on some of the unidentified leaves we'd brought back with us. When they realized I was watching them, they stopped chewing and stared back.

"Uh... Thank you," I mumbled, gesturing vaguely to the ball of yarn.

Creepy.

I turned away from the worms and placed the ball of yarn back with the others—because the clay dolls hadn't made just one ball but approximately two hundred of them.

I know the worms are massive and all, but seriously, where the hell did this much thread come from? I hope they're okay... They seem pretty happy, so I'm sure they're fine.

The next problem was the thread-spinning clay dolls themselves. I knew I'd made them exactly fifty of the reeling poles.

So where did the rest of them come from? Oh—okay, that explains it.

I hadn't noticed until now, but some of the original clay dolls were mixed in among those I'd created for thread production.

So you guys have been helping out too, huh? I didn't realize you'd even had a chance to meet one another. Hmm... Referring to you guys by job is starting to annoy me, so from now on, I'm calling you One Eyes and Three Eyes.

Right now, the Three Eyes were staring intently at me. I assumed they were waiting for their next task, but no matter how hard I tried, I still couldn't visualize anything beyond a tangled mass of thread. If what had happened the first time I'd asked the One Eyes to make a

bed was any indication, I'd have to come up with at least a *rudimentary* pattern for clothes. I peeled off my T-shirt and examined it thoroughly, trying to figure out how it had been pieced together. I might as well have been trying to read a book in a foreign language.

Suddenly, I looked up to realize that the Three Eyes had trotted over to me. They were also peering at the shirt with identically thoughtful expressions—

Hang on. Expressions?

I glanced quickly at the One Eyes. They were standing in the corner of the room, watching us—

Curiously. They're curious. Isn't that weird? They're just dolls! Dolls shouldn't be able to change their expressions, right?

Whether they were meant to be able to or not, though, they clearly *could* change expressions—as evidenced at that moment when the thoughtfulness on the Three Eyes' faces morphed into something resembling frustration. With a start, I realized that at some point, they'd taken the shirt from me and were now turning it inside out to examine the seams.

There was little else to do but sit there, half naked, as the Three Eyes combed over every inch of my shirt; I couldn't summon up the courage to try to take it back from them. Thankfully, ten or so minutes later, they handed the shirt back to me.

Thank goodness. I was starting to think they were going to keep it forever.

Then, much to my surprise, both sets of dolls leaped into action, regardless of the fact that I hadn't given them any orders.

Uh, I'm not sure this is a good thing... What should I do? I don't even know what they're *doing! Can... Can clay dolls actually have thoughts of their own?*

I looked over at Spider Boss and the baby spiders; they didn't seem too surprised by the sudden development.

No, hang on— They do *look a little suspicious. Maybe something* is *wrong here... Oh well. The dolls are really helpful. Probably nothing to worry about.*

It seemed like the clay dolls (which I now realized closely

resembled a certain blue robotic cat) were gradually maturing with each passing day—if gaining the ability for sentient thought could be classified as "maturing," at least.

I've just gotta think of it as like an AI function or something. It'll be fine! Right?! It'll definitely be fine!

I stood in the entrance to the kitchen, altogether too dumbfounded to force myself to take another step. The last time I'd seen the kitchen, it had been a bleak, virtually empty room, with nothing but a stone bench. That was the sight that *should* have awaited me this morning. I rubbed my eyes, blinked a few times, and looked through the archway again.

Nope... Not a dream, then.

A wooden dining table and matching chairs sat in the center of the room. The kitchen bench was still the same stony gray, but it was the only stone I could now see. The floors, walls, and even the ceilings had been decked out in polished wood, giving the room a warm, rustic ambience, like I'd stepped into a well-loved log house. Raised sections of flooring divided the large room into separate areas for cooking and dining, with a third section off to one side possibly intended as a pseudo living room.

Eight of the One Eyes were still hard at work. *I wonder where the other two are? Probably helping the Three Eyes, I bet. More importantly, how and why is the kitchen now like this?!*

I faintly remembered mentioning how I wanted to eventually remodel the kitchen into a more relaxing place to eat, with different areas for different purposes—but I'd been talking to (well, at) Koa, and that had only been two days ago.

Oh... There was one of the One Eyes hanging around though, wasn't there? It must have overheard me. Still, I didn't expect them to remodel the whole room! I was just daydreaming out loud!

I still had a few questions—like how they'd managed to recreate the dining set I'd pictured in my head despite not even mentioning it to Koa—but I elected to not worry about finding any answers.

I don't see any problems here, really. I'm just impressed they figured out how much I wanted a dining room/living room combo...

Also, I didn't notice before, but why are all the wolves sitting in the corner?

42. The Clay Dolls Make...Everything Look Easier.

The clay dolls gaining sentience was somewhat unexpected, but since they didn't seem malicious, I couldn't really bring myself to care too much. Worrying about it would just be a waste of time, and compared to all the other stuff I didn't comprehend about this world, a couple of sentient dolls seemed almost trivial.

Yup, I don't care! I don't care... You got it, me?! I really don't care, okay?!

I willed myself to focus on the newly renovated dining room—while also trying to ignore the fact that some of the One Eyes now seemed to be making wooden cups and plates, because acknowledging it would mean I'd start fixating on *how* they'd figured out how to make them.

Oh, they made chopsticks too! Eating will be so much easier now. Wow, it's like they were made for my hand! Not gonna worry about where they learned about chopsticks from, though! Nope, not me!

I also didn't dwell on the fact that they'd added a comfortable headboard with convenient shelves to my bed, and I definitely didn't worry about the handrails they'd installed along all of the staircases.

I was pretty sure no one was around when I fell over, though... Nope, not thinking about it, remember?

Nor was I concerned when, a few days later, I woke up to a frantically gesturing One Eye standing on top of me. Eventually, I figured out they'd run out of planks, so I quickly transformed another massive tree for them. Later that day I stumbled into the bathroom to discover they'd outfitted the bathtub with polished wood like a fancy onsen.

I think you guys are starting to go a little overboard...

After failing for days on end, I finally managed to successfully turn the hides into a usable material. The first step was to scrape off any fat, membranes, and other excess junk from the inside of the hides. I'd first tried using magic, but the control needed was too precise for me, and the hide went to waste. Next, I'd attempted it with a knife, but the second hide ended up with just as many holes as the first. After a lot of practice, I managed to scrape the hides clean without putting too many holes in them and moved on to the next step: washing them.

I'd cast Clean on the monsters before butchering them, but the hides were still dotted with patches of obstinate grime. Hand-washing seemed to be the only thing that worked, but it was an extremely laborious task. I was exhausted by the time I'd finished the first hide—even more so when I realized it had shrunk to about a sixth of its original size during the process.

After so much effort too...

Despite how difficult the work had been so far, the next challenge was even more formidable: drying the hides. No matter what I tried, the hides always ended up becoming stiff and unusable. And once they'd stiffened, there was no way to make them pliable again. Soaking them in water for days, massaging them, beating them with a wooden pole—nothing helped. I'd been stuck with the stiff hides for a few days at this point but had yet to make any further progress—that is, until today.

I'd just made a potentially exciting (albeit accidental) discovery.

I'd been washing a new hide yesterday. After the last speck of grime finally released its stubborn hold, I transferred the hide to a clean tub of water to rinse it out. Usually, I used magic to swirl the water around, but yesterday, on a whim, I'd picked up a nearby branch and swirled it by hand instead. A minute later the wolves had come back from their daily hunting trip, so I'd left the rinsing unfinished to go and butcher their newest kills—and forgot to go back and finish the job. I only remembered the half-rinsed hide a few minutes ago. I rushed outside to find the hide and branch exactly where I'd left them submerged in the water. I yanked the hide out of the tub, hoping I hadn't inadvertently ruined it—only to

find that it was softer and more flexible than any of the hides I'd washed before.

The only difference was the branch... Crap, the branch! Which one was it?!

Fortunately, after a slightly frenzied search, I was able to find the branch I'd used. A careful inspection of it had revealed a few sticky nodules of white sap—likely the missing link in my quest for soft hides. Obviously, I immediately set out to find the tree in question, and I was now the proud owner of a massive stone jar of white sap.

Okay, maybe I gathered a bit too much... Oh well.

I looked at the hide in front of me thoughtfully.

But I want to at least try *making something out of it... Oh, it's no good. I'd just screw it up anyway.*

As much as I didn't want to admit it, I couldn't deny that giving the hide over to the clay dolls would probably provide a much better result than anything I could achieve.

Still kinda depressing, though.

I managed to shake off my funk by the time I finished making the four new clay dolls, which I lovingly named the Gremlins on account of the single small horn jutting out from each of their foreheads.

I know you guys will do a better job than me... It's not like I'm just dumping my work on you, okay?! And I'm definitely not *upset!*

I made them a couple of stone knives and explained the process, asking them to start by removing the fat. Just as I'd predicted, the first hide they attempted surpassed even my neatest work.

And without even a single hole either... I still ended up making a few holes even when I tried my best...

Next, the Gremlins transferred the hide into a shallow basin of water I made for them and washed the hides by jumping up and down with all their might. Despite their tiny size, they finished washing the hides in far less time than it would have taken me, possibly because their masterful scraping had already made the hide more malleable than any of mine had been.

I give up. I don't know why I bothered trying in the first place.

Finally, they soaked the hide in a self-determined solution of

water and sap overnight, before hanging it out to dry. Figuring out how to process the hides had taken far longer than I'd expected, but being immediately outdone by a few clay dolls didn't surprise me at all by now.

A few days later, I walked into the bedroom to find a large, soft fur laid on top of my bed. I slept comfortably that night.

43. Forest Landscaping... I'm Not Scared!

Being able to process the hides led to another problem: I didn't have a place to dry them. Rather, I didn't have a space large enough to string up dozens of hides to dry for days on end. The ground-level exit from the cave led directly into the dense forest, and the near-vertical mountain itself obviously wasn't suitable terrain for clotheslines.

It was time to start landscaping.

I'd needed a lot of planks for my various DIY projects, but with how big most of the trees were, I'd only ended up cutting down around fifteen of the larger ancient behemoths.A thick wall of trees still surrounded the mountain on every side. I'd stumbled across a few tiny clearings, but nothing even remotely large enough for my purposes.

Well, this is *a forest, after all. They're not typically known for being wide open spaces.*

I glanced around, trying to decide where to begin. I wouldn't need to clear every inch of the forest, of course. For starters, I decided to make a bit more space immediately around the entrance to the cave, which was also the area I used to butcher my daily delivery of monsters. Even that was a struggle at times when the wolves brought back more than five or so carcasses. Ideally, I wanted a space with enough room to process all the monsters at once, as well as to dry all the hides.

I started cutting down the trees and transforming them into planks. *Cut. Transform. Cut. Transform. Cut... Transform... This is boring.*

I teleported pile after pile of planks to the first basement level, and when it was full, to the still-unused third floor. When I went to

check that my teleporting had worked as intended, I stumbled across a group of One Eyes in front of the planks, gesturing excitedly to one another.

Getting ready to build something again? I'm looking forward to it! Even if I am a little nervous...

I went back outside to continue working, only to find the Gremlins marking out what I assumed was how much space they needed for drying the hides. I shrugged and finished clearing the space as indicated—figuring they probably knew better than me at this point—only to end up with a far wider space than I would have thought necessary.

Uh... Are you sure you need this *much space?*

Once the Gremlins seemed content, I kept expanding the area around the entrance. Koa, for some reason, was helping out. She ran from one tree to the next, growling happily when I cut each one down as per her indication.

I'm grateful for your help, but—I mean, isn't this going a bit overboard?

A massive clearing stretched out around the entrance by the time she seemed satisfied. Stumps jutted out of the ground left, right, and center. I'd have to remove them too before the space would be of much use—a space that was much, *much* wider than I'd set out to clear. I'd been so focused on following Koa's instructions that I hadn't realized just how many trees I'd removed, but now, taking a good look around, I could see that it nearly extended just as far to the left and right as the mountain did itself.

But the mountain's gotta be, like, two hundred meters wide! As if I cleared two hundred meters of forest without realizing! Ha ha ha... As if, right?

Exhausted—in more ways than one—I decided to call it a day and headed inside. The entryway—which had definitely had stone walls when I'd gone outside earlier—now featured wood panelling on the walls. I looked up to find a matching ceiling, with small square sections of the stone left exposed at regular intervals to allow the rock's natural glow to shine through.

I think the One Eyes are trying to convert the whole house to

wood... Seriously, I don't get what's up with them. Still, the place does look much nicer without all the dull stone...

Either way, standing around gaping at the entryway wasn't going to give me any answers, so I shrugged and headed for the dining room.

They'd been in here too. Newly built shelves held plates and cups, and a neat pile of furs now cushioned the corner where the wolves usually relaxed. A few more comfy-looking chairs dotted the living section, including—for some reason—a rocking chair. I thought I remembered seeing several pieces of this furniture before in a magazine I'd read a long time ago.

But I definitely didn't remember them this well—especially not to this *level of detail.*

And yet, there they were, perfect recreations of memories I didn't realize I had. A shiver ran down my spine, and I frantically shook my head.

Nope, not a problem! It's just because the One Eyes are so good at what they do! No problems here! I don't care if there's a cool hanging chair in the corner, not even if it is identical to the one I wanted in high school! Really identical... Ha ha ha... I'm not scared. Nope.

The hanging chair was extremely comfortable.

44. New Clothes...and a New Cave.

I hadn't made much progress in my quest for well-seasoned meat, but I hadn't given up either. I was currently exploring the forest once more in search of seasonings. Today, I was clad in an outfit made by the Three Eyes. They'd presented me with the clothes this morning, looking rather proud of themselves. It had been a pleasant way to start the day.

To my surprise, the clothes weren't plain white. Instead, I'd been handed black pants and a light green T-shirt, along with some standard white underwear. The clothes were more comfortable than anything I'd owned before. The fabric was smooth and soft to the touch, with none of the stiffness that came with my usual cheap clothes. I did ask them to make the material a little thicker for the next pair of pants they made, though: the fabric itself was comfortable, but thin, unsupportive trousers were less so.

The pants and T-shirt were one thing, but I was most grateful for the new underwear. I could clean them with magic, but at the end of the day, I'd been wearing the same pair since I'd arrived here. Physically, they might have been fine, but mentally, I *needed* a fresh change of underwear. Thankfully, I'd somehow managed to persevere through their detailed inspection of my old underwear without fleeing in embarrassment. Unfortunately, without any elastic, both the underwear and the pants had to be held up with thin lengths of cord, but it was a price I was willing to pay for fresh clothing.

I'd been surprised to see the colored reels of yarn when I'd dropped in to check on the Three Eyes a few days prior, so I'd lurked around to see if I could figure out how they were making it. Apparently, the color of thread produced by the worms differed depending on what they were fed. Small groups of baby spiders scuttled in and out of the room, returning with different types of

flowers and leaves according to the Three Eye's instructions.

Wait... Do the Three Eyes have some kinda authority or something? I don't understand the power balance between all of you...

Anyway, thanks to the Three Eyes, I had a new outfit—and they say that with new clothes comes a new attitude. Hopefully my positive mindset would lead to positive results during today's expedition.

A few minutes' walk from the edge of the recently made clearing, I stumbled across a small, rugged hill—with a gaping hole right at the base.

"Another cave, huh..."

A gradually descending slope led farther inside, quickly disappearing into the darkness. From out here, it was impossible to tell just how far underground it led. I quickly thought it over. The new cave wasn't too close to the house, but it wasn't all that far away either. If *something* was lurking inside, it was probably close enough for it to affect our cave too—which, unfortunately, meant I needed to do some spelunking. I conjured a ball of light to illuminate our surroundings and crossed through the rocky archway with Koa, Soa, and Hio beside me.

The sloping passage led deeper and deeper under the ground. Minutes passed as we walked along without any notable changes in scenery—and with nothing to distract me, I instead began to focus on the passage itself. Specifically, I was starting to feel anxious about the size of it. The entrance itself had been quite large, but that wasn't too unusual, as far as I knew. However, the entire length of the passage we'd covered so far had been exactly the same dimensions, never shrinking in width or height.

I wasn't sure how far we'd walked by the time we emerged into the large chamber. And there it was: the answer to the question that had been wriggling away in my subconscious since I'd first noticed the size of the passage.

I was face-to-face with a strange, giant ant—or rather, face-to-fangs, several of which were bared at me in an unquestionably

threatening manner. The ant was around the same size as Koa, who, given her recent growth spurt, was currently around the same size as a golf cart...

Come to think of it, you're way too big, Koa—and this ant is too!

The giant ant was mostly a very bright red, with a mottled black pattern covering some of its body. It wasn't like the shadows that had covered the other animals; in fact, the black patches seemed to emit a strange, dull light rather than the ominous mist I was used to. Still, it *felt* like the others had.

It's not shadows, but maybe it's still a curse? I mean, who knows if curses always come as shadows anyway?

The atmosphere here felt just like it had all of the other times I'd happened across a cursed animal, so for starters, I tried purification. The ant's whole body glowed with the warm, familiar light—apart from the mottled black patches, which actually seemed to *repel* it.

My purification didn't work.

45. Curses...Are Scary!

It was the first time I'd seen my purification have no effect at all. Sure, at times it was a little lackluster, but it still did *something*. To be honest, I was a little freaked out.

"**Barrier. Reinforce.**"

There. At least now the curse shouldn't be able to touch us. I wonder if the black pattern is a different type of curse? What types of curses are there anyway? Hexes, jinxes, vengeful spirits, possession— Wait, is it possessed?

I examined the giant ant again, but nothing pointed to any obvious evidence of possession.

In the movies, they're always going on about possessed people looking "dead on the inside" and crap. Though...since I've never seen this ant before, I don't really have a frame of reference for whether it looks dead or not anyway. But I don't know anything else about possession apart from what I've seen in movies!

I jumped as Koa suddenly darted in front of me, protecting me from an attack I hadn't realized was coming. The wolf's body glowed as she pounced, sending the giant ant flying backward. The impact of it hitting the ground sent a tremor through the cave.

Jeez, that must've hurt.

Koa growled as the ant struggled to its feet, Hio and Soa joining her to form a wall in front of me—but the ant had found reinforcements too. A scuttling sound echoed around us as more ants appeared from somewhere.

The big one's children, maybe?

They were much smaller than the giant ant, and all of them had the same ominous black pattern. There was something about the pattern, though. It didn't just make me uncomfortable; for some reason, it disgusted me. I *hated* it.

I gotta do what I can—so, what can *I do? What do you do when*

something's possessed? Exorcism, right? Okay, lemme picture an exorcism... Um, what does that look like again?

I racked my brain, trying to remember something—anything—I'd heard about exorcisms, but it was no use. Nothing was coming to mind. The horrible sound of gnashing fangs echoed around me, sending a chill down my spine.

Scary. Scary. Scary.

I willed myself to think.

Possession, possession... Ah! It's like having two consciences in the same body, right?! One conscience forces its way into a body it doesn't belong to... What is a conscience, anyway? A soul? Yeah, sounds about right. So something's taken over, and the ant's actual soul is being suppressed. Okay, sounds good! So I'll visualize a soul...what the hell does a soul look like?! It's more of an abstract thing, I think. It's probably not important. I'll just picture the ant itself. It's imprisoned in a dark vacuum—no, make it simpler. It can't move; it's chained up. And now imagine those chains burning—no, chains don't burn well. Cutting! Yep, the chains are severed, and the ant can finally move again... Let's give it a go.

"**Unbinding.**"

A ring of light appeared around each of the ants, trapping them in place. Next, each ring began to gradually float upward and form a cylindrical wall around each of the insects, as though they were individual specimens in some strange glowing test tubes. My vision shimmered as each ant was showered with golden light, which slowly washed away all remnants of the black patterns—and then, with a sudden cracking sound, the light vanished, leaving behind a swarm of clean, uncursed ants.

Oh, it worked on the small ants too. I'm glad. To be honest, I can't believe it actually worked at all. Hang on, if it worked, does that mean they really were *possessed? So curses here can possess things too... Scaryyyy.*

The giant ant was looking in our direction. Thankfully, it was no longer gnashing its fangs or getting ready to swipe at us, just simply looking. Specifically, I was pretty sure it was looking at *me*. It took a single step closer, which Koa responded to with a sharp growl. The

giant ant hesitated, with an expression I took to represent confusion. I'd become pretty good at reading animal expressions recently, although actual communication was still impossible.

Under Koa's watchful eye, I carefully approached the giant ant. It didn't move, so I slowly reached out and ran my hand over its head. To my surprise, it was cold and smooth, like touching a ceramic bowl. I'd always thought that ants would be kind of spiky and rough to the touch. Before I realized it, I was petting a giant ant with as much affection as I would a friendly dog.

The ant looked more bewildered than before, but I pretended not to notice.

46. Inside the Cave Is...a Beautiful Lake.

I was currently wandering around a cave accompanied by not only a few huge wolves but also a giant ant. Now that it wasn't possessed, the ant seemed to be rather friendly. It even caught me when I tripped over an errant rock a few minutes ago.

Speaking of which... Physically, I'm so much fitter in this world. So how come I'm still tripping over so much? Maybe clumsiness overrides physical abilities... Like, I'm fine with tripping over a random rock, but most of the time I'm tripping over thin air! It's starting to get embarrassing. I guess the more I fall over, the more I'll get used to the embarrassment... Ha ha ha. Hang on, I don't want *to get used to it!*

The giant ant led us farther and farther into the cave. I assumed we were heading all the way into the depths—and given that I had no real way of communicating with the insect, assumptions were all I had to go on. Koa and the others were with me, so I wasn't *too* worried about what might be waiting for me at the end of the tunnel.

Okay, maybe I am worried. Where the hell are *we going?*

The smaller ants followed us too, scuttling along the walls and ceiling. Every time I turned to examine one, I caught it hurriedly looking away, which amused me greatly. I'd initially thought that the smaller ants must have been the giant ant's offspring, but thinking more about it—without the impending threat of death—I started to wonder if they were actually the worker ants, with the giant ant being the queen.

Not like I'll be able to find out for certain either way... But yeah, I'm pretty sure each nest usually has one queen and the rest are worker ants, right? Well, that's how it was back home at least.

Doesn't necessarily mean it's the same here... But on the other hand, there's no one to stop me from defining things however I like.

We finally came out into a large chamber, which seemed to be the end of the cave. It was dark—far darker than the tunnel had been—so I conjured a few orbs of light to illuminate our surroundings.

Apparently, the deepest chamber of this cave was home to not some terrifying creature but a lake. And not just any lake, of course. It was a pitch-black, shadow-oozing, cursed lake.

You again! You're getting on my last nerve, you stupid curse!

I held out my hand. "**Purify.**"

The giant ant and the worker ants—

Nah, "worker ants" sounds wrong. They're too cute for such a boring name. Antlets! Yeah, let's go with antlets.

Anyway, the giant ant and the antlets had really started to grow on me. The frantic, awkward way they ran about was absolutely adorable. Finding insects cute was a relatively new experience for me, but first there were the spiders...and now these ants. Maybe giant insects were just naturally cuter in parallel worlds. Either way, I liked the ants, which was probably why this cast of purification—and specifically, the desire to send the curse back to its caster—felt stronger than anything I'd cast before. My warm feelings toward the ants and my own sheer irritation must have intensified the spell. I didn't really know if the "counter-curse" part of my purification spells were actually having any effect, but the sight of shadows fading away from the lake's surface made me happy anyway.

There's probably more critters like these guys elsewhere in the forest, possessed by this stinkin' curse.

Anger rushed to my head at the thought. I shook it away, focusing on a mental image of the whole forest—or as much of it as I could, anyway—and held out my hand again. "**Unbinding.**"

I knew such a broad spell probably wasn't strong enough to exorcise anything from here, but if there was anything else out there possessed like the ants were, I hoped it would let them regain even a little bit of self-determination. I wanted to help them all, but I was only one person. All I could do was keep at it day after day, purifying

and exorcising and whatever else I needed to do, and hopefully one day the forest would be rid of the curse once and for all.

A sliver of color caught my attention, and I looked up, only to have my breath taken away. The last patches of shadow had vanished, revealing the lake in its natural form. It looked like the pictures I'd once seen of the Blue Cave in Okinawa, a crystalline, shimmering disc of azure blue. It was sparkling with a light that seemed to come from *beneath* the glassy surface. I extinguished the few orbs I'd conjured earlier. As I'd suspected, a soft, warm glow came from the bottom of the lake itself.

Some part of me wanted to stay there forever, soaking in the mysterious, beautiful atmosphere, but I had work to do. I wasn't any closer to getting my hands on any seasonings, which had been the whole point of today's expedition in the first place. I'd come back to the lake again soon.

With a final long look at the mesmerizing cavern, I turned and began the return journey up the passage. Koa, Soa, and Hio were close behind, followed by the ants—

Hang on. Are you coming home with us too?

I hesitated for a second before quickly deciding that adding a few more large insects to my swiftly growing family probably wouldn't cause any trouble. And so, ants in tow, we retraced our long path back out of the cave.

What felt like hours later, we finally emerged into the open forest. I blinked away the blinding sunlight to find Spider Boss right in front of me.

Aww, were you waiting for me or something?

Spider Boss and the giant ant were staring at each other. No, not staring—*glaring*. A chill ran down my spine.

"Hey now, none of that!" I hurriedly cried. Two pairs of eyes—well, four pairs, because Spider Boss had six eyes—turned to me, and I stared at each of them in turn. "No fighting! You have to play nice."

The two huge insects looked at me, then back at each other—before suddenly walking off together, vanishing into the trees and out of my sight.

Hey! Where are you going? You both better behave yourselves! Maybe I should go after them... Nah. I'll just assume everything's gonna work out fine. Not much more I can *do. It's not like I'm gonna be able to stop them fighting! Make sure you come home safe, okay?!*

I pressed on, willfully ignoring the potentially dangerous scene about to unfold somewhere beyond the treeline. A few minutes walk from the lake cave, we stumbled across a tiny clearing, and in it, a tree laden with fist-sized black fruits.

Okay, so the color's a little unusual, but this is the first time I've come across any fruit growing at a normal *height. This'll be the first thing I harvest with my own two hands since getting here... This world sure likes to keep things out of my reach!*

Clutching my prize triumphantly, I looked over at Hio, first pointing to the fruit and then miming eating it. He nodded, so I quickly peeled the fruit and took a generous bite.

"Argh! What the—?"

It's salty?!

My tongue—which had been anticipating the sweet taste of fruit—took a second to start working again, but there it was. *Salt*. The flavor I'd been longing to experience once again. I hadn't expected that *fruit*, of all things, would hold the key to acquiring that most basic, wonderfully versatile seasoning.

But I am in a parallel world, after all. I need to remember that. Even so, salty fruit is still a little weird, parallel world or not.

I'd finally found some proper seasoning—something I could use to give a little complexity to my otherwise plain daily diet of meat. I picked every single one of the salty fruits I could reach, which, as it turned out, wasn't that many of them. Luckily, Spider Boss returned at that moment, and with quick, skillful movements, retrieved the remaining fruits for me.

Thanks, Spider Boss. Looks like neither of you got injured either. Did you manage to talk it out, or whatever the insect equivalent is?

47. Anferfurmi

— From the Perspective of a Giant Ant —

When the Magic Eye first appeared above the forest, we initially didn't feel much concern. It was not powerful enough to threaten our daily life, and so for a short time, we continued as we always had.

Before long, however, I began to see changes in the forest. The Magic Eye's power was growing, as was its influence over our home. Rivers dried up. Trees lost their color. Fruits turned to poison.

The monarchs of the forest, trying to put an end to the spell, began their counterattack on the humans. It was in vain. Every spell inexplicably faded as soon as it passed beyond the borders of the forest. Again and again they tried, but each attempt ended with the same result—and while the monarchs prepared futile attacks, the Magic Eye's influence continued to spread throughout the forest. By the time we realized it, it had penetrated every last lake and tree. The weaker-willed creatures lost their minds, transforming into savage beasts who attacked their brethren as easily as they did their foes. Strange new monsters appeared, and the forest became unrecognizable as the home I once knew. Many species were wiped out entirely under the Magic Eye's foul gaze, and those who remained continued to suffer.

Time passed, and we who dwelled in the forest could do little but watch. Over half of the monarchs disappeared in what felt like the blink of an eye, and those who managed to cling to life changed dramatically. As each monarch's power faded, the Magic Eye grew stronger, and the forest decayed quicker still.

Somehow, in the midst of this vicious cycle, I managed to hold on to my fading presence of mind. One instinctual, primal urge kept me

going: the need to protect my brethren. But I was no more immune to the dark power than any of the others had been. I felt my consciousness fading away—felt the savage tug of mindlessness. With my last shreds of willpower, I sealed myself and my remaining children in the sacred lake cave. I knew it would only delay the loathsome power from seizing complete control of the forest. I couldn't stop it; all I could do was extend our time.

Darkness.

I didn't know how long I'd been in that place when the light had appeared, guiding what remnants remained of my mind out from the endless black. Warm light washed over me, freeing me from the coiling, crushing weight of the Magic Eye's chains. Confusion and panic flooded my previously dull senses—particularly when I looked up to find a human. An *enemy*. A soon-to-be dead enemy. But my attack didn't land. I was flung backward. The Fenrir monarch growled at me with bared teeth.

A Fenrir was defending a *human*.

I couldn't make sense of it. Bewildered, I turned to check on my children; they were just as surprised as me. Those who remained anyway. There were far fewer than I remembered. Still, my final desperate effort to protect us had saved some of my brethren, a fact which gave some small relief to my aching heart.

I was further surprised when the human approached me and gently stroked my head. It was sheer lunacy: No one would have dared to think that a human could be so bold. I froze, entirely unsure of how to react, and the human continued patting me. Warm mana flowed out of those hands and into my body, the same warm magic I'd felt earlier.

Ah, I thought. *This magic—this human—is what saved us. Humans are detestable creatures...but this one—this one is different. The Fenrir queen would never deign to protect a mere ordinary human—nor would one be capable of touching me in such a ridiculous manner. But what kind of being does a monarch call master? A god? Perhaps I should consider serving this human too... No. There is no need to consider. The human saved our lives, and thus a life is owed. It is already my master.*

I guided Master to the sacred lake, only to find it in a far more terrible state than I'd feared. I closed my eyes rather than look upon it for another second. A bright flash blazed through my eyelids, startling them open again. I stared at the lake in astonishment.

It looks just like it did all those years ago...

The lake had been restored at Master's hand, just as we had been. This sacred lake was one of the favored abodes of the dragon that presides over all water in the forest. There was no evidence of the dragon here now, but I hoped with all of my heart that it was still out there somewhere.

We left the cave and emerged into the forest. It, too, had started to resemble its former self as it had been before the Magic Eye had cast its gaze on our home. Another surprise awaited me too—an unpleasant one, this time.

Chuearenie.

We called her kind the Gatekeepers of Hell, for any creature who laid eyes on them tended to meet a swift death. Though their leader—who stood before me now—was one of the monarchs who protected this forest, she and I had never seen eye to eye. Bloodlust surged through me at the very sight of her, and her movements revealed that the feeling was mutual.

However, a few words from Master were enough to keep her in check. The bloodlust that had been emanating from her vanished, as though it had been no more than a mere illusion.

But how—? No. Master is powerful enough to control anything, even a Gatekeeper of Hell. It would do me well to remember it.

But to think the day would come when a Chuearenie and I would settle matters with words...

48. Salt Making... The One Eyes Are Too Wise.

We arrived home with the new additions to our family. I did wonder if they would return to the lake cave after seeing the house (which couldn't really be called a cave at this point), but the ants didn't seem particularly bothered.

All righty then. Welcome home, I guess.

Chai took one look at the giant ant and tucked his tail between his legs.

Hey, don't be scared, boy! It's friendly...I think.

I shot a glance at the giant ant, but it wasn't reacting to Chai's apparent fear. I couldn't *really* tell what it was thinking, but since it wasn't actively threatening Chai, I chose to believe that it was indeed friendly.

It's a new friend, okay? Don't worry, boy.

"Giant ant" was getting a little old, so I decided to give it a name—a unilateral decision, of course, but what else was new?

"Shuri." The name came from the kanji for "vermilion" and "wise." I couldn't tell, of course, but I wanted to believe that the giant insect liked its new moniker.

I surveyed the wasteland of stumps before me.

I know I've gotta do something *about this soon...but not today. Sorry, but I've got other plans!*

I was going to spend the rest of the day experimenting with the salty fruit. Specifically, I wanted to find out whether or not I'd be able to turn the juice into a hardened form; crystallized or powdered salt would be far more convenient than liquid for use as a seasoning. I turned my back on the stump field and made a beeline for the kitchen.

Everyone, you're free to enjoy the rest of the day however you like...! Just like always, I guess.

In total, we'd harvested sixty-five of the strange black fruits. It was a lot, but if I could use them to make salt, I was happy to have as many as I could get. Plus, I had a seemingly permanent time stop storage room too. For starters, I placed a bowl I'd shaped out of the silvery ore on the counter and secured a thin piece of cloth over the top to use as a filter. Careful not to crush it, I cut the first fruit in half and squeezed it over the bowl. It produced far more juice than I'd expected from its size, and by the time I'd finished juicing the fifth fruit, the bowl was pretty full. I decided to stop at five for the first attempt. If I screwed up, at least I wouldn't waste too many of the fruits.

I used magic to slowly warm the metal bowl and evaporate the moisture content of the juice. I noticed some scum floating to the top of the bowl as the liquid receded, so I paused for a minute to filter the remaining juice again. As to avoid burning the juice, I stirred the liquid constantly as I warmed it. Little by little, the liquid evaporated until I was finally left with a tiny pile that resembled sorbet. My heart raced as I trailed a fingertip through the damp, loose crystals and pressed it to my tongue. Just as I'd hoped, it was perfectly salty.

Oh, man... I could cry with happiness.

I transferred the sorbet-like salt to a clean cloth and wrung as much of the remaining liquid out as I could before spreading the fabric flat and carefully drying the contents with wind magic. I succeeded. I'd finally acquired salt.

I can't believe fruit *was the answer, though... This really is another world. I mean, salty fruit?*

All in all, today had been an excellent day. I'd found some new friends *and* salt.

I fetched some of the smaller nodes of the golden ore from the basement and returned to the kitchen. Willing the strange magic power inside me to penetrate the metal, I visualized a small, lidded container.

"**Transform.**"

It worked. I transferred the finished salt into the container and started the whole process all over again, focused only on turning every last fruit into glorious salt. By the end of the day, I'd filled four whole containers.

More salt than I could have dreamed of... I'm so happy.

I felt like I'd gotten better at fine-tuning my magic over the course of the afternoon too. I'd had to give the heating process my complete, undivided attention; if I lost control for even a second, I risked heating the bowl too rapidly and burning the liquid within. One such failure had been enough.

What is it they say? Slow and steady wins the race... Or something like that anyway.

With my work finally done, I treated myself to a heavenly meal of heavily salted meat and a moment of rest. The steak tasted several times more delicious than usual.

I'd love to get my hands on some eggs next. Mayonnaise would go great with this too... Oh, and some garlic would be nice, and dashi for cooking... There's still a lot of stuff I want, huh? But I shouldn't be greedy. I've just gotta focus on one thing at a time.

All of the tree stumps were gone by the time I went back outside.

What the—? Where the hell did they all go?!

I quickly spotted a new hole in one corner of the now-open field. A large hole. With a very large head sticking out of it—Shuri's.

Oh, it's not a hole—it's a nest. Ants build nests.

I saw something odd out of the corner of my eye. It was a singular stump that had yet to vanish, though it appeared to be in the process of doing so, given that it was—for some strange reason—moving. I peered at it closely and realized it was being carried by a swarm of antlets. I watched as they lugged it across the field and into the hole.

Maybe they're gonna use it for something... What, though? Oh well. It's made my job easier. I had no idea what I was gonna do with a bunch of stumps.

I continued watching as a team of One Eyes appeared outside. In no time at all, they'd constructed scaffolding around the hole, and

their project quickly took form: a wooden canopy to prevent rain from flooding the nest.

Wow, you guys can do this kinda construction work too? Awesome!

I was only slightly concerned about just *where* they'd learned how to build scaffolding and canopies. It certainly hadn't come from me.

49. Commander of the Fourth Knights Brigade (1)

The king had issued an order. My brigade was to investigate the forest. Officially, our mission was just that—an investigation—but I knew that if we were to encounter any unexpected issues, the king would expect us to *resolve* said issues.

The Fourth Knights Brigade has always had more contact with the forest than any of the other units. Most of the time, it was in the form of monster capture and subjugation missions, but being sent to survey one area or another in the forest isn't unusual for us either. So despite the strange business with the magestone that's got everyone a bit flustered, today's mission doesn't worry me in the slightest.

"But this time you're going to the *center* of the forest. Doesn't it worry you that the problem seems to be originating from where the monarchs were supposed to dwell?"

I chuckled at my friend's words. He'd always worried too much for his own good. The so-called monarchs of the forest were nothing compared to *our* king. Besides, by now it had been decades since a monarch had been seen in the forest—and even if one or two of them did still lurk in those trees, what did I have to fear?

The news that a crack had appeared in the magestone had all the knights talking at first, of course. But pretty soon it came to light that the crack in question was *tiny*—and our magestone was far larger than any of the others discovered throughout history. A tiny crack or two posed no harm to a magestone over a meter tall. According to the records, there'd already been a few small fractures in it when they'd unearthed the magestone anyway. Why fear another crack now? Even if a king was still alive somewhere in the forest, all we had to do was crush it. Those false monarchs were a

thing of the past.

Still, when the mages had first alerted the king to the new crack, there'd been a lot of unease among those in the castle, and the knights had been no exception. However, once we'd learned of the insignificant size of said crack, unease had turned to indifference, and anyone still foolish enough to voice their fears became the subject of ridicule—just as they deserved. Our kingdom possessed the strongest power in the entire world. Fear was unnecessary.

"I hope you're right..." my friend mumbled, smiling timidly.

I smiled in return and teased him again for worrying so much. *Coward.*

We stood at the border of trees that marked the edge of the forest. A path led the way inside—the same path we always took. One more step and I'd be inside, but for some reason, my feet refused to move. I glanced behind me, taking in the mirrored expressions of my subordinates; apprehension written on every face.

The forest looked the same as it always had, at least from where we stood. But it *felt* different. Fear bubbled up inside me, like it was oozing out of the ocean of trees and straight into my chest.

But nothing's changed. Nothing could *have changed.*

I sent the slaves to conduct a preliminary search of the forest as always. Usually, the Brigade would spend this time setting up camp while we awaited their return. Today, no one moved. I knew everyone else was feeling the same way I did: Something inside was saying not to sleep here.

The slaves returned from the forest. To my great relief, they hadn't found anything out of the ordinary in the near vicinity. Fear still roiled in my chest, but I had to follow my orders. My feet felt like lead as I took that final step, crossing the border into the forest.

I remembered how my friend had looked when we'd last spoken. Sad. Worried.

Maybe I should have listened to him...

50. Commander of the Fourth Knights Brigade (2)

The forest was as quiet as always, disturbed only by the occasional howl or shriek of a distant monster.

See? I reassured myself. *Nothing to worry about. Looks the same, sounds the same—nothing's changed.*

Still, I couldn't shake the unpleasant feeling covering my body, like something had coiled itself around me.

I moved the slaves to the vanguard position and sent them ahead to scout, leaving the Fourth Brigade in the safer rear position. Little by little, we pushed deeper into the forest. I couldn't tell how much time had passed. The crushing feeling didn't fade, and my discomfort gradually morphed into fear. Each new step brought a new surge of dread, and the atmosphere began to thicken with tension, which only caused the dread to surge even more. It was a vicious cycle. I willed myself to calm down, to think clearly, but the words seemed to hold little meaning.

We'd come across four monsters, the last of which was currently being disposed of with far more force than was warranted for a creature of its size. The monsters seemed nervous too. Their attacks weren't the synchronized, shrewd movements I knew. They were reckless and brutal.

We could see one change in the forest now: There weren't enough monsters. Usually at least ten of the creatures would have attacked us by this point—but that wasn't the worst of it. The four monsters we *had* encountered weren't the natural inhabitants of this forest but experiments created by our kingdom's mages. Born of the magestone and designed to attack other monsters—and *only* other monsters. They shouldn't have been able to attack a human.

But they did, so what's gone wrong?

Perhaps... Perhaps there *was* something waiting at the center of the forest. I didn't think I'd be able to progress any farther in my current state—actually, I didn't know if I'd be able to force myself to move farther into the forest at all. The fourth and final monster finally fell, and I sighed with relief. The knights slackened too, nerves giving way to exhaustion. Fatigue could be fatal in this place.

"We'll rest for a while."

I knew how ridiculous the command must have sounded to them. How could anyone rest in a place like this? At the same time, we couldn't just up and leave the forest every time we needed to catch our breath. It was here or nowhere, and it needed to be here and now. If my men couldn't regain their composure soon, they'd end up behaving as recklessly as the now-dead monsters.

I ordered the slaves to stand watch as we rested. My command was met with blank expressions—as they always were. Slaves didn't show emotion. They didn't need feelings—they'd never needed them. They'd been slaves since the day they were born.

I suppose they don't feel fear either.

Right now, I envied them for that.

A few minutes passed, and I began to look around, covertly trying to examine the condition of my men—which was when a beam of light shot past us and out of the forest. It was gone before I'd actually realized something happened. It had lasted for less than a second. A single ray, like a flash of lightning. There'd been no warning. No chance to defend.

Screams rang out from around the clearing. The light—whatever it was—had lasted for less than a second, yet it had fanned our collective fear more than the rest of the mission so far. I surveyed myself and my men. No one was injured. No one was unconscious.

Obviously. It's just light. Light can't hurt us.

Yet my heart was racing, and I could feel the sweat dripping from my brow. I drew my blade and waited. Nothing happened. The forest was silent—

Until light surged out of the very earth itself and into the sky.

I heard screaming and the sound of fleeing footsteps. I tried to command them to halt, but the words caught in my throat. My legs

crumpled beneath me, and I fell to my knees, desperately gasping for breath.

Calm down. I have to calm down!

Somehow I managed to get to my feet and survey the scene. My men lay scattered around the clearing. Some had fainted, their faces etched with terror; others cowered, arms wrapped around shaking knees.

I took a deep breath and gave the order to withdraw. We had to get out of the forest—now.

We made for the open plains just beyond the border. It wasn't a long journey—we hadn't ventured far by this point—and yet, everyone ran like their lives depended on it, desperate to escape even a minute sooner.

"Commander, the slaves are gone."

I hadn't noticed, but now I looked around, there wasn't a single slave in sight—something that should have been impossible. Their slave seals had been reinforced by the power of the magestone. They were bound to the kingdom with the strongest chains magic could create. So for them to escape...

Something is definitely going wrong.

51. So Ants Are Carnivorous... Wait, Karen Too?

My land-clearing project was progressing at an unexpectedly quick pace on account of the ants absconding with all the stumps.

What the hell are they gonna use them all for, anyway?

My gaze followed Shuri as the ant disappeared inside the nest once again. The entryway was large—easily large enough for me to go through too. Curiosity got the better of me, and I shuffled to the edge, peering down. It was deep; that much I could see. The temperature inside seemed much colder for some reason.

Must be my imagination. Yeah.

The wolves had apparently gone hunting while I'd been experimenting with salt, for they showed up soon after with a fresh lot of meat for me to process. Once again, they'd gone a bit overboard with the "supply" part of "supply and demand." As always, I was thankful for magic. I'd be screwed if I had to butcher everything by hand.

I teleported the largest of the fresh carcasses over to the wolves' feeding area and prepared it in the usual way: blood drained (by me), skinned (by the Gremlins), and, of course, with all organs intact.

Incidentally, the Gremlins had started popping up out of nowhere every time I butchered a carcass. I'd never sense their presence, probably because they were dolls. I'd just turn around to find them staring up at me, which, of course, scared the crap out of me every time.

Nearly done. I turned to start on the last carcass, only to find it gone.

"Um..." *I'm sure there was still one to go... Ah.*

Tracks led away from where I'd last seen the carcass, like

something had been dragged along the ground—right into Shuri's nest.

Wait, are ants carnivores?

I started walking back over to the hole but froze as a swarm of antlets began to emerge, each of them covered in blood. It was like something from a nightmare. Feigning nonchalance, I averted my eyes and slowly backed away.

Nope, nothing to see here!

Instead, I turned my attention back to the stumpless, bumpy clearing. Even with the hide-drying section that the Gremlins had marked out, there was a lot of space to spare—but if I wanted to use it for anything, I had to first figure out how to deal with the potholes. Despite my attempt to ignore them, the antlets immediately began scuttling right into my line of vision—and tunneling down into the earth.

"Er..."

Bewildered, I could do little but watch as the ground began to shift.

They're... What are *they doing?*

Eventually, it became clear. The dirt trembled and flattened as the holes disappeared one by one. The ants were plowing the soil.

I guess farmers do sometimes add insects to their fields to aerate the soil. I think they usually use worms, but I've heard about ants being used too. I don't think they're meant to be this *fast though... They're racing around under there.*

Well, they'd tilled a giant plot for me, but I didn't know what to do with it. In Japan, this would be prime real estate for growing vegetables, but I didn't have any seeds. Come to think of it, I hadn't even come across any root or tuber vegetables.

Maybe I should ask Shuri? Ants should know a lot about what goes on underground.

"Shuri?"

A blood-covered face poked out of the nest.

Pretending not to notice it, pretending not to notice it...

Squatting in front of the giant ant, I drew a diagram in the soil of a vegetable growing under the earth.

Ants are pretty smart. I'm sure it'll understand— Hang on. This is just a line and a circle!

Cursing myself internally, I fleshed out the diagram with some charades, pointing to the circle and miming eating it.

"Do you know where I can find some vegetables that grow in the dirt?"

Visions of potatoes, yams, radishes, and other delicious root and tuber vegetables danced across my mind. Seeds or the crops themselves—I'd be happy with either. The vegetables I knew in Japan were just wild plants that had undergone selective breeding; surely I'd be able to find *something* of the wild variety in a forest this size.

Shuri tilted its head curiously.

It's got no idea what I'm saying. Or maybe root vegetables aren't a thing here... Oh, they're leaving.

Shuri and the antlets scuttled off into the forest, quickly followed by (for some reason) the baby spiders.

Maybe it did understand me after all. For simplicity's sake, I'll assume it did. Don't work too hard, though! And stay safe!

Karen returned home. I hadn't seen the bird for three days, and I'd been starting to worry.

I was still a little worried, actually. Karen had grown in the time it had been away. It had been pretty small, so a little growth was normal—good, even. But not *this* much.

Somehow, the bird had tripled in size—if not more. When I'd last seen Karen, it had been the size of a sparrow, a *small* sparrow.



Karen’s extraordinary growth was second only to that of Spider Boss. The already-large spider was getting larger by the day.

Spider Boss is already as big as Koa— No, I think it’s bigger. I wonder how much more it’s gonna grow... Nope. Scary thoughts. Ignore. The baby spiders are getting bigger too... Hang on, is Shuri gonna grow as well?! It’s only a little smaller than Spider Boss as it is. If it starts growing...

Ha ha ha... Nope.

Karen hadn’t returned alone. Accompanying the bird was a... Well, I didn’t know what it was: some kind of strange, round creature that looked like a ball of wool with wings—wings that it wasn’t even using as it bobbed up and down in the air.

What’s the point of having them, then?!

I could sense the cloying aura of the curse, so I started off with a Purification.

You’re still hanging around? Stupid curse. When’s the jerk who cast you gonna just give up, huh?

The strange, round creature shimmered, black giving way to a deep, rich blue. It still just looked like a ball of wool, albeit one in a pretty color.

Well, whatever it was, it was apparently one of us now. Since I had no idea what kind of animal it was, I had to name it purely based on appearance. And so, “Fluffy” joined the family.

52. Tubers...and Monster Stones.

To my relief, Shuri and the others returned several days later. They'd brought back a substantial haul—way, way more than I'd anticipated. In total, there were around one hundred individual tuber vegetables, which seemed to be split across ten different varieties, plus an assortment of random seeds.

I just hope they're edible...

I asked the ants as much, pretending to eat one of the potato-like crops. The ants nodded in approval. Twenty or so ants nodding in unison was a vaguely unsettling sight.

For now, I decided to try planting some of the tubers in the newly plowed field. Vegetables need proper nutrients to thrive, so I gave making organic fertilizer a try—something my father had once insisted on teaching me, whether I liked it or not.

First, I dug a largish hole and installed a wooden frame, like a planter box, around it. Into the hole went all the food scraps, as well as dead leaves, grass, and other bits of natural waste, which I subsequently stomped down and compacted. I repeated the process over the next few days, adding whatever food scraps we had and stomping it down again. The dead leaves were a little dry, so I added a bit of water too. Once it was nearly full, I set out into the forest, hoping to find something that looked like fungus or mold. Natural bacteria was great at accelerating decomposition. I wasn't entirely sure that parallel worlds *had* natural bacteria, but luckily, I managed to find something vaguely mold-like.

And in you go... Should be fine, I think.

Now I just had to wait about six months for it to fully break down—which wasn't a particularly enticing thought, so I used magic to fast-forward the date in the manure pit by a year instead.

I love magic. The fertilizer looks perfect! So I'm guessing that was *mold after all... That might come in handy later. Mold's pretty*

useful in a lot of ways.

I spread my new fertilizer over the soil and mixed it in, tilling the plot into neat rows as I did. I still wasn't sure the tubers would grow in here—if they could even grow at all—but there was only one way to find out. I cut each of the tubers into smaller chunks, making sure each chunk had at least one eye sprouting from it, and planted them in the soil. By the time everything was planted, my field had over fifty furrowed rows. My friends had worked hard to bring back so many of the tubers, so I hadn't wanted anything to go to waste. Even after exhausting myself making fifty rows, though, there was still a lot of field to spare.

This field is just too wide... Maybe I should have spread the rows out more? Who knows? Not me.

Since I had room to spare, I decided to plant some of the seeds that the ants had brought back too—although I didn't have any idea what they'd produce. Before planting them, though, I first verified that they were edible via my somewhat dubious charades.

Okay, sorry guys, but you need to pick a representative. I can't handle everyone nodding at me at the same time. You're ants. It's creepy.

Plow and plant. Plow and plant. It took over half a day to finish planting the seeds, by which time the number of rows had doubled. I took a step back to survey my work. When I first thought of growing some vegetables, I'd been picturing something like a small hobby garden. The field before my eyes resembled something from a commercial farm. I wasn't quite sure where I'd gone wrong.

Later that afternoon, today's hunting squad returned, dragging an assortment of prey behind them with their teeth. I was always impressed by how easily they seemed to carry the monsters, which were always much larger than them.

You're all so strong! Who's a good wolf— Er... Shion, are you floating just a little...? Nah. Gotta be my imagina— No, you're definitely floating. Hmm... Well, I guess this is a parallel world. There's magic here. Floating wolves aren't too odd.

I'd become a master at turning a blind eye recently.

While I was butchering the latest lot of meat, two of the carcasses disappeared into the ant's nest.

Enjoy your meal! You guys sure earned it. Baby spiders, you're gonna have to wait a little longer, okay?

The baby spiders had recently started preferring their meat on the cooked side. The wolves still liked theirs raw, but they seemed to prefer it when I drained the blood first. I assumed it tasted better that way.

Another one... What are these things?

Lately, I'd realized that most of the monsters contained a weird gemlike stone. It wasn't every monster, but at least ninety percent of them produced one of the slate-gray pebbles.

Animals back home don't have stones inside them... I think. Yep, definitely not. The only stones you'd find inside a living thing would be kidney stones or something... Maybe these monsters were sick? Nah, the stones are always right near the heart. Heart stones? I don't think that's a thing... But what causes stones to form near a monster's heart? Ha, as if I'd know. Either way, I've got way too many of these piling up. I wonder if I can use them for something? They're starting to take up a lot of space...

53. Monster Stones...and a Barbecue.

I looked at the stones again. *Monsters are basically animals. Animals shouldn't have stones inside them. It's unnatural. Unnatural... Wait, are these related to the curse?! I never considered that before. I'll try a purification spell... Nope, nothing. That's a relief. Still don't know what they are, though.*

I decided to see if the stones responded to an input of mana, like the stone that makes up the cave. The result was surprising. My mana penetrated the monster stone in an instant, like the stone itself was sucking it in.

So much faster than working with actual *stone... Still don't know what I can use it for, though. Guess I'll have to try a couple of things. Wonder if I can stockpile mana inside these too?*

For spells to keep working long after I cast them, I needed to fill whatever material I was using with a reserve of mana—something I'd only discovered after the flushing function on the first-floor toilet stopped working. I'd thought maybe it was broken, but when I carefully inspected the toilet, I realized I couldn't feel the usual constant pulsing of mana, which I'd grown accustomed to. Thinking I'd perhaps found the answer, I'd flooded the entire room with my mana, penetrating not only the toilet itself, but the floor, walls, and ceiling too. I was right on the money. The toilet started flushing of its own accord. I considered myself lucky that it was the toilet spell that wore out first, and not the food-preservation spells I'd cast on the storehouse. Imagining all that food rotting...

Yep. Definitely lucky.

Carefully holding the stone, I visualized—and felt—my mana pouring into it. And pouring. And pouring... The stone wasn't very large, but it seemed like it could hold quite a lot of mana.

"Argh!" I nearly dropped the stone when it suddenly gleamed and turned from dark gray to vibrant green.

Weird. Guess it is pretty different from cave stone—no matter how much mana I pour into the cave, it's still just good old stone.

The stones that came out of the monsters were opaque and gray like actual stone, but this one was now a transparent, glistening green, just like an emerald—and I didn't have the faintest idea why.

Wonder what happens if I try to add more mana... Huh. It's not going in. Full tank, I guess?

I was still very confused, but I decided to test out some of the other monster stones. A few minutes later, I had a small spectrum of the gemlike pebbles: green, red, burgundy, sky blue, and sapphire.

I wonder if there's any difference? Well, the colors are different, obviously—but do the colors mean *anything? No idea how I'd find out... Oh yeah, also, I can put mana into the stones, but I don't know if I can take it back out... Nope. That didn't work. I have absolutely zero idea what I'm doing. Huh? Oh hey, Koa—*

The wolf was breathing fire.

Jeez, you scared me. What's wrong? Is—? Hang on, you can cast magic? I mean, I kinda thought you might be able to, but still... Well, that's great! Good girl! By the way, any reason you decided to start breathing fire all of a sudden?

Koa lifted a paw and placed it on top of the red monster stone, and let out another stream of flames. It was more powerful this time, and mildly terrifying.

Great job, girl! Still don't know why you're doing it though. Did... Did I do something to upset you?

Koa?

The wolf repeated the process again—a smaller jet of fire, followed by a larger one. I knew she was trying to tell me something; I just had to calm down and figure out exactly what that was.

Otherwise, I feel like she's gonna keep standing here blowing flames at me.

After a few deep breaths, I made the connection—she was moving her paw on and off the stone, kind of like...

Like it's doubling her power.

Time for a little experimentation. I fetched an empty cup and grasped the red stone. "**Drinking Water.**" Water materialized, filling the cup—the same amount as always.

Huh. That's weird. Maybe the stones don't double the power of a spell, then?

Koa, who'd clearly been watching me, picked up the sky-blue and sapphire-colored stones and dropped them at my feet.

Ah, so maybe red is for fire, and blue is for water. I see, I see.

I picked up the sky-blue stone and tried again. "**Drinking Water.**"

Water materialized out of nowhere—about *five* times as much as usual.

So it's not double*, I guess...*

The area around us was drenched.

I don't know what I expected. The cup gets completely full with just the normal spell, and I wanted to add to it—what else was gonna happen? Sure, I was thinking I'd get double the water, not five times as much, but it was gonna overflow either way. Idiot.

"**Evaporate. Clean.**"

The water—both in the cup and outside of it—vanished, and our surroundings returned to their pre-flooded condition.

Destruction of evidence successful!

I grabbed the sapphire-colored stone and tried again. "**Drinking Water!**" A ridiculous deluge of water gushed around us.

Wait a minute. It didn't fit in the cup last time—why the hell did I do it again?!

I quickly cleaned up the new round of evidence, somewhat exhausted.

Well, at least I figured out what the monster stones do. They intensify magic! But I don't know why I'd need to do that. I've never once thought "Jeez, I wish I could double the power of this spell" since I got here. Hmm... Well, I'll give them to the wolves for now, if they want them. Maybe they'll come in handy while they're hunting. Oh, maybe they'd be useful in a battle. "Offensive Power Up!" or something? Ugh... That'd be scary.

I made fifty mana-filled spheres of rock, each around the size of my fist. Rock Transformation seemed to be my specialty. Then I shaped some of the silvery metal into a long trough—around a meter long and half as wide—and filled it with the spheres.

Barbecue preparation: check.

Next, I shaped some of the golden ore into long, thin rods and used them to skewer chunks of meat.

Meat preparation: check.

Finally, I held my hand over the trough, visualizing glowing, sizzling charcoal. "**Heat.**"

Somehow or other, my plan seemed to have actually worked. The stones were able to maintain a consistent (and intense) level of heat, just like charcoal. It was exactly what I'd hoped for. I rested a few of the skewers over the trough and waited for them to grill, sprinkling them with a little bit of salt about halfway through.

They were delicious.

Fire spells usually cooked the meat well enough, but it wasn't the same as a properly barbecued skewer.

I wonder what other pseudo-appliances I can make... I'd love some sauce or marinades too. And some other types of seasonings. Gotta get back into the forest.

With a start, I realized that the canine members of my family had gathered around, staring at the grilling meat. They usually didn't show much interest in cooked food, but maybe the premium smell of barbecue had lured them in. I grabbed a few of the rarer, unsalted skewers and shredded the meat onto a stone plate. They seemed a little cautious at first, but pretty soon, they were wolfing it down.

Looks like they're fans.

Also fond of today's menu were the spiders, who tended to prefer their meat cooked anyway. I had no idea whether that was a "parallel world" thing or if spiders back home preferred cooked meat as well. Shuri was firmly in the "raw meat" camp, but the antlets had recently started requesting their share sans blood.

Hope Shuri's not gonna get mad at them or anything... Eh, I'm sure it's fine. Definitely.

54. The Knight (2)

— From the Perspective of the Commander of the First Knight's Brigade, Kingdom of Empras —

Silence had fallen in the throne room, as I—and likely everyone else present—tried to comprehend what we'd just heard.

The Fourth Brigade had returned to the castle far too quickly, each and every knight bearing stiff expressions and guarded tongues. Their commander, along with the rest of us commanders and seconds-in-command, had immediately been summoned to the throne room. Obviously, we all knew *something* had happened. *But this...*

"The slaves *escaped*? Not died, but definitely escaped?" asked the king's advisor. The commander of the Fourth Brigade nodded, and silence fell again.

We'd all heard his report of the strange changes in the forest and to the monsters within, changes no one here would have dared to even imagine. Those who'd been apprehensive after the crack had appeared in the magestone had long since regained their composure. Those still nursing fears and misgivings (countable on a single hand) were the subject of much ridicule. The atmosphere in the castle had returned to something near normal.

And now this report...

Understanding was written on every face: The forest was indeed a threat. But it was probably too late. Some small part of all of us had known that the forest was changing, but we'd turned a blind eye, interpreting those changes in a way that suited us. We'd thought that the forest all but belonged to us already, and that belief had dulled our judgment.

The new report brought new awareness. If the slaves had indeed fled, it meant that their slave seals—seals reinforced by the power of the Magestone no less—had been nullified. If our enthralled monsters had attacked the knights, it was because their natural instincts—instincts the Magestone had warped—had returned. As for the other alleged changes in the forest—the atmosphere, as he put it—I had no explanation. However, everything I could explain was related to the Magestone.

A thud broke the silence—the sound of the king standing up in frustration. He swept from the room without uttering a single word, his expression warped with obvious anger. Before now, the forest had been all but within his grasp. His anger was to be expected.

A sigh of relief escaped me as the king vanished from sight. I looked at my friend, still standing in the middle of the room. He sighed too, his shoulders drooping with the release of tension. In most circumstances, the king would have regarded the report as a clear failure of his duties as commander of the Fourth Brigade. The king did not tolerate failures, and most of the time, the punishment was death.

I clapped him on the shoulder and began guiding him out of the room. "I'm glad you're safe."

He scowled at the words, and I raised an eyebrow. It was unusual for him to let his emotions show so freely.

"What's going on out there?" he asked quietly.

I'd like to know that too.

"It looked the same as always, but the feeling... I've never felt fear like that before," he continued, his voice shaking.

He really must have been scared for it to have affected him like this. What will the king's orders be? He won't abandon the forest, not when he's so close to conquering it.

No, he'd never back down from a treasure he thought was already his. In all likelihood, war would be his answer. But in our kingdom, wars were won with the power of the Magestone, but the Magestone seemed to be the main cause of the problem in the first place. It might not be wise to continue wielding it as a weapon against the forest. But since the Magestone's power and the king's

power were one and the same, I doubted he'd decide not to rely on it should things come to war.

"What manner of being is more powerful than a monarch?" I asked. I was met with an expression of utmost shock in return.

Why are you surprised, old friend? Surely you didn't think it was the monarchs of the forest causing all of this? If they could fight back, they would have done so decades ago. No. Something more powerful than a monarch—more powerful than all the monarchs—dwells in that forest. Or, more likely, has appeared *there. But as to what manner said being is...*

55. Fluffy’s Special Skill? And...Let’s Give It a Go.

I want soy sauce! But I can’t make soy sauce without soybeans, so I guess I’m outta luck... Okay, gotta pull myself together. Think about what I can *make with the stuff I do have. I’ve got salt, and there might be fish in one of these lakes. If I can get some fish, I can probably make fish sauce.*

I vaguely remembered seeing fish sauce being made on some TV show. As far as I recalled, it was as easy as mixing salt and fish and leaving the mixture to ferment for a year or two. Fish sauce wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea—it had a pretty distinctive smell and flavor—but I’d always been fond of it.

Well, if I can find some fish, I’ll give it a shot. Tomorrow I’m heading to the lake.

Hio and Kurou were my chaperones today. *Thanks, you two.*

The morning sun sparkled as it reflected off the clear water. It was a beautiful, tranquil sight—but I wasn’t here for the scenery. I was here for fish—if the lake had any to offer. I peered inside to no avail.

Idiot. Of course I wouldn’t be able to see ’em from up here. So what should I do? Probably make a fishing rod, but how? I can get wood easily enough, and the Three Eyes can probably make some fishing line. Then I need a hook and bait... Hmm.

A blur of motion startled me out of my train of thought as Fluffy darted in front of me. It had appeared out of nowhere in the morning when I’d set off and followed us all the way to the lake, bobbing around me in excited circles. Well, I’d assumed it was excited since Fluffy’s expressions were nearly impossible to read. It had seemed really enthusiastic, so I’d been happy to let it

accompany us—a happiness that had been short-lived. Fluffy had spent the entire journey rapidly circling my head, which was both distracting and frequently obscured my vision, just like it was doing now.

Are you trying to tell me something? Hmm... Nope, no idea. Sorry, but it's way too hard to read your expressions.

"Hey, Fluffy. Sorry, but can you calm down a little? I'm trying to figure out how I'm gonna catch a fish."

Fluffy froze for a moment before spinning around in a circle and spreading its wings.

Oh, so you can *use your wings? First time I've seen it. Where are you flying off to? Oh, you're diving into the lake... Wait!*

Fluffy plunged deep into the water.

Are you okay?!

A moment later, a blue streak of light flashed underneath the lake's surface, and something shot out of the depths, landing right at my feet.

"Ah."

Apparently, Fluffy was something of a skilled fisherman. I'd been hoping to catch a nice small fish, just big enough for an attempt at fish sauce. However, the fish flopping around at my feet was closer in size to a shark than a river fish. Fluffy darted back out of the lake and over to me, once again circling my head in frantic, bouncing loops.

Yep—I was right. It's excited.

I chuckled. "Thanks, Fluffy. You really helped out...I think."

Either way, fish acquired! Bit bigger than I expected, but that's not a problem. Could do some grilled fish for dinner. I need to kill it first, though... Usually I think you knock 'em out with a spike to the brain, but I've got no idea where this one's brain even is... Quick wind magic slice to cut off the head. Done. Next is gutting... No organs for me. Teleport and Incinerate. Refrigerate to keep it cold, and Chronostasis to keep it fresh. Then it's just Ascend to carry it back... Magic is so damn cool.

I got started on my attempt at fish sauce the minute we got

home. First, I cleaned and filleted the fish. I never made fish sauce before, so I decided to start with a very small portion of the fish for my trial run.

Crap. I've got no clue how much salt I need to use... I think it's a pretty heavy amount. Let's see... Lemme try a five-to-one fish-to-salt ratio. That sounds plausible... Wait, how am I gonna measure the salt? I don't have scales. Okay, visualizing scales... How do scales work again? Oh, this is impossible. I'll just eyeball it.

I shaped a new container from the silvery metal and hit it with a precautionary Clean, and I was ready to go.

The fillet I'd selected was leaking a fair amount of blood.

Blood... I don't remember if I'm meant to leave it in. If I'm not, and I leave it in, isn't it gonna stink worse?

Somewhat hesitant, I used magic to remove any trace of blood from the fish. Next, I smeared the fillet with a thick layer of salt—maybe a little too thick, but I didn't want it to rot. Thankfully, I'd gone back and harvested more of the black fruits and spent a day or two mass-producing salt, so I had plenty. When salt was your only seasoning, it ran out pretty damn quickly.

The salt-covered fish went into the container, along with a little more salt for caution's sake. I was very apprehensive about the measurements.

Well, it's my first time, after all. Failure is part of the process!

The final step was to put the lid on and wait a year or two, which obviously, wasn't going to work for me. I zapped it with a bit of magic, fast-forwarding time for three months exclusively inside the container, gave it a good shake, and repeated the spell. When I nervously peered inside, the fillet was no longer distinguishable, and fermentation had begun, but it didn't seem quite right yet. I repeated the process again, and again, and again. When I opened the lid after the fifth fast-forward, the smell hit me— the scent of pure, undeniable fish sauce. It was milder than the one we'd used back home, and it smelled a little extra salty—I might have added too much—but I was still pretty sure I'd succeeded. Finally, I strained the sauce through a thin sheet of cloth, leaving me with a light brown liquid.

I quickly grilled a monster-meat steak and finished it off with a dash of the sauce.

It's... It's perfect. Nostalgic. Delicious. I feel so moved...and a little scared. Like I'm... Like I'm being watched.

I turned to find a neat line of wolves staring at me with hungry eyes.

Um, I don't think salt is good for dogs... You probably shouldn't have any— Oh, I give up. You're too scary when you're like this.

I grilled a few more steaks with magic and seasoned each with a few drops of the sauce, putting a plate in front of each of the canines.

Whoa! Your teeth sure are sharp. And scary. Your eyes are too. I'll... I'll get started on some more steaks. Uh, what's that gnashing sound— Oh, it's you, Shuri. And your fangs. I'll make you a plate too, okay? Just stop doing that...

Shuri tore into the freshly grilled steak. I was a little worried—it was probably the first time the giant ant had ever eaten cooked meat—but everything seemed fine, so I shrugged it off and went back to making the next round of steaks for the wolves. I spun back around when a catastrophic symphony of noises rang out. Shuri and the antlets had started fighting over the steak—and neither side was giving an inch. On the other hand, the spiders, who'd always preferred their meat cooked, were calmly enjoying—

No, wait a minute. When did you take that?!

The spiders had stolen the sauce container from right under my nose and doused their plate in the stuff. Spider Boss was currently kicking out wildly, sending baby spiders flying away from the plate.

I'm not sure how things ended up like this.

The fish, once salted and grilled, was delicious—and even more so with a dash of fish sauce on top. I hadn't eaten fish in ages. River fish weren't usually my favorite because of their distinctive smell, but this one didn't have even a whiff of it. Fluffy and I enjoyed our meal in peace, sitting a considerable distance away from the others.

The trick was to not look at them.

This would be great with some rice...

56. How to Grow Veggies... Itsy-Bitsy Ants and Spiders.

Something had been on my mind since planting the tuber-like vegetables—whether this world had four seasons like mine. If it did, then it probably meant there were optimal seasons for different crops—which, in turn, meant that I might have screwed up.

But how can I figure out if there are seasons here anyway? Well, there's always temperature. I think it's been slowly getting hotter ever since I came here. Getting hotter should mean we're approaching summer, but I don't know what "summer" feels like here. We might already be in summer, or it might just keep getting hotter, which would mean we're probably not... This is too hard.

Well, I'd planted the tubers, but now I was a little stuck. I'd helped my dad make fertilizer for pocket money once or twice, but I'd never actually grown anything myself or even helped him weed. I'd watered the garden often enough, but sprinkling water around hadn't taught me anything that could help me now.

Vegetables, vegetables... What do they need? Water, for sure. Pesticide—or a way to remove bugs, I guess. And fertilizer. I think that's all? That's all they showed on that farming documentary...I think. Yeah. Probably.

I surveyed the field.

Yep, there's no way I can manage this alone. It's way too big... All right, time for some more clay dolls!

Without a few helping hands, I wouldn't be able to keep all the vegetables alive—and I was already starting to lose the motivation to do it anyway.

I quickly popped inside to grab some surplus stone and a handful of the monster stones. The new batch of clay dolls would be the

ones watering the crops, and watering such a large field would be a lot easier with magic.

So if I imagine them being able to use magic and give them each a monster stone for a bit of extra power... Yeah, that should work! Yep. Actually, I don't even know if it's possible to make magic-wielding clay dolls, but all I can do is try my best.

I selected six of the blue stones—three sky blue, and three sapphire—as well as two green ones. Despite many attempts, I hadn't yet been able to figure out what kind of magic the green ones strengthened. But they were green, so it probably had something to do with nature. I'd also brought two colorless stones. Like the green ones, I hadn't figured out what the colorless ones applied to—but they were pretty, so I wanted to use them. I filled my mind with images of dolls casting spells, sandwiched between scenes I remembered from the farming documentary, and willed the malleable rock to take form. Each doll I made was finished off with one of the monster stones, carefully pressed into their respective foreheads.

I have a feeling there were a lot of "bug extermination" scenes in my mental blueprint... I just really hate finding bugs in my veggies. Shouldn't cause any problems, though. Right— They'll need mana to cast magic. I'll give everyone a good dose of it... Okay, done.

"Good morning!"

A new job should always start off with a friendly greeting— Why are they all saluting? Did I accidentally add something to the mental blueprint? I can't remember anything that would have caused saluting... Oh well. Should be fine.

I ended up christening them "the Farm Brigade" on account of the unintended, militaryesque action. The new batch of dolls could obviously move—now I just had to wait and see if they could cast magic.

Welcome to the family, guys.

The Farm Brigade was amazing.

The six blue-stone dolls could freely conjure and manipulate water. I'd wanted them to be able to use magic, so I was obviously

pleased—but at the same time, I had a strange feeling that they were actually better at it than me.

Still a success—I think. And only a little irritating.

The green-stone dolls, on the other hand, were creating gusts of wind to blow around the field—

That's weird. I'm sure I tested out wind magic with the green stones, and it didn't do anything... Eh, it's probably fine. I don't know why they're conjuring wind either, but I'll assume they know what they're doing.

Finally, the two colorless stone dolls seemed to have appointed themselves as the leaders, based on the way they were currently giving out orders.

Still no idea what your stones do. Oh well. Everything will probably go smoother with someone to oversee it, so I guess you're in charge! What does that make you—generals, maybe? Looks like everything's worked out well.

Or so I thought. Minutes later—and after a confusing game of charades—I found myself making another twenty new recruits for the Farm Brigade**,** as per the generals' wishes.

I guess the field was still too big, even for ten of you. Thirty should be fine though... Hang on, why does it look like you're making a new plot? Must be my imagination.

Later that day, I was cornered by Spider Boss and Shuri, each clutching a large white ball. Shuri's was around twice the size of a basketball, while Spider Boss' was slightly larger at about three times the size.

Why are you guys here, and what's with the balls? Actually, what are *the balls...and why are you putting them in front of me?*

Spider Boss gently placed a leg on the larger ball, and I could feel the mana pouring out of the huge arachnid and into the strange white object. Shuri did the same. Then, each nudged their respective ball in my direction.

And you want me to do...?

Unblinking gazes burned into me as both again began pouring mana into the balls.

Um... I think they want me to add some mana too? They'll stop me if I'm wrong.

I placed one hand on each ball and started flooding them with mana. Neither Spider Boss nor Shuri moved to stop me, so it seemed like my guess had been correct. The balls—whatever they were—were capable of absorbing a lot of mana. I wasn't sure how much they needed me to add, so I just kept pouring it in, assuming they'd stop me at some point—but about half an hour passed, and neither of them seemed content. Until—

Crack.

"Crap." Cracks appeared in both of the balls at the same time. Thinking I'd broken them, I started to panic—panic that intensified a moment later. I was surprised I didn't scream.

Spider Boss and Shuri seemed to radiate with joy as the two balls shattered, revealing countless...

New friends.

One squirming mass of baby spiders and another squirming mass of baby ants had apparently joined our family. Both species were the size of my pinky nail, just like the other baby spiders had been when I'd first met them.

Eggs. I didn't even consider that they might have been eggs. Eggs shouldn't be that big.

That night, I dreamed of millions of tiny black insects spilling out of a hole and chasing me. It wasn't a pleasant dream.

57. Back in the Forest, We Find...Chai's Friends?

The whole field situation was beginning to get out of hand. The Farm Brigade and the itsy-bitsy ants and spiders had joined forces and had entirely taken over.

At the One Eye's prompting, I'd transformed and teleported a large pile of wooden planks to the field, which they'd then laid neatly between each row of crops. These were paths for the itsy-bitsy ants and spiders to walk along—designed as a countermeasure against my clumsy feet, no doubt.

Seriously, thanks, guys. I don't know what I'd do if I accidentally stepped on one of them.

The Farm Brigade seemed to be getting better at their work with each passing day. Every time I surveyed the field, I spotted new, more efficient methods in use.

It's weird, though—how are they getting new knowledge? What a mystery.

The Gremlins had also improved their skills in regards to the hides. The pelts they were producing these days were even softer and fluffier than their initial attempts. Again, I had no idea how they were doing it, but I appreciated it nonetheless.

And then there were the clothes made by the Three Eyes. They'd added overshirts to their repertoire, and the loose pants they'd made at first now instead resembled fitted cargo pants—with pockets too. They'd started laying my outfit for the day at the end of my bed, ready for me when I woke up each morning.

I feel like I haven't seen a repeat of clothes in a while though... Ha ha, it's gotta be my imagination... Right?

The forest exploration plan was continuing as well. Compared to when I'd first arrived, the forest was now bursting with an

abundance of wild fruits and vegetables. As a result, I'd quickly run out of room in the original food storehouse, and had added three more refrigerated rooms and five more chronostasis rooms for future foraging. It was a lot of food, but I had to prepare for winter. I didn't even know if this world *had* winter for certain, but there was no way I could afford to be caught unawares if it did. Being trapped in a cold cave with nothing growing outside if our stockpile ran out would mean death. So for caution's sake I'd built the additional storerooms, which I was now in the process of filling.

It's handy having a house I can expand at the drop of a hat—I'll never run out of room.

Today, I'd set out in yet another new direction, with Chai and Koa at my side. One of the initial lot of baby spiders—now the size of my fist—sat atop Chai's back.

You... You okay with that, buddy?

More spiders followed along in the trees, soaring from branch to branch. They were easily larger than my fist. Recently I'd started to notice some differences in the growth spurts of the spiders. Some were still growing rapidly, while others had slowed right down.

Maybe they're different subspecies? It's strange...

"Oh... Another cave, huh."

Not seasonings, but another cave again. The first cave had wolves, the second cave had Shuri... Probably something else in here too.

Although wary of the odd darkness inside the cave, I ventured in—only to be attacked the second we passed through the entrance. Thankfully, I'd made sure our barrier was reinforced before we'd entered, so no one was injured. I glanced around for our assailants, only to find seven dogs snarling and circling our little group.

Hey, they look just like Chai!

Chai himself rushed in front of me and barked, but there was no reaction from the pack. The baby spiders made their own attempt at a threatening sound—to a similar lack of response.

I considered the scene before me. The dogs didn't feature any sign of the black, mottled pattern that Shuri and the other ants had,

but the atmosphere was similar. It was possible that these dogs were possessed too. I'd need to try an exorcism, but it would be hard with the way the dogs were moving around.

Guess I gotta try this... Sorry, doggies.

"**Restrain.**"

The idea of imagining them chained up somewhat upset me, so I visualized the pack being trapped inside a pen instead. Immediately, they stopped moving, much to my relief. From my new position of safety, I inspected the seven dogs. They were thin, and several seemed to be injured.

"**Unbinding.**"

A ring appeared around each of the creatures, followed by the familiar glowing wall and shower of light. The glow faded, and each of the dogs collapsed where they stood, one or two of them coughing up blood.

"**Heal!**" I frantically added. I hadn't expected them to collapse; they must have been on the brink of death. The possession might have been the only thing keeping them upright. With gentle strokes, I reassured each of the now somewhat-healthier dogs in turn, feeling their breathing become steadier. Chai had started to bark upon seeing their sickly condition, but as the dogs calmed down, he did too. From the color of their fur, these dogs were probably the same breed as Chai—maybe they were even related. I was glad I'd been able to save them, for his sake as much as mine.

As they came to their senses, the dogs began cowering in apparent fear and confusion. Chai—through barking—must have explained the situation to them, because they gradually seemed to settle down and start inspecting their surroundings.

You're fine. Good.

With relief came anger, anger that went from simmering within me to boiling and then to overflowing. Rage flooded me, aimed squarely at the caster of the curse. The image of lightning striking flashed across my mind.

"**Divine Punishment.**"

The lightning was easy enough to imagine, but since I had no idea where the curse had come from, the target was a little hazy.

Just saying the words “Divine Punishment” probably wasn’t going to be enough for the spell to work, but it did make me feel better at least.

58. The Knight (3)

— From the Perspective of the Commander of the First Knight's Brigade, Kingdom of Empras —

Twenty-five mages. The Second Knight's Brigade, to serve as their guard. The Fifth Knight's Brigade, to deal with monsters.

I gazed at the gathered troops. The Second Brigade seemed a little uneasy, though their commander, at least, looked more confident. The Fifth Brigade, with their Magestone-reinforced strength, were usually at the forefront of any battles—they just seemed eager to start the bloodshed.

"Apparently they're going to burn down the forest," muttered my friend. It was a miracle he'd escaped without punishment—the king must have been shocked indeed. And who hadn't been? The slaves had escaped. The power of the Magestone was no longer absolute.

A few days had passed since the Fourth Brigade's return, and since a strange stillness had fallen over the castle. Until today. The mages had been summoned, along with the Second and Fifth Brigades. The king seemed to have made his decision—the forest was to be destroyed.

The ancient texts say that magical power dwells within those trees, particularly in the center of the forest. No one's ever been able to verify those claims. But if those dusty books are right—if incredible magic resides inside the forest—what will happen when it goes up in flames?

But the mages had poured over every tome, and still there was much we didn't know about the forest. Burning it down might do nothing—that is, if the forest could even be burned down in the first place.

"You look worried. If we destroy the source of the problem, everything'll be settled, you know?"

He knew me too well—could read my troubled expression. Of course, if the problem did dwell in the center of the forest, then reducing the whole place to ash would also remove the problem. It was a reasonable decision, but at the same time, it was an outrageous one. I wondered how many of those gathered here truly understood what they'd been signed up for.

"Well, it should help, of course—*if* the changes in the forest are occurring because of the monarchs."

"It will help. The mages he's sending are the most powerful we have."

He was right. The mages selected for today's mission boasted the highest reserves of mana in the entire kingdom. They seemed assured in their success, and the king, too, had regained his temporarily unsettled composure.

"As you say. They do possess incredible power."

And this time, they would join forces to lay waste to the forest. Their collective power would probably be unlike anything ever seen before. There wasn't a single human in this world who didn't fear the might of our mages.

But there was every chance that we were no longer dealing with *humans*.

"Is a human capable of overthrowing a being more powerful than a king, do you think?"

"Huh?" replied my friend, bewildered. "That's..."

An indescribable sense of anxiety and fear had dominated my mind since I'd heard about the plan to burn down the forest. Something was going to happen; I was sure of it.

"Commander, the sky..."

My ears pricked up at the sound of my vice commander's voice, and I turned to look out the window. My eyes widened.

Today's weather was fair. I'd been outside at training until minutes ago, and there had been nary a cloud in the sky. *But then, what's...*

"Those clouds..."

Ominous black clouds covered the sky like a roof. A rumble filled the air, reverberating in my eardrums, and then—

Crack.

A bolt of lightning shot through the sky, and the whole room shook. Screams sounded around me—not just from those gathered in the throne room but from all over the castle. The sky lit up again and again, each time accompanied by a crash of thunder that shook the ground beneath our feet. Glass rattled in every window. No one moved—not even a single knight. For what could we do?

Crash.

The next moment, every window in the throne room shattered simultaneously. Screams rang out, but they were quickly drowned out as—

Boom.

A bolt of lightning streaked through the window. For an instant, the throne room transformed into a scene from a nightmare, like being trapped inside a raging volcano. Lightning striking was terrifying enough, but it coming through a window? That wasn't natural. I glanced toward the king, and my gaze was pulled to the ground at his feet like a magnet. Dark smoke coiled up from charred ground. That was where the bolt had struck.

The thunderstorm lasted for a minute, maybe two, at most. But that was long enough for it to strike fear in the hearts of those gathered. I could hear renewed screams and frantic footsteps as people fled. I just stared at the rising smoke.



59. The Clay Dolls Are Doing as They Please... An Attack from Above.

This morning, I'd gone to help the Farm Brigade after breakfast, only to be refused entry to the field.

Why?! I'm pretty good at controlling water now... I helped you yesterday! Why—? Did I do something wrong?

I racked my brain for an answer, to no avail. Either way, it seemed as though I was strictly forbidden to set foot inside the field. But apparently, I could observe if I liked. Annoyed, I went to search for something else to do.

A small artificial lake had appeared near the house—a joint venture between the One Eyes, the Farm Brigade, the antlets, and the itsy-bitsy ants—for Fluffy's use. I wasn't sure how they'd managed to fill it with water, but as it turned out, Fluffy could conjure as much water as it pleased. Magic, as usual, was handy. And mysterious.

I wandered over to check on the lake, and Fluffy shot out of the water, racing in rapid circles around me.

You're usually not this flustered. What's up? Something wrong?

A ball of water floated out of the lake and bobbed over to Fluffy, who promptly dropped it into a small hollow in the ground at my feet.

Um... Sorry, no idea. Do you want me to do something? But the One Eyes can do basically everything I can, and you can communicate with them... Must be something only I can do, but what? Cutting down trees? That seems to be my sole purpose at the moment. But why do you want me to clear some land? Do you want a bigger lake? Hmm...

I shrugged. I couldn't see any issues with it, so I decided to do as instructed and start clearing the requested trees.

Although... Do you really *need all this space?*

Removing every tree Fluffy indicated had resulted in another giant clearing.

Well, you seem happy, so I guess it's fine.

I smiled at the buoyant ball of yarn—and jumped when, just behind it, a stump suddenly bulged out of the earth. Shuri's face poked out from underneath it as I willed my heart to stop racing. Spider Boss appeared and looped a rope (made by the Three Eyes) around the stump with skillful movements before dragging it toward the ant nest.

You're all working together well now! So... I guess I'm not really needed, huh?

I glanced away wistfully only for my eyes to land on a small group of baby spiders and Farm Brigade generals marching into the forest. One of the generals was clutching a small black bag...

Hang on, that's my *bag! The magic bag! Since when did you start helping yourself to it?! Hah... Well, shouldn't be a problem. I think. This is fine, right? Yeah... Should be fine.*

I went back inside the house, where I was promptly picked up by the remaining baby spiders and carried down to the basement.

I can walk there by myself, you know... Also, you're way too strong.

I was carried through the food storehouse and gently lowered to my feet in front of one of the newer chronostasis rooms. Confused, I peered inside. The shelves—which had been empty when I'd left them—were now bursting with fruits and vegetables.

When did this happen? I've never even seen *some of these varieties before...*

In fact, every one of the new storage rooms was now packed with supplies. The final room I checked revealed a small army of clay dolls. A few of the One Eyes were making a new set of shelves, while some Three Eyes were sorting and storing a pile of ingredients.

You guys are cooperating well too... It's a good thing, I guess. Even if it feels like I won't be allowed to join in.

A muffled noise pulled me out of my funk. The baby spiders were tapping lightly on the entrance to the chronostasis room and looking at me, probably gesturing for me to increase the number of rooms. It made sense—we'd still need somewhere to store the crops from the field when they grew. I moved to the end of the chamber to start making a new room, but before I could get there, Koa began tugging at my ankle. I faltered a little—she'd never tried to stop me from transforming the cave before. When I looked down, she was pointing at the refrigerated rooms with one massive paw.

Er... What's up?

She blinked, and pointed again—first at the refrigerated rooms and then at the chronostasis room.

Oh... Maybe she wants me to make more refrigerated rooms too? I suppose they're pretty full as well... But why's she pointing at the chronostasis rooms? Oh—come to think of it, there's no point having refrigerated rooms now that I can freeze time instead! We've been going through the meat pretty quickly, but if it keeps piling up, even chilling it won't keep it fresh forever. Who's a smart girl?!

After a few minutes of planning, I began a large-scale remodel of the first basement level. I started by transforming a new chamber at the end of the hallway, three times as large as the existing refrigerated rooms combined. Anything that was placed inside would be first chilled, then subjected to Chronostasis, which would hopefully keep any meat fresh indefinitely. Once the room was finished, I needed to make shelves. I hadn't even started molding the rock before a handful of One Eyes raced into the room and began measuring the walls for wooden shelving. They were fast—a little *too* fast, if you asked me.

Once the shelves were done, the Three Eyes began transporting all the meat into the new storeroom. I initially tried to help, but apparently I kept putting things in the wrong place, because I was quickly chased out of the room.

I'm not upset, do you hear me?! I'm fine! I'll just go do something I am *allowed to do!*

I stormed back to the now-empty refrigerated rooms and canceled the spells I'd placed there, turning them into more chronostasis chambers. Once I was done, I peered back into the refrigerated room. The One Eyes were still making shelves, while the Three Eyes seemed to be discussing the layout. Neatly stored slabs of meat lined every surface—neater than I could have arranged them, however much it pained me to admit it.

Wistfully, I examined one of the newly built shelves. It was expert craftsmanship, built without nails or screws.

Man, the One Eyes are amazing. I could never make something like this—which is kinda weird, since I'm the one who made the dolls in the first place.

I quickly brushed off my suspicions—after all, amazing craftsmanship wasn't a bad thing. I decided to just look forward to whatever they'd come up with next.

Koa and the others went hunting, and for once, I joined them. With more room to store meat, I wanted to help increase our stockpile. Even inside of the barrier, there were a good number of monsters, some of which fled at the mere sight of Koa. I didn't blame them.

While there were still plenty of monsters, I did notice that barely any of them were covered in shadows or stained with black patterns.

Which is great—but I'm a little unsure as to why. Has... Has the curse lost power? Hmm... Dunno. Not like I can find out either. Nope, as long as it's decreasing, I'm happy.

Our search for prey led us right to the edge of the barrier. Actually, it hadn't taken us long to reach the edge at all, not running at full speed.

Maybe I should widen it again—

"Argh!" I shouted as Koa unleashed a jet of flames into the sky. My head whipped up just in time to see the huge, birdlike monster swoop. It skillfully evaded Koa's fire and shot right toward me—obviously, I must look like the easiest prey.

"**Sever.**"

Unfortunately for the bird-thing, I'd prepared for something like

this before joining in on a hunt. I'd already tested out the spell, meaning it was ready to go in the event of an attack—like right now. If you wanted to kill something in one go, chopping off its head was a pretty surefire way to do it.

I kinda assumed I'd be using it against something on the ground, though...

A head suddenly plummeting out of the sky was going to be a little *too* terrifying for me to handle on a regular basis.

60. Karen, the Phoenix

— From the Perspective of a Phoenix Mistaken for a Normal Bird —

I returned to Master's side after a few days surveying the forest.

I'd seen it from a distance, but I hadn't trusted my eyes—not until I was right overhead. I still didn't entirely believe what I was seeing: Anferfurmi—the Sentinels of the Underworld, who dragged many a living creature into their foul pits.

First the Chuearenie and now their sworn enemies? Master is truly a mysterious being, to willingly bring together two hostile creatures like this. Well, I suppose the Fenrir and I could be considered just as combative... And more golems again? Master is extremely powerful, but even then, this is beginning to frighten me.

There were more golems awaiting me inside the house too. There were now fifteen of the woodworking golems, and five who made cloth. The horned golems, who processed hides, had grown in number too—there were six of them now, by my count. All in all, there were ten or so new golems inside, in addition to the *thirty* currently tending to a new field.

Master's golems could think and move for themselves. They worked without orders, and I'd even witnessed them consult with one another. Golems were said to lack free will—they are tools given life by magic, after all—but Master's powers, as usual, seemed to operate beyond the fundamental rules of this world. I'd grown used to it over time. Perhaps that familiarity was itself a dangerous mistake.

Golems have always primarily been a tool of war. Curious to inspect the combat potential of Master's golems, I'd once asked them for a demonstration. Each golem I asked could crush stone to

dust as easily as squashing a bug—and not just any stone, for the stone around this cave is some of the sturdiest known to exist.

I suppose Master can also manipulate this stone as though it were mere clay—that's how he shaped the golems, after all. In many ways, their power is his.

Some of the woodworking golems had joined those outside. The farming golems appeared to be teaching them how to use magic. It shouldn't have surprised me. The golems brimmed with vivid, overwhelming mana—a gift from Master when he'd crafted them. Anything in possession of so much mana would naturally be able to cast magic—even, apparently, a golem. Still, it shook me—and once again, I found myself thankful the golems were on our side.

The newest batch of golems each featured a magestone atop their forehead. Not a normal magestone either, but an augmented one. When magestones were filled with an excess of pure mana, they transformed and became even more powerful. The more transparent a magestone was, the higher its potency—and Master's magestones were the most powerful I'd ever seen. It's said it takes over ten human mages to produce a high-quality magestone, and yet Master had given them to golems. It bewildered me. Some of the golems even possessed clear, all-purpose magestones—treasures among already-rare treasures. I assumed these golems must be intended for guarding the house, for why else would Master grant them such valuable gifts?

I inspected Master. He was currently pacing before the mountain, pouring mana into another magestone as he did so, as though the act did not exhaust him in the slightest. Likely enough, it didn't. The magestone rippled and transformed into a pearly white—a healing magestone, containing the power to save even those on the brink of death.

Master strode over to me and handed me the magestone, saying I was free to do what I pleased with it. Just like that, an augmented magestone was mine.

I'll treasure it, Master.

I followed Master and the Fenrir when they went hunting. I lost

sight of them for a brief moment, until the wyvern shot past me. I rushed to follow it, to protect Master—which was when the wyvern's head disconnected from its body.

It was terrifying.

Wyverns protected themselves with layer upon layer of magical wards. To wound a wyvern means first neutralizing all of those barriers, usually a long and strenuous process—*usually.* Master simply shattered the wards and decapitated the wyvern with a single spell.

Master is a powerful being indeed—far more powerful than I'd dared to imagine.

61. A Huge Bird... Cool, Doors!

We were attacked, but everyone was safe. *No problems here!*

Karen was hovering above us—I hadn't realized the bird had followed us.

Maybe something's wrong back home?

I pointed in the general direction of the mountain, but Karen shook its head.

Okay, no problems at home either—so why do you look worried, then? Strange bird.

I looked around for the giant bird who'd attacked us, which wasn't hard to spot, given its size. It was even bigger up close. Upon closer inspection, it looked less like a bird and more like a giant lizard with wings.

Still massive, though.

"**Refrigerate, Chronostasis.**"

I'd butcher the carcass when we got home, but I still wanted to keep the meat as fresh as possible until then. After a quick game of charades with Koa, I confirmed that the winged lizard was edible.

All right, time to head home... Easier said than done.

Deciding that Ascend would probably be the easiest way to transport the carcass, I prepared to cast the spell. My bag slid down my arm as I did.

Hmm.

The Three Eyes had made it. They'd made quite a few in fact—each upgraded to feature infinite storage, of course—for which I was thankful now that the clay dolls seemed to be borrowing them whenever they pleased. Usually, I filled the bag by hand, but now I was wondering if I could simply Teleport things into the bag. It was worth a shot. I imagined the huge carcass vanishing, like some gaudy magician's trick.

"**Teleport** the winged lizard inside the bag."

Cool. Guess we're free to hunt a little more before going home, then.

I teleported the contents of the bag back out, placing them before the waiting Gremlins. A giant winged lizard. A giant boar-like monster. A giant bovine-ish creature—

They're all *giant, okay? Everything's giant, and these magic bags are too efficient.*

Next came butchering—another job that had recently been taken from me. The Gremlins handled it now. With how much we'd brought back today, though, they permitted me to help.

Yay! I get to do something...for once. I feel like every time I find a new job to do, it gets stolen away from me just as quickly.

The work was over in a flash, and the Gremlins shuffled off with their new hides. I watched them go—feeling slightly lonely—when a stomping noise made me turn. Behind me was a large wooden platform. It had been one of the One Eye's most recent projects, an outdoor eating space large enough for everyone to sit on it at the same time. For some reason, though, all of the animals had started to gather on it now.

A flash of movement from the house revealed the baby spiders emerging, a jar of fish sauce in hand. I looked away, only for my eyes to land on the antlets, who were in the process of setting up the barbecue.

Looks like it's dinnertime.

I decided to grill the winged lizard, much to everyone's apparent unease.

Don't worry, guys. I'll cook it properly. Well, I'll do my best, anyway. Stop looking at me like that, okay?

It was delicious. Despite being a flying creature, it didn't taste like chicken, to my slight disappointment. The boar-like thing had tasted like pork, and I was really missing the taste of chicken. I'd made a dipping sauce out of fish sauce and fruit juice, which had only added to the flavor.

The animals were still fighting over the choicest pieces of meat. I tried my best to ignore it, which wasn't easy. Their fights—however

friendly they might be—had been getting more and more intense of late. I hoped it was just my imagination.

The sauce is great... But damn, I want some rice.

I headed inside after dinner. Well, more accurately, I tried to head inside but froze outside the entrance.

It had a *door*.

It was a sliding door, of all things. After I'd acquired thread—and then cloth—I'd hung up a sheet of fabric to serve as a rudimentary barrier between the house and the outside world. I hadn't the faintest idea where the door had come from. I carefully slid the door open and stepped inside. The One Eyes were waiting for me.

I was quickly ushered down to the second basement level and presented with a node of silvery ore.

"Um... What do you want me to do with this?"

I was dragged back upstairs. One of the dolls pointed to the ore, followed by a nearby window, and finally, the door.

Oh, you want me to make some glass? You got it.

A minute or two later the door was complete, with a large glass panel for natural light. The door had been installed on rails, smoothly gliding out of the rock face itself. It was another masterful piece of construction, just as I'd come to expect from the One Eyes by now.

It wasn't just the entrance. The toilet, the bathroom—every room now had a door. To my surprise, the third floor now featured a room for Chai's new friends too—the One Eyes had clearly made it while I was out hunting. I stopped to inspect the new addition to the house, but a tugging on my leg urged me along. Apparently, my job wasn't over yet.

I was led back to the basement. Ten more doors lined the walls, awaiting glass panels. A One Eye tugged on my pant leg again, pointing to the ore, and back to the doors. I shrugged and did as instructed, fitting each door with a large sheet of glass.

Okay, I'm done. What the hell are you gonna use these for, though?

Another tug. I gave in, letting myself be pulled back upstairs and

into the dining room. The doll pointed to the wall, then at a door that had followed us into the room, carefully carried by another group of the One Eyes. I looked out the window. The wooden platform was just on the other side of the wall—

Oh, it's a deck. *You want me to make a door leading to the deck. Okay, no worries— Wait, since when can you do that?*

I'd looked back inside to find the One Eye marking out the desired location of the door with glowing, obviously magical lines.

You guys couldn't use magic before, right? Well, you're clearly using it now, so maybe you could. Hmm... Okay. Seems fine.

I transformed the rock as instructed, and soon enough, the dining room now opened into an outdoor entertaining space. While I'd been inside, the deck had gained support posts and a framed roof, upon which was laid a massive sheet of sturdy fabric—clearly some of the Three Eyes' work. In no time at all, the deck had been covered by a seemingly effective sunshade. I watched as the clay dolls tottered off and returned in twos and threes, each group bearing new furniture—benches, tables, comfortable chairs—each crafted in the style I'd come to realize that the One Eyes preferred. They adjusted the position of each new item carefully.

They look kinda proud of themselves, don't they? They're pretty cute... Guess I just gotta let them do what they like.

62. Time for Names... Smothered by Seeds.

Much to my relief, Chai's new friends soon recovered from their feeble condition. I hadn't been entirely certain they'd all pull through when I'd first seen them. Now, however, I was watching them chase one another around Fluffy's lake.

Fluffy's lake was doing well too. My mental image of lakes was that they tended to stagnate and smell, so I made sure to visit once a day to apply a cleaning spell and check up on the condition. The area around the lake was changing on a daily basis as well. Every time I visited, there'd be new benches or picnic tables, and even freshly planted trees.

The One Eyes and the Farm Brigade, I'm guessing.

There were fish in the lake now too for some reason, as well as some strange creatures that resembled shrimp. I pretended not to notice them.

Now that they were recovered, it was time to give the new dogs names. There were three male dogs and four females, mostly with the same brown and black pattern as Chai. One of the males had white tufts rather than black, and one of the females had reddish tufts instead, as well as red eyes.

First, the males: I named them Chaya ("brown existence") Chata ("brown multitudes") and, to the one with white tufts, I gave the name Charu ("brown rapids"). The females became Sau ("brown feather") Sasa ("brown sand"), Sami ("brown beauty") and the red-eyed one became Kisa ("brown princess"). One syllable from each name came from one of two ways to pronounce the kanji for "brown"—the same kanji I'd used when naming Chai. I was quite proud of myself.

And I think they like their names too... Probably.

Speaking of Chai—he and Koa had seemed somewhat distant with each other when I'd first met them, but these days, I hardly ever saw the two of them apart. Whenever one went hunting, the other would always follow. I was a little worried that Koa might feel lonely now that Chai had more dog friends, but nothing had changed; the two were still constantly together.

They must be really close. It's nice.

Whenever *I* went anywhere, on the other hand, I was now accompanied by at least two wolves and a dog.

My own personal bodyguards... Probably not a bad thing. Thanks, guys.

Rounding out the guard were always two antlets, and two each of the itsy-bitsy spiders and ants. They were probably different each time, but I couldn't tell them apart in the slightest, which I felt kind of guilty about.

Everyone must think I'm pretty weak, though, to need this many bodyguards. I gotta get stronger for them!

A thought struck me one day—or rather, a memory.

It was from a reality show—one of those ones where they drop average people on a deserted island. On the show, someone had demonstrated how to press camellia seeds to get oil.

I wonder if there are any similar seeds here. If I can make oil, then I can make... I can make deep-fried food!

I'd recently come across a fruit that, to me, resembled eggplant. Well, I wasn't really sure whether it was a fruit or a vegetable, but it had been growing on a tree. Either way, I wanted to fry it. Deep-fried eggplant with a dash of fish sauce... My mouth watered at the thought.

But first, I needed oil—and there were a *lot* of seeds to go through.

On the first day, I gathered and crushed dozens of different types of seeds. No luck.

The next day, dozens more—zilch.

I woke up on the third day to find hundreds of seeds piled on the

kitchen counter, all different colors and sizes. A few massive fruits protruded out of the pile too. The baby spiders and antlets beamed (well, a similar expression anyway) up at me.

Did you go and find all of these? You're the best!

I spent the whole day cracking open seed after seed. It wasn't physically tiring thanks to my handy magic, but mentally, it was exhausting. I cracked open another hard shell, only for it to slip out of my fingers. I examined my hands curiously. A shiny liquid coated my fingertips.

The seed had come from inside one of the large fruits, around the same size as my head. Sweet-smelling pulp had given way to reveal the seeds clustered at the center.

Come to think of it, what kind of seeds produce oil in the first place? Obviously it's not all of them... Not like I'd freaking know.

I tried a mouthful of the pulp and immediately regretted it. It was incredibly bitter. I spit it out, gagging. Sasa was looking at me in shock.

She probably knew it was bitter. My fault for not checking... Oh well. Time to test out some oil! Oh, but I'll need more of these fruits first.

63. Return to Sender... Sorry. Didn’t Mean to Make You Worry.

I got the ants and spiders to lead the way to wherever they’d found the fruit in question. Shion, Kurou, and Sasa followed at my side as we sprinted through the forest to keep up. Luckily, I was much faster in this world than I’d been in my last one. I still had to take care not to trip; tree roots were quickly becoming the bane of my existence.

We stopped at a thick grove of trees, each heavily laden with fruit. Unfortunately, the majority of the grove was outside of my barrier—making it laden with just as much curse as fruit.

Hmm...

I’d tried to expand the Barrier recently, but Koa and the others had stopped me. I still wasn’t sure why. Our mutual understanding was improving but not enough to let them explain the reason. But they’d shaken their heads and growled every time I’d tried to do it, so I’d quickly given up. But now, with the fruits I wanted *just* out of reach...

I’d apologize later.

I took a deep breath and pictured the barrier. I looked down from above through my Clairvoyance drone and imagined it stretching, stretching...

How much should I extend it? Double—no, triple. I’ll triple the current area... Hang on!

Something had caught my eye—a cluster of vegetation in the distance. The shadows made it impossible to tell for sure, but it looked like something I very much wanted to investigate later.

Hopefully I’m right. It won’t be within the barrier, though—lemme make it five times bigger, just to be sure.

With the temporary barrier marked out in my mind, I cast Purify,

followed by Return, to send all the unwanted junk back to the sender—just like spam mail. I made sure to extend the spell into the ground too, to the same depth as the initial barrier, followed by another Return. Next, I cast Barrier proper and then quickly cast Reinforce. Using the drone, I checked all the rivers and lakes from above to make sure they were curse-free. I targeted anything that wasn't with an Adhere/Return combo. Finally, I dispelled the original barrier. I imagined every leaf and twig being scrubbed of shadows, every drop of water being filtered, and cast a final Purify and Return for good measure.

That should do it.

The forest spread out before me, vibrant and green. There wasn't a hint of curse anywhere. I smirked.

Looks like my Purification skills have leveled up.

I checked on the animals. Everyone seemed fine, so we quickly gathered as many pieces of fruit as we could and set off home. A monster or two tried their luck on the journey back, but Shion's growls froze them in place, leaving them open for a quick—and fatal—attack from Sasa.

The new doggies are just as strong as the wolves. Glad to have you on our side! I should really start training too...

I returned home to find everyone waiting for me outside, seemingly worried.

Did something happen?! Is everyone all right?

A quick inspection of the mountain and the surrounding revealed no changes. It didn't seem like we'd been attacked or anything, at least. I sighed with relief.

Koa approached me, and I reflexively reached out to stroke her. She stared at me for a moment but eventually gave in, wagging her tail. With the first wag, the tense atmosphere softened, and the gathered creatures seemed to relax in unison.

Are you mad at me for extending the barrier after you told me not to?

"Sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. Everything's fine. The barrier's fine too."

I didn’t mean to worry you, honestly. But I needed to do it. Hopefully she forgives me.

64. Koa, Queen of the Fenrir (2)

— From the Perspective of a Fenrir Mistaken for a Wolf —

I surveyed the field.

The soil foods seemed to be developing well under the Anferfurmi's—Shuri's—care. Food that grows in dirt—I'd heard of it before, of course, but never tasted it. Fenrir do not eat things born of dirt.

Well, the same could be said for all of us gathered here, I suppose. I don't know why Master seeks to grow such things... Master's cooking is always surprising, though. I never imagined meat could taste so good. It's strange. Perhaps these dirt things will surprise me too? We shall see. And on the topic of surprising things...

The golems—specifically, the newest specimens. While out hunting, we'd caught the trail of a monster headed straight for the house. I'd rushed to catch up to it, but the golems had already slaughtered it by the time I reached it.

I'd encountered golems with the capacity for magic before, but infrequently. However, Master's golems... They didn't just use magic. They moved so fast that even I lost sight of them for a moment and wielded such force that the monster died with a single blow. No, Master's golems... I hoped to remain on the same side as them. The alternative sent a chill down my spine.

I wandered to the lake for a short rest. Like most things around the mountain, cleaning spells have been woven into the lake itself. But Master's spells do not just purify; his magic has penetrated the water itself. Mana ripples across the surface. That, perhaps, was why

I could see so many of *those* creatures swimming around—creatures that usually chose to dwell only in the clearest streams. I locked eyes with one as it surfaced.

No hostility. It seems peaceful. Good.

The golems blessed with green magestones conjured a healing breeze that danced around us, flowing from the mountain itself to the very edges of Master's protective boundary. I felt calm. *Perhaps I shall nap for a bit—*

I jumped to my feet as Master's mana surged past me.

What's happened?! His guards didn't send any warnings...

Mana pulsed through the forest, more virulent than ever before. It rode on the breeze, pouring into the soil, the trees, the water, and every single living creature it touched. And then, the boundary vanished. Growls echoed around me—the others had felt it too. Something was wrong.

No.

The golems—they continued their work, altogether unaffected by the obvious change in the atmosphere. *They're linked to Master—if something was wrong, they would feel it. So perhaps all is well? But the boundary...*

Regardless, the golems' collective lack of disturbance soothed me, and I settled the others. We waited for Master's return. He appeared unharmed, and, to my great relief, closer inspection revealed no worrying changes.

Still, I'm curious about the boundary... Something must have occurred.

It wasn't until the following day that I realized the boundary had expanded.

The desire to expand his territory was something he'd mentioned before, to which we Fenrir had replied with resounding disapproval. The existing boundary already took an enormous amount of mana to maintain, and we worried for Master's safety.

Those worries had been fruitless, it would seem.

I inspected the new boundary, running alongside it for a time. It soon became clear that it would take more than a day to completely

circumnavigate it, so I turned for home.

Despite the mana he must have been expending to maintain it, Master appeared unchanged. Today, just like every other day, he spent the morning inspecting the field and the lake, checking on his subordinates, and covertly examining the golems.

He's not even affected. I was foolish to expect otherwise.

65. A Lot of Seeds...and a Sudden Realization!

Hundreds of seeds spilled out over the counter before me. I'd ended up gathering heaps of the fruit, despite not actually knowing if my oil-making plan would work.

This is gonna hurt if I do fail... Well, life's a challenge! So—oil. Er, how do they make oil again? I think they press it... So I need to grind them down really small and squeeze them, basically? I'll give it a go, I guess... Okay, wash 'em nicely, get rid of the pulp. And then crush them. Crush them... Why are they so hard?! Oh yeah, magic! Bam.

The seeds were pulverized in an instant.

Perfect.

Next came pressing the crushed seeds. I scooped a bunch of them into a piece of cloth and wrung it tightly. The cloth became mildly damp, but that was all.

Hmm. Maybe I need more force.

I fetched some of the gold-colored ore and got to work. First, I shaped a small, hollow frame, with a raised hole in the top and a solid cylinder that fit inside said hole perfectly. I also (painstakingly) made a fine mesh sheet out of the metal, attaching it over the base of the hole. Finally, I made a bowl to sit underneath the frame, and my oil press was complete. Hopefully, all I'd have to do was put the pulverized seeds into the hole, and push them—and the cylinder—down with a bit of magic to reach the pressure needed. Oil would drip through the mesh into the bowl below, and I'd be one step closer to my deep-fried dreams.

I scattered a handful of seeds over the mesh and pushed the cylinder down with magic, gradually increasing the pressure. Drip by drip, the bowl began to fill. Thanks to my ever-handy magic, the

action wasn't too tiring, but the mesh sheet did snap after just a few minutes.

Too much pressure? Well, it broke, but it still worked until then. Just gotta figure out the finer details.

I inspected the bowl. The liquid inside was a light pink—not a color I was familiar with when it came to oil. It smelled faintly sweet but not unpleasantly so.

Good start. Lemme give it a taste.

It was oily. Slightly less so than the oils I was used to but similar enough.

I think... I think this might work. Gotta actually try it to make sure. How, though? Guess I need a frying pan?

For caution's sake, I decided to start by heating up a rock with magic and placing the semi-full bowl on top of it to heat up in turn. I let it come to a simmer before removing it from the heat and waiting for it to cool. The color, scent, and taste didn't change in the slightest, so I judged the initial experiment a success.

Step two was bringing the oil-like liquid to a full boil. Some oils, as far as I remembered, could combust even at low temperatures. Thankfully, no fires broke out—hopefully the same would stay true once I started cooking.

Shion padded up beside me, looking curious. Using my usual charades, I asked him if the oil was edible. He looked even more confused.

Guess he probably doesn't recognize it... Not surprising, really. Well, I think it's fine. Success!

I repaired and reinforced the oil press and began mass production. The oil press broke five more times in the process, but an hour or two later, I'd wrung every last drop of oil out of the seeds.

I made heaps of oil, but the press isn't working too well... I'll have to make some more substantial changes later. It needs to be a lot *stronger.*

And now, the final test. I fried an unbattered slice of the eggplant-like thing in a shallow bowl of oil. A dash of fish sauce, and...

It's... It's perfect!

I'd been a little worried about the sweet smell of the oil, but it hadn't transferred to the pseudo eggplant at all. It was, for all intents and purposes, perfectly normal fried food.

Chai and his new friends seemed to especially like the pumpkinesque vegetable I fried up next, while Spider Boss seemed intent on swallowing a large slice of fried eggplant whole.

Be careful, okay? Don't burn your tongue!

When I checked on the large jar of oil the next day, it had separated into two layers, so I transferred the top layer into a separate jar. The top layer tasted—and felt—oilier than the bottom one now, which was even sweeter in comparison.

This'll be great for stir-frying. Score! I got two different types of oil for one.

I rummaged through everything I had on me when I was flung into this world. *I'm sure it was in my bag somewhere... Yes! Awesome.*

In my hand was a small magnet.

Now that I had oil, I wanted a frying pan—and not just any frying pan. I wanted a proper, *iron* frying pan. I'd been racking my brain to come up with a way to find an iron frying pan when I'd suddenly remembered a few things.

One, iron was found in ore veins, like any other metal.

Two, those ore veins were—as far as I recalled—magnetic.

Three, I'd had a small magnet stashed in the bottom of my shoulder bag.

Tomorrow, I'm gonna try sticking this on every rock and boulder in sight. There's gotta be some iron ore somewhere! ...Right?

66. Horned Squirrels...Take It a Bit Too Far.

Five days had passed since I'd begun my pilgrimage. I'd gone to every cave and cavern within the barrier—a search area that was obviously much wider than it had been a week earlier. I'd extended the barrier farther than I thought.

And it doesn't help that there's so many bloody caves! This is ridiculous!

However, while I was (figuratively) up to my eyeballs in caves, none of them contained what I was desperately searching for. The most recent spelunking spot contained two types of crystals—one red, one blue, both glittery—but no iron. Fluffy zoomed around excitedly for some reason upon seeing the sparkly crystals, but I chose to find out why later.

Whatever it is, I'll check it out after *I find what I'm looking for. Sorry, Fluffy.*

The cave after that one was more like a labyrinth. I gave up searching halfway through. *Postponing this for later too.*

The next cave was more of an accidental discovery; I only just caught a glimpse of the entrance through the thick vines obscuring it.

I've got a good feeling about this one... All right, in we go!

I pushed through the vines to find a squirrel standing in front of me. Actually, it wasn't really *standing*, per se—it was frozen solid in a block of ice. Purification had no effect on it, so it didn't seem to be cursed.

Still... A frozen squirrel? It's a bit creepy.

I made to leave but hesitated. I was a *bit* curious. I carefully knelt down in front of the squirrel and pressed my fingers to the ice. It wasn't cold.

So not *ice, then. Also, this squirrel... Er, does it have horns? Yeah. And it's blue. Well, turquoise. Horns—I wonder if it's aggressive? Or* was *aggressive... Is it dead? It doesn't look very dead. This is weird.*

A sudden snap echoed as a crack formed exactly where I'd touched the icelike block.

Crap. I didn't mean to break it, I swear.

The crack spread across the block, and the whole thing shattered.

Crap, what do I do? Fix it? I don't know how to make fake ice!

I looked around frantically. Kisa was glaring at the squirrel-thing warily, although Soa didn't seem particularly worried.

So is it dangerous or not?!

I nervously peered at the now-defrosted turquoise, horned squirrel-thing. Our eyes met.

Ah. So it is alive... Still don't know if it's aggressive though.

The squirrel-thing just ignored me and leaped away, stopping in front of—

Another squirrel-thing.

There were more of the ice blocks scattered around the cave, each containing another of the weird squirrels. The singular defrosted squirrel-thing looked at the blocks, and then back at me.

With a half-hearted shrug, I proceeded to shatter every ice block.

How many of these squirrel-things are there? Forget it, I'm just calling them squirrels. Close enough.

There ended up being thirty-four of them in total. Thankfully, none of the squirrels seemed even a little bit aggressive. Koa and Spider Boss showed up just after I'd freed the final squirrel—I must have been gone a while. They both seemed a little surprised, but not scared, to see the swarm of squirrels.

The squirrels were adorable. One climbed up to sit on my shoulder and rubbed its head against my cheek, which would have been even cuter if I hadn't been so nervous about its horn. Still, they were rather charming, if a little oddly colored. With no obvious signs of aggression, I decided to declare the squirrels safe and take everyone home.

Oh, but I was looking for iron... Eh. There's always tomorrow.

I felt somewhat—

What's the word I'm looking for? Oh yeah. Miserable.

I felt somewhat miserable.

On the way back home we passed by the cave closest to the house, the one where we'd found Chai's friends. Since we were there anyway, I'd decided to pop in to quickly check for iron.

The magnet stuck to the rocky wall, which was when I remembered: This was a *parallel* world. There was no guarantee that iron ore—or something like it anyway—was going to be the same silvery brown color I knew. The stone in the cave was black with lime-green flecks scattered throughout.

Lime-green iron, huh... If this even is *iron. Just because it's magnetic, doesn't mean it's iron—especially not here. How can I tell, though... Well, there's no point worrying about things I don't know the answer to!*

I extracted a chunk of the black-and-lime-green rock. Trial and error was going to be the only way to figure anything out—just like everything else in this world.

67. New Friends...and Rocky Problems.

I introduced the squirrels to the rest of our ever-growing family.

Fluffy twirled around the scurry of squirrels in what I assumed to be joy, though I wasn't particularly confident. Fluffy was, after all, basically just a ball of yarn with eyes. It was very hard to read its expressions.

The wolves accepted the new additions without any panic. The dogs did too (with the recent addition of Chai's friends, it no longer seemed reasonable to group everyone together as "the wolves"), though I did think I saw them stiffen for a moment when we first arrived. But they relaxed quite quickly, looking at me and nodding their heads.

Um... I'll take that to mean it's fine. Yep. Cool.

However, the ants—of both the baby and itsy-bitsy varieties—shot into their nest the second they saw the squirrels.

Er...

I glanced at Shuri, and it seemed somewhat spooked. So I gently stroked the giant ant's head until it relaxed. The squirrels chittered, looking at Shuri and me. One took a few steps forward and nodded slowly.

I think it's trying to tell me something—or reassure me, maybe? Whatever. I choose to believe everything's fine... Wait, do squirrels eat ants?

The smaller ants began to emerge from their nest in twos and threes.

I think they're still a little nervous, but don't worry. You're safe.

Karen returned home soon after. The bird had been leaving the mountain at dawn for the past few days in a row, returning late in the afternoon—and, obviously, I didn't have the foggiest idea as to

where it was going every day. It landed on the perch the One Eyes had built near the lake.

Still growing, huh? You'll need a bigger perch soon.

I called Karen over to introduce it to the squirrels, who promptly fled toward the nearby deck and scampered up the support posts, hiding between the cloth shade and the beams. I curiously glanced back at Karen and received an inclination of the head in return. Recently, I'd realized that the animals had started nodding to signal that everything was okay—a signal they'd developed for my sake, no doubt.

I called out to the squirrels. Cute, rounded faces peered out from atop the rafters, watching me—and Karen—nervously.

"You won't hurt them, right?" I asked Karen.

It nodded.

"See?" I waved to the squirrels, motioning for them to come down. They crept down cautiously, gathering in a tight huddle a short distance from us.

So the food chain here is something like ants, then squirrels, then birds... I stole another quick glance at Karen. *You're big, sure—strong too, I think. Well, you're not gonna eat any of our new friends, right? So no problems here.*

I decided it was high time for a meal to welcome the new additions to the family. Also, I was hungry.

The antlets had taken to eating fish lately. At first, they'd exclusively eaten red meat. However, since I'd made the fish sauce, they'd started demanding fish on a daily basis—lightly grilled, with a healthy dash of fish sauce. Shuri was the only one who still seemed to prefer red meat.

Well, there was a giant, fresh fish in the storeroom—probably one of Fluffy's catches—so I decided on fish for dinner. Hopefully it would cheer the ants up after their scare. I tried a new cooking method today, lightly soaking fillets in a mixture of fish sauce and sweet fruit juice before placing them on the grill. A tempting aroma wafted up from the barbecue.

Once it was fully cooked, the fish immediately became the rope in a tug-of-war between the collective ants and the squirrels.

At least they've cheered up.

The ants won, which wasn't surprising, considering how many of them there were compared to the squirrels.

It's hard to believe you were hiding in a hole just a little while ago — I'm grilling up the next batch now, okay? So quit looking at me like that!

Thirty-four despondent squirrels making puppy-dog eyes was too much for me to handle. I upped the heat level on the grill. It wasn't until after dinner that they realized Karen was still nearby, at which point they immediately reformed their defensive huddle.

Well, at least they had something to eat.

I examined the chunk of rock I'd extracted from the cave—dark black with shiny lime-green veins running through it. For now, I'd assume it was, indeed, iron ore—or something close enough.

So how do I turn this *into an iron bar, or whatever?*

Try as I might, I couldn't form even a vague mental image that would help me turn what was essentially a rock into usable iron. I assumed it had something to do with heat and tempering, but smelting wasn't really something I'd dabbled in back home.

Heat... Forges... Oh, forget it. I can't picture anything but third-degree burns.

Using wind magic, I cut the rock into smaller pieces. Focusing on every splash of lime green I could see, I imagined them sliding out of the rock and murmured, "**Eject.**"

Lime-green shrapnel flew out of the rock and clattered to the floor.

Success! I think. Not particularly usable yet, but at least it's out.

I prodded one of the slivers with the magnet. It didn't react—but it did, however, stick firmly to a nearby chunk of black rock.

You're kidding me... The rock's *the iron?!*

68. Hard Work...Bears Fruit.

I opened my eyes one morning to find all thirty members of the Farm Brigade kneeling in two neat lines next to the bed.

Nope. Don't do that. Seriously, stop it, or I'm gonna start thinking you're actually trying *to scare the crap out of me. You're... You're not bullying me, right? Right?*

I stared at the Farm Brigade. Thirty eyes stared back at me. *Seriously, quit it.*

I somehow managed to find the nerve to get out of bed, at which point I was immediately led to the field.

Oh, it must be harvest time. Don't know why all *of you needed to come fetch me, though. Or why you were kneeling like you were at a tea ceremony.*

The Farm Brigade were definitely the most mysterious variety of dolls I'd made.

I'd never grown vegetables before, but even I could tell that we'd grown a bumper crop. Well, all I'd done was sow the seeds and water them once—the rest was all thanks to the Farm Brigade and the itsy-bitsy insects. I hadn't even realized they were anywhere near ready to harvest.

I decided to start with the more familiar-looking vegetables, of which there were ten.

They look *edible enough. Doesn't mean they'll taste any good. Plus, some of them might not even be edible in the first place—Hang on a minute. What...?*

There was a new building beside the field—built without my knowledge, as usual—which turned out to house all the farming tools. The One Eyes had clearly struck again, though I had absolutely no idea as to when they'd built it. As always, I chose to ignore it.

Harvest time.

Out of the ten familiar-looking vegetables, seven were ripe enough for harvesting today, as per the Farm Brigade's gestural explanations. Despite the size of the harvest, the work didn't take long at all—again, mostly thanks to everyone but me.

Harvest time: check. Sampling time: go.

I poured a small amount of water into a large stone pot and placed a raised stone plate inside, then topped it with one of each variety of vegetable. After covering the pot with another stone plate to serve as a lid, I slowly began heating the pot with magic. The result, hopefully, would be simple, steamed vegetables, which would allow me to verify the taste—and edibility—of each variety.

A short while later, a tantalizing scent wafted through the air when I lifted the lid and used Ascend to lift the contents out. First, I carefully inspected each vegetable for any worrying changes—all clear.

Let's begin. First up, we have...a potato. Tastes just like one anyway.

Specimen number two had a lovely, fluffy texture but was essentially tasteless.

Shame.

Vegetable number three was mildly sweet with a somewhat sticky texture.

Sweet potato.

The fourth variety I tried was juicy and a little crisp.

Kind of like daikon radish.

I found another of the vegetables and tried it raw. *Yum.*

Contestant number five featured viscous, pulpy flesh, reminding me of taro.

Number six, while sweet, had an incredibly bitter aftertaste.

Rejected.

Finally, the seventh vegetable—it had a syrupy, pulpy texture and didn't taste like any vegetable I'd tried before, but it was delicious nonetheless.

I teleported all but the second and sixth varieties into the Chronostasis rooms, moving the remaining vegetables into a temporary storage room on the first floor. Then, I got to work

cooking.

Dinner that evening was a buffet of vegetables and meat. The animals seemed bewildered by the spread at first, but soon enough, they each found one or two varieties they seemed to enjoy. Watching everyone dig in brought a smile to my face.

The next morning, a single Farm Brigade doll waited beside my bed. I followed it to the field to find the ants and spiders eagerly tilling the newly emptied soil.

Guess they really did enjoy their veggies.

Ten days later, we harvested the last of the initial crop.

First, there were the tubers. There were seven varieties of potatoesque vegetables, which differed greatly in texture and taste; three types of radish-like crops, which had different sizes and levels of sweetness; one (very sweet) sweet-potatoish tuber; and two varieties of something like taro.

We also harvested some non-tuber vegetables: three that looked and tasted like pumpkins, of which one variety was ridiculously large; one that smelled like ginger, and four types of oniony vegetables. Beyond that, there were thirteen more types that were completely unfamiliar, and I had absolutely no idea how to classify. They were all quite tasty, though.

All in all, we'd ended up with a bumper crop of thirty-four types of vegetables. I left ten of each variety by the field to turn back into seeds later and teleported the rest into the Chronostasis rooms to be sorted.

In the end, four types didn't pass my taste test, three of which were either extremely bitter or downright tasted weird. All the rejected vegetables got moved into the temporary storage room for turning into fertilizer later.

Any that were overly sweet or acidic, or downright flavorless—but not inedible—were stored in a separate Chronostasis room. Hopefully, I'd be able to turn them into seasonings. I was starting to get sick of fish sauce.

I'd tried my best to help with the harvest, and apparently, it had

shown. I hadn’t been escorted out of the field at any point, at least, which I decided meant I’d succeeded in making myself useful.

It was hard work, but it was fun. Maybe they’ll let me help with the watering next time too...

69. More Landscaping... Clay Dolls Are Weirdly Competent.

The Farm Brigade and the Three Eyes cornered me with a request to expand the field. The other clay dolls stood nearby, stone eyes somehow filled with encouragement and hope.

Fluffy only just asked me to expand the lake again too... The whole area in front of the mountain has already turned into farmland. Should I clear some more land in front or... I'll ask the Farm Brigade, I guess.

It was the wrong decision.

A massive section of the forest was marked to be cleared, with the mountain at the center. I hadn't had any say in the decision-making process. The One Eyes, after consultation with the other clay dolls, had drawn a diagram in the dirt. I'd chuckled at first; the clearing they'd marked out had to be at least ten times the size of the mountain itself. Fluffy's lake and Shuri's nest had been marked out too, so I'd crouched down to examine the scale a little more closely, thinking that either they or I had made a mistake. By the time I'd stood up, everyone had already started making preparations, and the plan was approved without even a scrap of input from me.

It's like my opinion is worthless to these guys...

I surveyed the finished clearing.

Ha ha, Koa looks so small from here... That's weird, right?

It wasn't, in fact, weird at all. The clearing was just massive.

The Farm Brigade had already started working on the newly expanded farmland, including one odd-looking area I couldn't make sense of.

I'm sure that patch wasn't in the original plan... Oh well.

The Farm Brigade and the Three Eyes seemed to be collaborating on something in one corner of the farmland. I'd leave it up to them.

I still thought they'd been a little *too* excessive in their demands. The new vegetable patch was shaping up to be about ten times bigger than the original one—another decision made without my input.

Fine. See if I care!

Before long, the Farm Brigade had finished marking out the plot, and the itsy-bitsy insects got to work tilling the soil. I shrugged and turned away to see how the others were getting on, only to find the antlets in the process of excavating a massive river to encircle the entire clearing.

What the hell?!

I went to put a stop to the unnecessary digging, only for one of the One Eyes to gesture that I'd approved the work.

I most certainly did not! There was no river on the diagram, see — All right, which one of you added to the diagram when I wasn't looking?!

The One Eyes and Fluffy appeared to be in the midst of consulting on the best place to connect the lake to the new river.

I give up. Do whatever you like... Oh, what now?! You want me to clear the land on the far side of the river too?! Isn't the garden big enough for you yet? I sighed. *Fine. I'll just do whatever you tell me to. Clearing trees is the only thing I'm good for around here anyway.*

I chose to ignore the fact that they were clearly—and repeatedly—adding to the diagram every time I turned my back. I just went along with it. The plan now, apparently, was to dig another moat at the far side of the *new* clearing on the other side of the *new* river.

Ha ha ha. A moat? Cool! Um... Wait, how did it end up like this again?

The collective canines had approached me earlier, trying to ask for something. After ten minutes passed without me being able to figure out what it was, they'd given up and gone to the One Eyes. A few hours later, all was revealed as ten long, thin huts appeared

along the fence encircling the mountain. The fence itself had only recently appeared too.

Oh, doghouses! Wolfhouses too, I guess? Yeah, I never would have figured that out.

Karen had apparently wanted more perches, because the One Eyes had made more of those too. The giant worms and the Three Eyes were satisfied for now, as far as I could tell, but Spider Boss had requested a private room on the second floor, which I didn't learn about until after the One Eyes had already finished it.

The clay dolls are doing so well... I need to step up my game.

If this was a game, then my opponents were a bunch of giant trees—still, I tried my best, cutting down one behemoth after another and turning the lot of them into planks.

Time for a break.

I was the only one who felt so, apparently. Everyone else was still working—and a whole lot faster than I had been. Shuri and Spider Boss were on stump-removal duty, while the One Eyes were building more huts and fences on the freshly cleared and compacted ground. Fluffy and the itsy-bitsy insects were still digging out a canal for the future river.

In spite of their name, the itsy-bitsy insects had already grown quite a lot, which I probably should have expected. Each ant and spider was now around fifty centimeters long.

They grow up so fast... Like, alarmingly so. They're strong too. Just like everything else here... Should I be worried? Nah. Means the work goes quicker, after all!

The Farm Brigade were working on yet another field, planting seeds and sprouting tubers in long, neat rows. Whenever they were close to running out of seeds, a baby spider would trot up with a fresh supply.

Great teamwork, guys... Why are you all so good at this?! While I'm just a glorified lumberjack... Well, I guess I'm pretty good at making planks too. Besides, it's not like there's anything else I'm allowed to do!

The river was fully excavated by the following morning, so I filled it with water and we all spent the day relaxing in the cool, refreshing

flow.

It's important to take a day off every once in a while. Especially for me! Yep, rest, recuperation... Ignoring the strange fish and shrimp things that've apparently already moved in... Ignoring that there seem to be more of them than there were this morning...

While most of us were working on the mass landscaping project, the wolves and the dogs helped out in the usual way, by hunting. With the way our family was growing we needed a lot of food just for daily sustenance, let alone to stockpile for a potential winter. The Gremlins could clean, skin, and butcher a carcass in just minutes now, and had somehow become able to use magic too.

Don't acknowledge it, don't acknowledge it. Nope, I didn't see anything.

It took a few more days until I finally cut down and transformed the last tree on the far side of the river. Surveying the transformed forest through my Clairvoyance drone, I could scarcely recognize the terrain. Open land now flanked the river on both sides, forming the shape of an eye with the mountain at its center like a dark pupil.

I was exhausted. Off to the side, I could already see stumps being dragged away, the holes filled in, and the One Eyes building a bridge.

You're all too damn motivated.

We had a barbecue that night to celebrate the end of the expansion project. Truthfully, it wasn't very different from the barbecues we had most nights; I just wanted to celebrate, because...

No more damn trees! I'm free! Freeeeee!

I *might* have cried a little.

70. The Knight (4)

— From the Perspective of the Commander of the First Knight's Brigade, Kingdom of Empras —

Fear has settled like a mask on the face of everyone I pass in the castle hallways.

Not particularly surprising given the circumstances. Several hundred years have passed since the Kingdom of Empras was last attacked. When the king acquired the Magestone, he immediately erected the strongest magical wards known in the combined history of every kingdom. For centuries, Empras was untouchable—*was*.

We'd been attacked. That was the simple truth of it. It had lasted mere minutes, but nevertheless, something had been able to attack us. Lightning had struck inches from the king's feet, lightning out of a formerly clear, cloudless sky. Lightning sent by someone—or *something*—who could control the sky itself.

"So this is where you've been hiding." My friend's voice, worn thin with fatigue, startled me. I didn't have to turn to see how tired he was; it was there in his tone.

In the wake of the attack, the king ordered multiple layers of additional barriers to be erected around the Magestone. Teams of mages were assigned to stand watch and keep them reinforced day and night. However, twenty days later, we'd been attacked again. A multitude of glowing spheres had penetrated the Magestone chamber, shattered the barriers, and struck the Magestone itself, as though to mock the king's attempts to defend it. The small cracks in it had widened into deep fissures, some stretching almost the entire height of the stone. Witnesses had seen the spheres shoot through the sky, carving a straight path from the forest toward the castle.

Many civilians were among those witnesses, and though they couldn't grasp the true nature of the lights—an attack—the phenomenon itself was enough to cause unrest among the general populace.

The king was safe. The lightning hadn't harmed him, only scorched the ground at his feet. Many of the knights had assumed the king's personal wards had blocked the attack, and at first, I'd thought so too. But once I'd calmed down, I began to wonder: Had his wards *really* diverted the bolt? The forest border was at least ten days' march from the castle, and the center, which we believed to house the unknown threat, was several times farther still. The spell had traveled an impossible distance, aimed directly at the king, and struck right as he'd given the order for the forest to be razed to the ground. That meant the being lurking in those trees—whatever it was—could see us. Perhaps it could see the entire world. Otherwise, how could the attack have come at precisely that moment?

"What's wrong with you?"

"I feel... I feel as though we're being tested," I answered.

"Tested? You and me? By who?"

"No, not you and me—this kingdom..." I hesitated for a moment. "By the king of the world."

I heard him gasp.

Somewhere in all my thinking, I'd come to a realization—one I should have reached long ago. Something was wrong. When the new cracks had appeared in the Magestone, the mages had, after significant investigation, ruled them to be the result of an attack. An *attack*.

"By something that can completely nullify the power of the Magestone," I continued.

"What do you mean?"

The Magestone was protected. Wards—even normal ones—neutralized magical attacks, much less wards reinforced by the power of the Magestone itself. It was why Empras hadn't been attacked in centuries; if anyone even dared to attempt it, their spells would be rendered useless as soon as they came into contact with the first of the many layers.

“To damage something that’s protected by a ward, you first have to destroy the ward, right? There’s no other way.”

“Well, yeah...” my friend trailed off, unsure.

“But the ward around the kingdom isn’t broken. *None* of our wards have broken.”

He didn’t reply.

The main ward around the kingdom wasn’t broken—and yet, the Magestone had been attacked.

We should have noticed earlier. Perhaps centuries of safety had made us careless. Magical attacks and magical barriers couldn’t coexist—one had to destroy the other if ever they came into contact. The mages, surely, had started to realize the abnormality of the situation. They were probably panicking behind closed doors, desperate to figure out how to tell the king. Empras was, after all, a kingdom that depended on our mages—mages who could protect and strengthen the Magestone. But if our wards were failing, if the mages could no longer be relied on...

I didn’t have to guess what that meant for them.

71. Finally! Wait...Is It Summer?

After much trial and error, I'd finally managed to turn the black-and-lime-green ore into something resembling iron. As it turned out, I needed to combine the black stone *with* the green metal, rather than extracting it—a discovery that had taken three long, frustrating weeks to make. The method, once I'd figured it out, was frustratingly simple. If I penetrated a chunk of the raw, unseparated ore with my mana, it became as malleable as normal stone did. I'd then kneaded the ore until all the colors were completely mixed, cut off the mana flow, and bam—an ironish bar.

I suppose fictional fantasy worlds do usually have strange minerals and stuff, huh... Makes me kinda excited, actually.

My excitement hadn't lasted long. I'd eagerly transformed the iron into a frying pan, which promptly shattered on the third day of using it.

I mean, who would have guessed that you can't just smelt something using magic and call it a day?!

When my coveted frying pan shattered, so did my heart. I sank to the floor, cursing myself and my new world in equal measure. Miraculously, somewhere in the midst of my self-despair, a faint image surfaced in my mind—a hazy memory from some old TV show, where molten iron was poured into a mold. *Molten* iron, rather than my modelling clay knockoff. I racked my brain, desperate to remember anything I could about the scene in question.

Tempering. *Forging*. *Molten... Heat! It needs heat!*

I hastily glued the pieces of my pan back together with magic and hit it with an all-out Heat spell. The pan didn't melt like I'd half expected but instead produced a sudden cloud of black smoke that scared me half to death. By the time my heart stopped racing, the smoke had cleared, revealing a shiny, pitch-back frying pan. I stared at it, dumbfounded.

It was blackish before, but not like this. It wasn't shiny either. Could... Could it be?

Trying and failing to curb my excitement, I grabbed the pan and made a beeline for the kitchen.

Somehow or other, it had worked. I'd made a perfect, reliable frying pan. Whatever I cooked, be it meat or vegetable, came out with a flawless sear and exemplary grill marks—neither of which I'd been able to achieve before the pan had broken.

I can't let myself get too excited, though. If it breaks again, I'm not sure my heart will be able to take it.

I decided to give the pan a week before letting myself get too attached. Seven tense days dragged by, but to my relief, the pan held strong.

I did it! I did it!

The rest of the day passed in a haze of euphoria, as if I'd gotten drunk on the feeling of my own success. It wasn't until halfway through the next day that I remembered how concerned everyone had been about me, or how worried they'd looked.

I decided to forget about it just as quickly.

Being able to let go of things is an important life skill.

My attempt to make a frying pan—and the dramatic saga it swiftly became—had started as a way to entertain myself whenever I needed a break from the landscaping project. It ended up taking over a month before the collective clay dolls finally declared we were finished—and with the three weeks it had taken me to figure out how to make iron, my frying pan was finished at basically the exact same time.

Although now that I think about it, it was actually a pretty poor choice for a change of pace. All it did was add to my stress. Next time, I'll pick a slightly more relaxing side project— Hang on, I don't want *any more side projects. And I sure as hell don't want any more major ones! No more landscaping!*

The days were much hotter now compared with when we'd started, and the last few in particular had been a consistently warm

—but still bearable—temperature.

Guess summer is *here. Well, if this is as hot as it's gonna get, maybe it won't be too painful... But I can't let my guard down just yet.*

A smorgasbord of unfamiliar fruits and vegetables obscured the table before me.

I'd gone down for breakfast this morning to find the mountain of produce in front of my usual seat at the dining table and two members of the Farm Brigade standing to attention nearby.

They're probably waiting for me to taste test them, I think... Can't it wait till after breakfast?

I turned to the dolls to say something but hurriedly averted my eyes from the glowing, unblinking stares that were fixed on me.

I'm not scared or anything! But on an unrelated note, I'll test the food now.

It wasn't exactly the most pleasant way to start the morning. Even less pleasant was biting down on the first of the many new crops, a small, berrylike seed that tasted exactly like a peppercorn. It washed away any of my remaining sleepiness, at least, though the spiciness did just about short-circuit my brain.

The next sample was more enjoyable—grapes, or something close enough. I didn't even care that they were five times the size of our grapes back home. They *tasted* just like them, which meant they were possibly similar enough to make—

Wine! I can make wine! Damn, I want a drink.

I wasn't a heavy drinker, but I did like a bit of alcohol every now and again. Really, I would prefer to have a beer, but I didn't have the first idea about how brewing worked. Wine, though, was as easy as crushing some grapes and leaving them to ferment—as far as I could remember, anyway—which was surely something I couldn't screw up too badly.

For now, I'll ask the Farm Brigade to plant a few more of these "grape" vines and hope I can make it work... And I'll also ask them to hold off on any future taste tests til after *breakfast.*

72. Ores and Minerals and...Adventure, Maybe?

I spent the next few days immersing myself in iron-powered creativity. I made a massive pot for cooking soups and stews. While I was at it, I also made a range of different-sized frying pans and a variety of saucepans. Before long, the kitchen shelves were lined with an excessive number of pots and pans. Just looking at them made me happy.

I made spoons and forks, as well as a large ladle and other cooking utensils, wrapping the handles in a shield of the silvery metal to protect against burns. Last but not least came a giant grill for the barbecue, as well as a thick iron plate to use as a flattop grill. Upon spotting the new barbecue equipment, the keen-eyed antlets and baby spiders got so excited it almost caused a full-blown riot.

You guys scare me.

After putting it off for a while, I finally went back and excavated some of the red and blue crystals that Fluffy had gotten so worked up over. In my workshop on the second basement level, I put the ores through their paces, using magic to knead them, reshape them, and fill them with a stockpile of mana. The results: inconclusive. To me, they just seemed like bog-standard (albeit pretty) crystals. I didn't understand why Fluffy had been so excited to find them.

Sorry, Fluffs.

The only thing my magical tinkering seemed to accomplish was making the crystals a lot less sparkly, which I wasn't particularly worried about. Since they were somewhat transparent, I decided to transform all the crystals I'd excavated into bottles and jars. I then used the silvery ore to make lids, and before long, I was the proud owner of a full range of food-storage solutions. The variously sized

containers would be perfect for seasonings. The crystals hadn't lost their color when I transformed them, which made distinguishing the contents a little difficult, but I'd hopefully stumble across some clear crystals in the future.

The animals seemed a little wary of my new collection of containers. Fluffy, in particular, seemed downright shocked.

Maybe I shouldn't have turned them into kitchenware... Oh well. They're really handy, so I'm sorry Fluffy!

I spent the next few days visiting (and revisiting) the other caves and hollows around the area, gathering any ores and minerals I found, then lining them up by type on the bench in my workshop. I couldn't *actually* distinguish which of the two each rock was, so I just chose to assume that the plainer-looking ones were ores and the prettier ones were minerals. I hadn't ever needed to classify geologic resources back in Japan, so understandably, my knowledge was a little lacking.

What I did do, though, was decide on names for the more useful materials, largely for my own convenience. For simplicity's sake, the green-and-black metal I'd used to make my frying pan would be known as iron (even though I was fairly certain that iron wasn't usually green). The stone the cave was made of—which I'd also used to make the clay dolls, the barbecue coals, and half of my other possessions—became "all-purpose stone." The other two metals I regularly used—the golden and silvery ones—were simplified to just "gold" and "silver," and the two crystalline minerals would be referred to as blue crystal and red crystal, respectively.

No point in overthinking it!

I'd also come across two new types of ore during my search—a jagged rock containing metallic blue streaks and a smooth black rock with dark red swirls and something otherworldly about it. I couldn't think of any use for either at the moment, so I decided to put them aside for later.

However... I should probably put them somewhere obvious, or else I'll just forget I even found them.

Adventure!

The very thought made my heart race. It was time to once again attempt to conquer the labyrinthine cave I'd discovered during my hunt for iron.

Koa and Chai led the way back to the cave. Above our heads, two of the baby spiders kept pace, swinging from tree to tree—

Wait, swinging?! *That's new...*

Neither Spider Boss nor the baby spiders—as far as I could tell—were able to produce webs. Neither had really seemed to need to either; Spider Boss was as fast in the trees as Koa was on the ground. I'd just assumed that their species had evolved to have really strong legs.

They'd scared the crap out of me more than once. I'd be out exploring, totally oblivious to their presence, when I'd suddenly see giant spiders chasing after me like I was lunch. Each time, I'd close my eyes, whisper a desperate prayer, and wait for death until eventually remembering that the spiders were friendly.

I'd always thought that all species of spiders could make webs, so it had confused me that Spider Boss and its protégés weren't able to. Now I was surprised because some of them apparently could.

Maybe these ones have evolved? Or maybe it's a random trait that only a few of them have? Hmm... I shrugged. *Not like I can find out either way.*

As well potentially undergoing a rapid evolution, the baby spiders were *still* in the midst of their growth spurt too. The two spiders hanging overhead had grown so large, their bodies now spanned wider than my outstretched arms. I had to suppress a scream each time they swung into sight, terrified that their webs would snap and send them crashing into me.

How come you've got so big, and yet your webs are still so thin?! If you're gonna evolve anyway, evolve to have thicker webs!

Thankfully, the webs were stronger than they looked, and we didn't have any unfortunate incidents on the way to the maze cave.

Compared with the other caves I'd explored since arriving, the maze cave felt different: The air was thick and stagnant. A short descent from the cave opening led to the entrance to the labyrinth. The thought of wandering around the maze and getting lost would

have usually been enough to stop me from attempting it, but the maze had a fairly significant defect—the walls only spanned about half as high as the cave ceiling. The whole thing was visible from above, whether via magic or simply climbing the walls. As far as mazes went, this one was pretty pointless.

Koa, Chai, and I made our way through the maze, following the directions of the swinging spiders. Having them guide us made the whole "adventure" a lot more relaxed—that is, until we started encountering booby traps. It was pretty standard stuff: spears shooting out of hidden crevices, walls closing in, pitfalls suddenly opening in the floor, and so on. The spiders lassoed the spears with their handy webs. Koa smashed the walls to rubble. The pitfalls were easily overcome with a bit of wind magic. A little levitation and a touch of forward motion, and we could walk through the air as easily as on solid ground.

The airwalk strategy hadn't been one of my ideas but Chai's, which had confused me immensely—I hadn't realized he could use magic at all, let alone wind magic. He'd made it look so easy too. I, on the other hand, stood there stalling until Chai's anxious face made me feel bad enough to finally take the so-called leap of faith.

Thanks to my spider guides and magic-wielding canine escorts, my journey through the deadly maze involved no real danger. Apart from keeping up with the others, I had absolutely no role to play. At one point, I looked behind to discover that Shion and Sami had also joined us, as well as one of the squirrels, who'd climbed onto my shoulder without me even realizing. I trotted along in the middle of my pack of bodyguards, feeling entirely redundant.

Adventure...feels a bit less exciting than I expected.

73. New Friends and...Planting a Forest.

We made it through the maze without much difficulty and emerged into a wide chamber. I looked back the way we'd come. It wasn't a particularly effective maze, all in all, especially since any of the animals or monsters I'd met would be able to scale the short walls with ease and avoid the puzzle entirely.

Why'd someone go to the effort of making it, then? It's clearly not designed to stop animals or monsters... Does that mean it was made with people in mind? Are there people around here? Or maybe, there were *people around here...? Oh well. That's something to figure out later.*

Given that it was guarded by a booby-trapped maze and all, I'd been expecting to find something in the chamber, but it was empty. I sagged like a popped balloon, my anticipation all fizzled out.

I was sure *there'd be something here. What a letdown.*

A scratching noise snapped me out of my slump. Shion was pawing at one of the walls. I trudged over to him, curious—which was when the section of the wall in front of him collapsed with a bang, sending a tremor through the ground. A new path had opened up, otherwise known as...

A hidden door! A secret passage!

My excitement returned in full force. The adventure wasn't over yet.

It was another maze.

Thanks to our ever-reliable spider guides, the second maze was about as challenging as the first—in other words, barely.

There's gotta be something at the end of this one, though. I'm sure of it.

The second maze led to another chamber, guarding an unexpected treasure: dogs. They were small (for this world, at least), smaller than Chai had been when I'd first met him. Of course, Chai had grown a lot since then. Everyone had. Koa was at least two meters tall, and Chai was only slightly shorter. I felt tiny most of the time; the normal-sized squirrels had been a godsend for my mental well-being.

But these guys are perfectly average too! For now, at least... Please stay small. I'm begging you. Do you know how depressing it is to be looked down on all the time?!

I couldn't tell for certain from this distance, but height-wise, it looked like the new dogs would probably only come up to my chest. They were definitely the smallest out of all the canines I'd met so far.

They must be a different breed than Chai and his friends, though. Compared to the wolves and the first pack of dogs, they're a little more furious-looking, maybe? Ha ha ha. What am I thinking? They're all just as scary.

Three of the dogs seemed to be on the brink of death; four more stood in front of them protectively. They were growling, which seemed to be about all they *could* do. They were weak.

Crap. I gotta somehow let them know we're not gonna hurt them or they're gonna collapse from exhaustion... How, though?

Before I could decide on a strategy, Koa and Chai stepped forward, each about half a meter taller than they'd been a minute ago—

Wait, what?

Against all odds, I somehow managed to hold my ground—both mentally and physically—despite the shock of their sudden upsizing. It would be pretty pathetic for me to get scared as well as—or worse, *instead* of—the wild dogs. Thankfully, the dogs in question were currently cowering with their tails between their legs.

I know the feeling! Okay. Deep breath. Calm down... Phew. It's okay, me. They're my friends... I'm so glad they're my friends.

By the time I'd finished soothing myself, the dogs were already lying in complete and total submission.

Yep. I really, really *know the feeling.*

I approached cautiously, inspecting the dogs for any sign of the curse. I couldn't see any physical symptoms, but they obviously weren't doing too well regardless, so I treated them with the standard prescription of spells—Purify, Unbiding, Heal, and Clean—to immediate effect. The three weaker dogs lifted their heads to survey us curiously. It would be a while before they were truly healthy again, but they no longer seemed like they were actively dying, at least.

Koa and Chai returned to their normal sizes as well, to my great relief.

We explored the rest of the chamber for a while, but ultimately, it appeared that this was the end of the maze; there were no more hidden doors or secret passages to be found.

What the hell was the point of the maze anyway?! Seriously... Oh well. At least I was able to help the dogs.

As usual, I invited the newest batch of animals to come home with us, relying on Koa to communicate the offer. It went well—as far as I could tell, anyway—and the journey back to the mountain was altogether uneventful.

The mountain was in sight now. We crossed a wooden bridge over the river and followed the path through the fields. Compared to the clustered trees in the forest, being out here made me feel exposed. I still hadn't fully adjusted to the sudden openness created by all our landscaping, but like it or not, I'd have to get used to it eventually.

We were nearly at the house when it caught my eye. Something had changed after we'd left this morning, just beyond one of the new fields. I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was, but it was definitely not the way I'd left it.

What have they done now?

Leaving the new dogs to wait in front of the house, I quickly jogged over to investigate the strange change of scenery.

Oh, come on!

It wasn't an optical illusion, despite my attempts to convince

myself otherwise; they'd actually turned one of the fields *back* into a forest.

What was the point of all the landscaping, then?! Oh, hang on... Okay, I get it now.

The trees weren't haphazardly placed. They grew in neat, organized lines, and when I looked up, I could see that they all bore some kind of fruit. It wasn't a forest; it was an orchard.

Well, it wasn't just an orchard either. Unlike the first field, where everything mostly grew underground, this field apparently housed everything that grew on a shrub, tree, or vine, as well as any leafy vegetables. There were six types of leafy vegetables and nine types of vine-growing vegetables in all. Five long rows had been planted of each and every type. Then came the fruit trees—seventeen varieties of them, and again, five rows of each. No wonder I'd thought it was a forest. Last—but not least—came *thirty* rows of grape vines, which I had to admit did excite me.

Well, it's not like we don't have the room... This is still a little excessive though. The Farm Brigade sure are hard workers! Really, really hard workers... How the hell did they get all of this done in a single morning? I mean, the trees are pretty much fully grown! Come to think of it, the spiders and the ants were *even more energetic than usual this morning. Guess they helped? Even then, I'm pretty sure it still should have been impossible... Ha ha ha. Oh well. No point trying to figure out the impossible, after all! Yep, I'll just be grateful. Looks like everything'll be ready for harvest soon! Thanks, everyone!*

74. Cooking Necessities...and Magic Complexities.

It was time to start experimenting with the vegetables I'd put aside from the initial harvest—everything that was too sweet, acidic, or plain to eat in their natural form. The plan was to hopefully turn them into seasonings and other cooking necessities since all I currently had was salt and fish sauce—better than nothing, but I was desperate to cook something that wasn't just grilled, savory meat.

There were two vegetables I was particularly excited about.

The first was a flavorless potato-like tuber, which looked better than it tasted: starchy. If I could extract that starch and turn it into a solid, I would hopefully end up with something equivalent to the powder we used in Japan to make tempura batter, thicken soups, and much more—and for once, this was something I *did* know how to do. I started by peeling off the thick skin, then I grated the whole potato to shreds using a grater I'd quickly made earlier precisely for this task. I could make basically anything out of the silver ore by now, and the grater was so effective—and sharp—that I had to be extra careful so I wouldn't lose a finger. Next, I wrapped the shredded potato in a cloth, tied it in a knot, and placed the whole bundle in a bowl of water. Then came the hard part—massaging the bundle like my life depended on it. Sediment began to color the water, at which point I wrung out the cloth, squeezing it until the water turned cloudy. Once it seemed like nothing else was coming out, I removed the bundle, and let the bowl sit.

Now came the exciting part. Twenty or so minutes later, I *very* carefully poured the water out of the bowl. This was the moment of truth; if there was something left in the bottom of the bowl, then I was well on the way to my starchy dreams. If not...well, then I'd

failed.

"It's there!"

With most of the water gone, I could see a soggy, white sludge in the bottom of the bowl. It was a good sign. I added more water and stirred, left it for another twenty minutes, then drained it again and repeated the process a third time. The final result was a pure-white sludge, which I dumped onto a plate and dried with magic, leaving me with a hardened clump. I crushed the lump into a powder. It *looked* perfect; now I needed to test it. I used the powder to coat some appropriately sized chunks of meat, sprinkling them with a touch of salt for flavor, and gently lowered them into a hot pan of oil. I made ten pieces in total for the trial run. Finally, it was time to taste it.

I shed a tear as the delicious, nostalgic flavor hit my taste buds.

A spider plopped down from the ceiling above, looking at me and the deep-fried meat curiously.

I feel like more and more of you can make webs now... Hang on, that's not the important thing here! You gotta keep this a secret, okay? I don't have enough starch to go around yet!

I bribed the spider with a piece of my precious meat, which seemed to work.

The rest of the day was spent grating, massaging, and drying the rest of the bland potatoes. I was exhausted by the end of it, but more importantly, I now had a decent stash of the starch powder. It wasn't until I collapsed into bed that I remembered the existence of magic.

Why the hell did I do it all by hand?! Idiot!

The next day, I returned to the kitchen to continue my experimenting.

And don't forget to use magic this time. Idiot.

Back in Japan, we had a type of sugar made from beets, and beets, as far as I could remember, were a sweet yet bitter vegetable—just like the one I'd tasted after the harvest. To me, that bittersweet taste had been the taste of anticipation. If they could make sugar out of beets, then I should be able to make it out of

whatever this was.

The vegetable itself was a little unappealing to look at; it was purple and covered in lumps.

It looks *like it should be poisonous, really... Maybe this isn't such a good idea?*

I shrugged.

Well, won't know until I try! So... How do I try, again?

I had only a faint idea of the method. My mom had tried to make beet sugar once after seeing something about it on the television, and I'd caught glimpses of the process, but I wasn't certain about any of it.

It was definitely something to do with boiling. I think. Eh, I'll give it a go. I've got enough for a couple of failures.

I was pretty sure that she'd boiled the beets first, so I cut one of the purple vegetables into small chunks, which would hopefully allow more of the sugar to be extracted. I transferred the chunks into an iron pot and heated it to a boil. Before long, scum floated to the surface. It was bitter to the taste, so I scooped it out and dumped it, leaving the rest of the pot to boil.

An hour passed without any further changes—no scum, no sugar, no nothing. Just less and less water as it evaporated.

Looks like it's no good. Guess I'll leave it for a little longer... Ah.

The water had started to turn purple.

I spooned out a dash of the liquid onto a small plate and let it sit for a while. Nothing happened.

It doesn't look like it's gonna thicken or crystalize. I could try evaporating it, but it's all liquid, so I'm pretty sure I'd just end up with an empty plate.

I decided to put the pot back on the boil for a bit longer. Thirty minutes later, the liquid was an even deeper purple—and, more importantly, it was thicker, closer in consistency to honey than water. I removed the pot from the heat and picked out the mushy chunks of vegetable, before leaving it to cool. All that was left to do was wait, and...

Oh, it solidified. Cool!

I chipped off a chunk of the purple glass-like block and tried it.

Sweet.

It *was* sweet—sweeter than any sugar I'd tasted before but with a mild, earthy tang.

I did it! It worked!

Now it was time to turn the rest into sugar—with magic, rather than by hand like yesterday. I did a test run first, using magic to boil the mixture and strain out the scum and mush. Unfortunately, while the resulting liquid looked the same in terms of color and consistency, it wouldn't solidify, no matter how long I waited. Apparently, magic and sugar-making weren't compatible—much to my dismay.

I spent the rest of the day slaving over a hot fire, constantly stirring the pots to make sure they didn't burn. It was sweaty, exhausting work, but by the time I'd strained the final pot, I'd made a huge amount of sugar. I transferred it all into a massive iron pot—okay, it was more of a cauldron. I'd made it on a whim before realizing that I'd probably never *need* a cauldron, so I was glad to have found a use for it.

Dinner that night was sweet-and-savory broiled winged lizard. Really, it would have been better with rice, but I still didn't have any, so I boiled up some of the leafy vegetables to go with it. The wolves soon appeared in the kitchen behind me, probably lured in by the smell. The hunger in their eyes was terrifying, so I doubled the amount I'd been planning to make.

I spent most of the meal staring pointedly into the distance in an attempt to ignore the violence around me.

Every time I come up with a new recipe, I feel like the peaceful, relaxing dinnertime of my dreams gets farther and farther out of reach...

And on the topic of peace—I needed to make some more fish sauce, and *soon*.

75. It’s Hot... Ignore It. Ignore That Too.

Who said summer wasn’t going to be too painful here?! What an idiot! Yes, I know it was me!

It was the hottest weather I’d ever experienced. It must’ve been the peak of summer—at least, I prayed it was the peak, because the alternative would mean that we were still experiencing the onset. It was painfully hot. I didn’t have a thermometer, but I was sure it must have been at least forty degrees.

Maybe I could ask someone... Wait, there’s no one to ask. The heat’s making my brain go all funny... Ha ha. It’s too damn hot.

Aah... So refreshing. Thank goodness we have a river.

It was a real-life lazy river, like at a waterpark. The cool water was crystal clear, meaning that, unfortunately, I could see everything in the water underneath, which I was currently trying my best to ignore. I pretended not to notice the weird shrimplike creatures. I looked away from the mysteriously appearing fish. If I acknowledged any of the strange life-forms in the river, I’d never be able to relax in it again—and it was the only thing keeping me sane at the moment.

Aah... It’s so nice to just float around. Come to think of it, what am I floating on*? I don’t remember making an inflatable tube.*

I looked down to see what appeared to be a transparent amoeba, except that it was large enough for me to lie on.

Um... Is this thing alive?

I examined the amoeba-like lump warily, to no avail.

I don’t even know where the face would be. I’m not even sure amoebas have *faces— Oh. This one does. Well, it’s got eyes, at least. Just eyes? It’s probably got a mouth somewhere too... Also, the eyes are kinda small compared to the rest of it.*

The giant amoeba-like creature was entirely transparent, which made it difficult to determine how big it actually was. It had to be at least three meters long, if not more, but it was too hard to see where its body ended and where the water began. Apart from being large and transparent, the amoeba was also cold to the touch.

This feels so good... Well, it seems friendly enough, so I'm gonna stay right here.

We drifted along, passing the fields on the far side of the mountain and entering the orchard zone. Trees loomed on both riverbanks, all planted by the Farm Brigade. They'd expanded the orchard twice since I'd first seen it. Thankfully, it hadn't required any major landscaping or deforestation, so I hadn't needed to help too much. It was now about five times larger than it had originally been. I wasn't convinced we needed such an extensive orchard, to be honest. However, waking up to find thirty sentient dolls standing at the foot of my bed had rendered me speechless with fear, which the Farm Brigade had taken as approval for their request.

It had been like a scene from a horror movie. In my half-awake state, I'd felt like I was about to be sacrificed or something.

We floated along under the leafy canopy. And along. And along...

Jeez, this orchard is big... It's not too big though! It's perfect! No complaints here! Phew...

I lay back on the amoeba raft and looked up as leaves gave way to open sky and a tree flew overhead—

Wait a minute... Trees can't fly!

I frantically asked the amoeba to stop. It willingly obliged.

What a nice amoeba! Right, the tree. Ah... Okay, I get it now.

The tree wasn't flying, but floating—roots, fruits, and all—toward the orchard, which explained how the Farm Brigade had filled it with fully grown trees in a single morning: They'd taken them from elsewhere in the forest.

Good to know because I was starting to think I'd gone crazy. It's so weird being able to see all the roots. I wonder how many more trees there are gonna be.

Trees flew overhead one after another.

It's not too scary, but it's still weird. It's kinda like watching... I

can't think of an analogy, but it's definitely weird.

A baby spider rode on each of the trees too. Each time one passed over me, the accompanying spider would—for some reason—leap down like a trapeze artist showing off their favorite tricks. It was very cute. The more I watched, the more impressive the tricks became. I gave each passing spider a wave and a smile of encouragement.

More trees passed, as did Shion and Kurou, sprinting alongside in the sky—

Huh. I didn't know they could fly. They don't even have wings.

I did a double take.

Nope, I was right—that's them, and they haven't grown wings or anything either. Magic, I guess? I kinda assumed the wolves could only make fire... Ah, Shion did float that one time. I wonder if Koa and the others can fly too?

I'm kinda jealous.

The last tree bobbed past us, captained by Shuri. I waved at the giant ant. It waved back, holding on to the trunk with just its feet. Itsy-bitsy ant faces popped out from behind the leaves, and I waved at them all until my arms ached.

Did you guys help get the trees out so neatly? I bet you did. You're great with soil. But you shouldn't be working in this heat!

Once the final tree had passed out of sight, the amoeba began to move again, bobbing gently through the water. I lay back and sighed.

Flying trees, flying wolves... Parallel worlds sure are crazy. Every time I think I've gotten used to it, something else surprises me... Well, I just gotta keep focusing on ignoring everything.

76. Ai, the Garm

— From the Perspective of an Accurately Identified Dog —

I fought against an unseen enemy for what felt like an eternity.

On countless occasions, I bore witness as my comrades fell to that invisible beast, then attacked me in turn. There were many times when I, too, felt myself giving in to the darkness. Time and time again, I readied myself for the end—and yet, I survived.

Even so, my time was swiftly approaching. I couldn't cling on much longer. Few of my brethren remained, and they too were nearing their limits. We wandered the forest, searching for a haven in which we could at least wait for death in comfort. I could only suppose that the cave we found must have been shaped by one of the monarchs. There we made our final stand, huddled fur-to-fur, fighting against the might of the Magic Eye.

Time had lost all meaning when a pleasant breeze drifted through the cave, disturbing both the stagnant air and my stagnant thoughts. The smothering grip on my conscience was released. It was like a great weight had been lifted.

What happened?

I lifted my head—something I hadn't been able to accomplish in some time—but there was no explanation to be found in the cave around me. Something had changed, though, and these days, any change in the forest was undoubtedly connected to that dreadful spell. Panic coursed through me. With great difficulty, I managed to sit up, preparing for whatever was to come. But what came next wasn't an attack but that same pleasant breeze. Mana coursed past me, carried on the air like the scent of spring. It was a gentle,

healing mana. It flowed into me, penetrating every fiber of my tired body and healing it anew. The foul touch of the Magic Eye faded from my blood, my muscles, my bones. The others seemed to have felt it too, stretching their newly freed bodies in surprise.

My strength didn't return as easily as my mind, however. I could sit up, but nothing more. I wanted to investigate the forest—find the source of the strange happenings—but I knew it would be impossible as I was now.

I'll wait a while longer... See if my strength returns. Then—to the forest.

Days passed after the wind had saved us, though I couldn't say how many. My body was weaker than I'd realized. It took quite a while before I could venture beyond the cave. When I finally did, I found that the touch of the Magic Eye had faded, not just from us but from the forest itself. Instead, that strange, reassuring mana drifted between the trees, protecting the entire forest. I wasn't foolish enough to assume the danger was gone forever, but even so, I breathed a sigh of relief.

In spite of the healing wind, several of my brethren were nearing demise. They'd already been too close to the edge. I wanted to hunt something, to bring them nourishment, but I was still too weak. The magical breeze still floated past in the air, and my strength was slowly but surely returning.

A few more days. Hold on for a few more days, and I'll surely be able to conquer something, even if it's just a small beast.

It *was* a small beast—barely enough to feed one Garm, let alone all of us. However, the hunt had left me exhausted. It was all I could manage.

I was more thankful than ever for the healing wind. It restored my withered stamina more quickly, and as each day passed, I became stronger and stronger. It wasn't enough yet. While I remained a shadow of my former self, I lacked the power to heal my brethren. But I could feed them at least. I could give them enough strength to cling to life until my own returned—and then, I could

save them.

I'll make it in time. I have to.

I rested for a few days before I felt strong enough to venture out again. I stretched my still-weary limbs, loosening them up for the hunt that would follow.

Clunk.

A muffled sound came from the entrance to the cave. All thoughts of the hunt vanished, as I—and the others capable of standing—moved to guard our weaker brethren. We waited.

A Fenrir...? One of the monarchs, no less. And... Beside her, is that a dire wolf? Why would they be here together? And above them—an Arumearenie? I've never seen an Arumearenie hanging from the ceiling, but it's definitely one of those creatures. But why are they all—?

A human...? Why?! Why is a human here?! Enemy!

A growl escaped my throat, to which the Fenrir and the dire wolf responded with angry snarls. The dire wolf, in particular, made me uneasy. He was massive—unnaturally so. He, like the Fenrir beside him, had colossified—magically enhanced their size.

But dire wolves hunted in packs. They didn't need to perform such magic. They *couldn't* perform such magic.

Something was wrong—very wrong. I'd focused my sights on the human, but each and every one of the intruders were stronger than me, let alone my brethren. All we could do was surrender and see what would happen next.

The human drew near.

Fear coursed through me. *Attack. Attack.* The Fenrir queen must have sensed my instinctual thought for she let out another snarl, rendering us immobile. We were defenseless.

The first wave hit us, quickly followed by three more. Mana washed over me, through me. It wasn't an attack. It was... What was it?

It's the same feeling. The healing wind.

Magic left a different trace depending on the being who had cast it, and this magic penetrating me now was the same magic that had

dispelled the Magic Eye and saved us. Shock now rendered me immobile rather than magic. My exhaustion faded. My wounds vanished.

I see... This human is the one who saved us.

His magic was powerful. Powerful enough to bend a Fenrir to his service. Powerful enough to grant a dire wolf control over unattainable magic. Powerful enough to force the Arumearenie to evolve.

Before I realized it, my tail was wagging with excitement. It was only natural.

77. Chuearenie, Also Known As Spider Boss (2)

— From the Perspective of a Giant and Ever-Growing Spider —

One of my children dangled from the ceiling in front of me. Our kind should not possess such an ability, but yet, it was definitely one of my own brood. At some point, it had evolved (unbeknownst to me) and now emitted a strange, threadlike substance. It amused me for some reason.

Our kind were forged in the flames. We drape ourselves in hellfire like a cloak. Even submerged in magma, our bodies do not burn; indeed, the heat only serves to increase our speed. But we are fast even without our fire, on the ground or among the trees. With our cloaks of flame, we corner our prey before they're even aware of our presence. That is our way.

Bemused, I beckoned my child lower.

The thread... A "web," you say. What manner of substance is it? It doesn't burn... Well, that's only natural for something produced by our bodies. Have you complete control over it? I see... How fast does it fly—as fast as you run? Fast indeed, then. And you can use it to restrain your prey without them seeing you... It seems quite convenient.

As the days passed, more reports came in.

A trap? Clever... How does it work? You loop a web between two trees and make it sticky? Interesting... The prey can't free themselves, you say? Excellent. How do you make it sticky? You melt the web with a touch of fire... I thought they were resistant to the flames. Oh, you can change the level of resistance in each web? Just

a little? Still impressive, young one. And it works on nearly every creature in the forest... These "webs" appear quite beneficial. I'm pleased.

More time passed, and more of my children began producing the webs. Some had more control over it than others.

Hmm? You managed to get the web to catch fire? Well done, child. I'm impressed.

Master was, once again, spending the day at the river. I watched him from the riverbank. I found it refreshing, though I still preferred the embrace of fire.

The water flowed endlessly, propelled by Master's magic. Because of him, it was clearer than crystal, and gentle to the touch. I returned my gaze to the water spirit—the one on which Master currently sat. I'd never seen such a clear, vibrant spirit before—yet another of Master's creations no doubt.

Actually, many of the spirits now dwelled in the river.

Perhaps his mana has lured them in, like moths to a flame? It would appear so—they absorb his mana as it flows past. Spirits are fond of the purer types of magic, after all. Master shares so much of his mana, yet it doesn't seem to affect him in the slightest. It shouldn't surprise me by now, but it still does. Master's power is immeasurable. And not only does he share his magic with the spirits, he also deigns to play with them... His heart is as vast as his powers.

Ah, the hunters have returned. Let's see... A tortrage and a red deathfrog today. Excellent. That dire wolf has evolved too. It's much stronger than any of the others... For now, at least. The others seem to be evolving too—as is fitting for us species chosen by Master.

Golems emerged to begin dismantling the day's spoils. They worked quickly, but as usual, it seemed as though they'd gotten quicker yet again.

Come to think of it, I've seen quite a few of their kind roaming the forest lately. I wonder what they're doing out there... Has Master granted them yet another new power?

The golems were already nearly as fast as us. They possessed myriad magical abilities and had access to Master's limitless mana. I

feared them becoming any stronger.

Ah, Master is getting out of the river. Good. It is high time for dinner.

I'd become quite fond of Master's cooking, and I couldn't wait to see what was in store for dinner tonight.

What is it, child? Oh, your web is tangled? I see, I see. The trick is to let your magic flow through the web as you shoot it—that will let you manipulate it at will. Look carefully now.

I let three individual webs shoot from my back, moving each in a different direction. At the same time, I shot another strand from my foreleg, moving it with the same freedom.

See?

The so-called webs were quite a fascinating tool. Figuring out how to produce them had taken some time, but once I'd mastered that, shooting and controlling them had been simple. They were useful for both attacking and defending, and I'd also started to take some pleasure in setting "traps," a rather novel technique to our kind.

Hmm? Master seems surprised... I wonder why?

78. Spiders...and Holes.

As the hot days continued, so did the number of days I spent submerged in the river. I struggled with the heat. I also struggled whenever it was cold, but hot weather was worse. Especially in this world—summer here was a whole different beast.

It's gotta *be over forty degrees by now... It's hooooot.*

Today was another river day. I drifted along on top of the amoeba, pushing as much of my skin as I could against the cool, slightly gelatinous surface.

It's always so nice and chilly... I wonder if it's because it lives underwater? Come to think of it, the water's always cool no matter how hot the sun gets. It's a little weird, actually... Oh well. Suits me just fine, so there's no point dwelling on it.

My gaze drifted to the side. An amoeba stared back at me.

Huh?

I looked back beneath me. The amoeba was still there.

There're more of you?! Wait, don't amoebas reproduce by division? I think so... Hang on, doesn't that mean they can just keep dividing? Guess I'll have to wait and see... Or not. I'm surrounded by them. When the hell did this happen?! Stop dividing!

I shook my head.

I'm just gonna pretend I didn't see anything. Maintaining peace of mind is very important! Hmm, I should start getting ready for dinner soon.

Today's dinner was my attempt at nikujaga, the Japanese version of meat-and-potato stew. It had been simmering all day. The recipe was simple: a good helping of potato-like and onion-like vegetables and a hearty amount of mysterious monster meat.

The first nikujaga in this world... I can't wait to eat it. It should be just about ready I reckon. If only I had some rice.

I really need to get around to checking out that place I noticed

on the drone... But I'm gonna wait until it gets a little cooler.

Forget about exploring. I was going to have a hard enough time forcing myself to leave the river for nikujaga.

Huh? Do spiders usually shoot webs from there?

My gaze had landed on Spider Boss and a few baby spiders. What had my attention was the three webs shooting from Spider Boss's back—and the other from its leg.

I'm sure that's not right... Where does the web usually come from? From their wrists, right? No, wait—that's the dude with spider powers from that movie. I'm pretty sure normal spiders shoot it from their butts... Hang on. This is a parallel world, remember? The webs could come from anywhere here! No point trying to think about it rationally. Also, when did Spider Boss start making webs too? What a strange, incomprehensible place this is.

Jeez this tastes good! Yup, it's scary delicious. Scary... Nope, ignore them, ignore them. So good! Mmm...

I sighed.

It's impossible to ignore them. Their fights are getting even worse. Someone's gonna seriously get hurt before long. I should probably start doubling the amount of food I cook. Or tripling. I'll have to make a few more stewpots. Three more should do it... No, four. Five? I dunno. I don't want any to go to waste.

A itsy-bitsy ant went flying past my head and into the wall.

Let's start with five.

While making my way to the river the next day, I realized that more burrows had appeared near the house—two of them, in fact.

More of Shuri's nests? Or one more, with an entrance and exit? Hmm... These holes feel different from Shuri's, though.

Whenever I approached Shuri's nest—which was as infrequently as possible—it felt like the gaping hole was about to swallow me. It was terrifying. I didn't get the same sensation from being near these new holes, though.

The aura here is more relaxing, or something. Vibes are hard to

describe!

I shuffled a little closer to the nearest hole and peered inside. A face stared back at me.

"Huh?"

It wasn't Shuri. It wasn't even an ant. It was some kind of lizard. I jumped backward, afraid it was about to attack me, but it just stared at me. I stared back. We stared at each other for a while.

Our staring contest soon started to get pretty boring, so I gave it a friendly wave.

Crap, now it's coming closer. I'm pretty sure it's a lizard. It looks a little different from lizards back home... Parallel world, remember?

Actually, a lot of the animals here looked pretty similar to the animals back home. I would have thought parallel worlds would have been inhabited by fantasy creatures, but most of the animals I'd met were just weird versions of the ones I knew. Weird, giant versions.

This one's pretty lizard-like, so I'll call it a lizardy lizard... Just lizard is fine. I think the heat's getting to me.

Shuri seemed happy to see the new arrival. Koa and the other wolves each touched their own noses to the lizard's in turn.

Is it some kind of greeting? I guess this is what they call cross-cultural exchange... No, that's wrong. I don't think it's cross-cultural unless you're the same species.

Chai and his friends, on the other hand, seemed scared of the lizard. They all lowered themselves to the ground when they saw it.

Spider Boss reached out with one long leg and tapped the lizard on the nose several times.

Was that a greeting too? Maybe different species have different greetings... How mysterious.

Fluffy and the lizard seemed particularly friendly. Pretty soon, they were flying around together—

Flying?! Lizards don't fly! It doesn't even have feathers! It does have wings, actually. And I guess Fluffy doesn't use its wings anyway... Clearly feathers aren't important to flying. Maybe they're the same species? Ha ha, idiot. They're clearly different. Why the

hell would you think they're the same? Well... Guess we've got another new friend.

The dogs—the ones we'd found most recently, not Chai's friends—wandered out of the house, possibly roused by the commotion. They were still quite thin, which made me worry.

They look surprised. I wonder if everything's all right?

I called them over, and they hesitantly approached. The timidness made them even cuter.

One's missing, though... Guess it still can't walk. I'll go check on it later. I hope they all start feeling better soon.

I spent day after day playing in the river with the amoebas. Recently, all the days had started to blend together.

I gotta start pulling myself together...but it's toooooo hot. I can't motivate myself to do anything in this heat. Can't I get my act together when it's cooler? Okay, fine. I'll go all out making dinner today! I'll push myself! Besides, if I don't make enough, it'll just get scary again.

Oh, you're back!

The newest batch of dogs had left the house together today. It was the first time they'd all been well enough to do so. The weakest one had started standing up a few days ago, much to my relief. It was still much thinner than the others (and they were pretty thin), but it seemed like it could run without too much difficulty.

I'm glad. Guess I'll have to decide on names for you soon, eh?

Trailing behind the dogs were Charu and Chata; I'd asked them to supervise, being their first outing and all.

Thanks, you two. I'll make you a special dinner today... Nope. Terrible idea. I may as well paint a target on your backs. How about a nice head pat instead, hmm?

Even I could be perceptive every once in a while.

79. Ai, the Garm (2)

— From the Perspective of an Accurately Identified Dog —

The commotion outside stirred us from our slumber, and those of us well enough to stand went to investigate. The other creatures had already gathered. Whenever Master ventured outside, most of his companions tended to follow, but it was unusual for *all* of them to be present.

I wonder what—?

I froze, as did my kin. Right in front of our eyes sat the Earth Dragon.

It was a ghost of its former self, to be sure, but nothing could disguise that magical power and raw authority. The Water Dragon's presence had surprised me enough—and now, the Earth Dragon had come to Master's side too?

As for said Master... He seemed altogether unconcerned by the Earth Dragon's appearance. I couldn't say the same of us Garm, though Master soon noticed our apprehension and tried to reassure us.

Just like the Water Dragon, the Earth Dragon seemed content to treat us as something like equals, in spite of our lower status—probably because Master did the same. The human was surprisingly open-minded. I hoped to become of use to him soon.

Right now, neither I nor any of my kin were strong enough to even go hunting. It was shameful but necessary. We had to prioritize our recovery first. Master seemed to desire that too. Thankfully, as the days passed, so did our former strength return. Most of us could now run with no real difficulty, and even the weakest of my kin could now stand and walk. Before long, we'd be able to begin repaying

Master's kindness.

I'd never had a master before. I didn't realize it would be such a pleasant thing.

We raced through the forest at full speed—well, as fast as we were able to at present anyway. Some of the other Garm still couldn't move as they once could, their muscles stiffened from disuse. I couldn't truthfully say that I was fully recovered either.

Two of the dire wolves—Charu and Chata, I believe—were accompanying us on Master's request. He still seemed to be concerned about our health. In truth, I was thankful. There were many enemies within the trees, and in our current condition, an encounter would likely mean death. Of course I did not intend to cause Master any sadness by getting into a futile battle, but even an attempt to flee would have no guarantee of escaping unscathed. Today, we ran simply to readjust to the sensation itself, then returned home safely. But soon... Soon we would hunt.

The heat continued day after day.

It had been decades—maybe even centuries—since the season had been felt in the forest. I'd thought it gone forever. Master's magic must have restored it too.

Master was checking to make sure all the golems had returned inside. Work must have been over for the day.

I had nearly fainted the first time I'd seen the golems working in what Master called a "field." There were *dozens* of them. The constant supply of mana needed to sustain them apparently cost Master as much effort as maintaining the wards did—that was to say, none at all.

His power terrifies me.

It was "dinnertime."

Master preferred to eat at the same time each day, so we followed suit, as did all the other creatures. The "dinners" he made were strange yet delicious. Many of them contained things I'd never eaten before, some of which I wasn't aware were even edible. I'd

started looking forward to "dinner" each day, as did my kin and the others. Excitement built throughout the afternoon. Some of the creatures seemed like they were preparing for battle rather than food, but everyone looked forward to the meal.

Master performed his predinner ritual, and we began to eat.

It was a pleasant time, though a little frightening. Most of the creatures fought over each morsel of food—violently so. We Garm chose to watch from a distance, eating our own share peacefully.

Some of the fights were quite entertaining, but most of the time, I had to fight the urge to flee in fear. The fight between the Fenrir and the Arumearenie actually *did* send me running the moment it began. Worse still were the fights between Shuri's kin—the Avimfurmi—and the Ratatoskr. Though they did little more than glare at one another, the sheer enmity was greatly unsettling.

Whenever any of those factions met, I made sure to plan my escape route, just in case.

Today's fare was as mysterious yet tasty as always.

I never thought evil serpent could taste so good...

A growl snapped me back to reality.

What happened?

I was right in the center of the carnage. Obviously, I'd joined in on the free-for-all; it just hadn't been a conscious decision.

How strange. I should be fleeing, not joining in... However, that taste was worthy of the fight. If only I had my former strength. Then I might have claimed victory—

"Ai."

Master had started using the word around me a few days ago. It was probably my name, according to the dire wolf Chai. I quite liked the sound of it, unusual though it was. My brethren had been given them too, though remembering their names seemed to be causing them some frustration. Once I got used to my own name, I would have to begin trying to remember theirs too.

80. Don’t Screw It Up... Three Times? Five Times?

It was time to give the newest batch of dogs their names—a unilateral decision, as always.

I’ll assume they don’t mind.

One of them clearly seemed to be the leader. It hadn’t been obvious at first, but when they’d first gone back into the forest, the others had instantly fallen into step behind him. He’d also checked in on the weakest dog more than any of the others. Like Chai and Koa, the leader of the latest canine pack seemed pretty intelligent and very considerate, for which I was grateful. I’d only just remembered it, but dogs and wolves were both supposed to be extremely territorial, so I was worried that the newest pack might meet some resistance. Luckily, everything had gone well.

I know they’re highly intelligent and all, but I’m still impressed that they’ve managed to put their instincts on the backburner to cooperate... What a relief.

Okay, naming time. Let’s see... You all look very similar. I’m gonna have to be careful not to call you by the wrong names! Messing up someone’s name is rude enough, but it’s even worse if I do it with names I decided to give you myself...

Their fur had a tinge of indigo to it, so I ran with that for inspiration. The apparent leader became Ai, taken from the kanji for “indigo”—a kanji which handily had several different pronunciations. There were three other males. I named the first Sora (taken from the kanji for “provide” and “indigo”), the second Nea (“sound” and “indigo”) and the third Raki (“indigo” and “demon”). The three females became Ami (“indigo” and “beauty”), Ayu (“indigo” and “dream”), and “Mira” (“princess” and “indigo”). As usual, I was quite proud of myself.

Within a few days, the dogs would turn when I called them.

Smart doggies! Now I really, really *need to make sure I don't get you mixed up...*

They'd been happily sleeping in one corner of the main bedroom, but now that they were healthy again, they'd moved into some new doghouses that the One Eyes had apparently made on their request.

I guess they're more comfortable out there... Still makes me feel a little lonely, though.

We'd also gained another friend—the lizard. As lizards go, it was definitely a little strange, but it was lizardy enough for me to be happy with my classification.

I mean, it's not like any of the lizards back home could fly, so the fact that it looks a little different from the lizards I've seen is far from the oddest thing about it.

And as for a name...

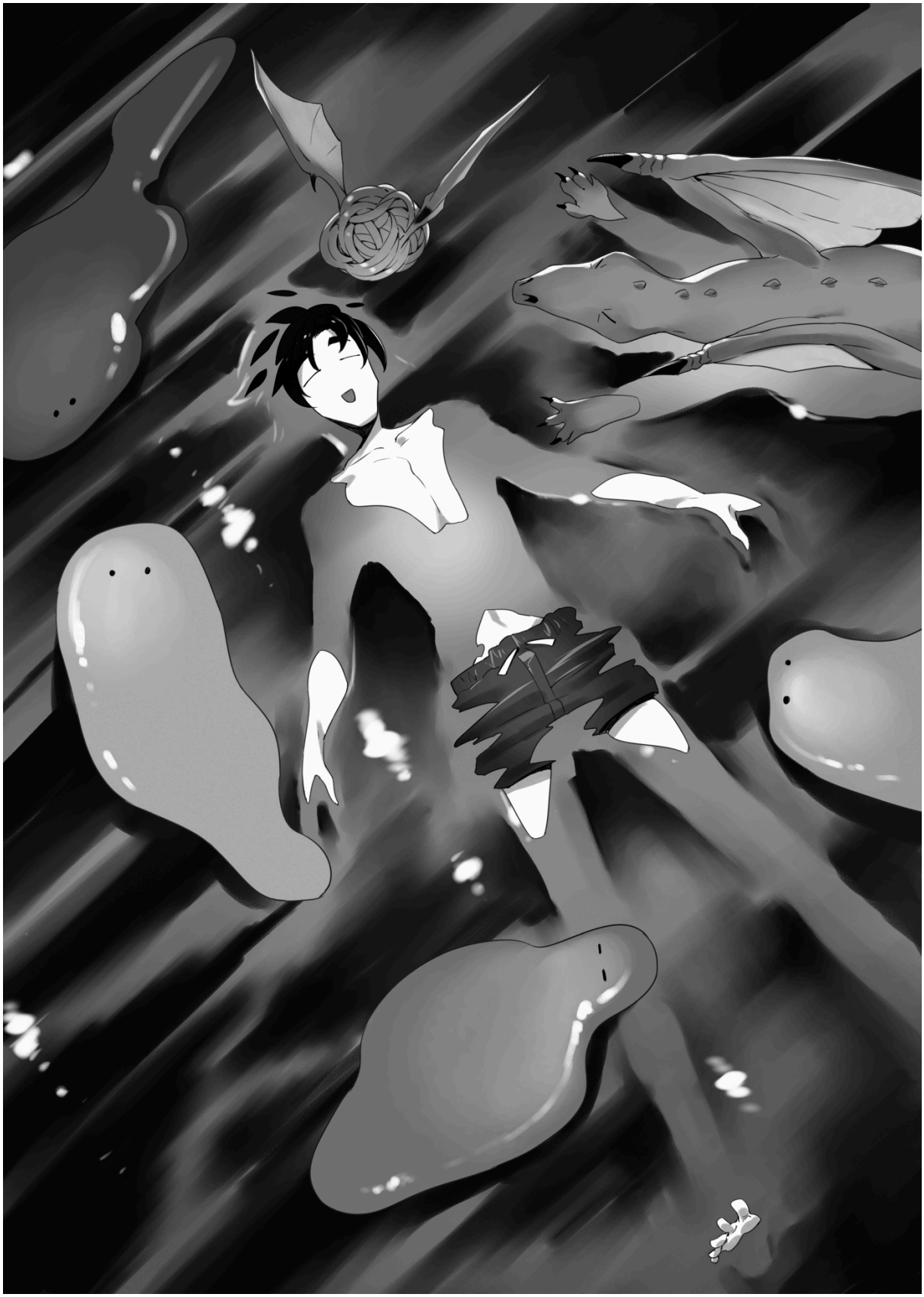
It was now known as Flying Lizard.

I'd taken to calling it that while trying to think of an actual name, which turned out to be a mistake on my part. While I was still ruminating over various options, Flying Lizard had already become strangely attached to the temporary moniker. I tried calling it by a range of suitable, kanji-inspired names, but it refused to respond to anything but "Flying Lizard." I hesitated at first—it was a very unimaginative name after all—but Flying Lizard seemed happy with it, and who was I to deny a lizard's wishes?

Plus, it was kinda cute.

Flying Lizard and Fluffy were almost always together. They took to joining me in the river, which must have looked like a strange scene: me, a ball of yarn, a flying lizard, and countless amoebas, drifting peacefully with the flow...

Forget "strange"—this has gotta look downright surreal. Oh well. It's not like anyone is *looking.*



Yesterday, the hunters had brought back dozens of creepy snakes. After getting over the urge to run, the next problem had been whether or not they were edible—I quickly decided they were. Otherwise, why would the hunters have brought them back? I'd grilled up a small piece of the meat to try.

It tasted like chicken.

Chicken! The giant rabbit was pretty close, but this snake is even closer! Seriously, who would have thought rabbit and snake were gonna be the answer?

I started preparing it as soon as I got up the next day. I had chicken (well, pseudo chicken), so that meant one thing: karaage. I diced the meat, brushed it with a mixture of fish sauce and sugar, and coated it in starch powder. All that was left was to fry it. My mouth was salivating in anticipation, but I couldn't shake the worry that there might not be enough to go around—specifically, enough for *me*. The last time I'd made karaage (using a weird, giant eel), there hadn't been enough to satisfy everyone, and the night had ended in chaos. I prepared at least three times as much meat today. I just hoped it would be enough.

To go with it, I boiled and roughly mashed some potatoes, stirring in some marinated and fried fish in an approximation of Japanese potato salad. What I really wanted was some eggs.

If I had eggs, I could make mayonnaise—it's hard to imagine karaage without it. Plus, I could make pancakes, and pudding, and—Stop! Stop thinking about it! You can't have any of it, so stop torturing yourself!

Oh, I'm really missing carbs too... I hope I find some soon. Rice or wheat, I don't mind—just give me some grains! I've gotta start exploring again soon...when the weather gets a little cooler, of course.

The time came for dinner, which meant it was also time for our daily dose of violence. Ai's pack joined in for the first time today.

They always avoid the fighting... I was kinda hoping it would stay that way. Looks like triple the amount still wasn't enough. How much should I make next time? Five times the amount? I'm gonna need some help...

The fighting was over. The victors devoured their spoils with joy, while the losers stared at me with sorrowful eyes. Really, really sorrowful.

Stop looking at me, please. But man, the karaage was great. So was the potato salad. I did good today... Me? Avoiding reality? Never! Well, maybe.

Come to think of it, no one ever tries to take my share. I wonder what I'd do if someone did try...? Ha ha ha. I'd immediately *run away. There's no way I'm getting caught up in one of their fights—not that I'd stand a chance. It'd be over before I could even blink. Running away would be my only chance at survival.*

I guess they're probably just showing me some compassion because I'm so weak... I'll take it.

Actually, the One Eyes are always hanging around whenever I'm in the kitchen—maybe I can ask them to help? Dunno if they're any good at cooking, but it can't hurt to give it a try. If they start helping, I'll be able to make a lot more food, and the fighting might settle down. The peaceful, relaxing dinnertimes of my dreams will be back within my reach!

Oh, but if they start helping, it might be a bit of a struggle for space— Nah, the One Eyes aren't that big. It should be fine... No, but the plan is to make more food too... Now I'm confused.

Okay, okay. So when I made all the karaage today, I had barely enough room to do it, right? Technically speaking, I didn't *have enough room—there was a small mountain of meat on the counter, remember? So if I want to make any more—which I do—then I'll need more space. Okay, good. Settled. The next question is, how do I make more space? The easiest thing to do would be to extend the counters— Oh, but if I'm making karaage, I'll need more frying stations too. There's not enough room for both in the kitchen...but I don't want to make the dining room smaller either. Hmm... This is hard.*

81. The Mage

— From the Perspective of a Highmage of Empras —

I glanced at the Magestone—and at the long, vertical cracks running down its surface. Per the king's orders, the other mages were beginning the preparations to repair the damage. Very few of us remained dedicated to our previous task: investigating the source of said damage.

The Archmage—the leader of our order—had been the one to deliver the news to the king. The wards had not been broken. They were not warped, nor pierced in any way; no holes were to be found. And yet, the Magestone had been attacked, which could only mean that the attack had come *through* the wards.

I remember the king's face when he heard. Denial. Refusal. Desire to dismiss the report outright had all but oozed from every fiber of his being. Unfortunately, it was the truth. We'd checked every inch of the wards ten times over, and nothing was wrong with them.

A few days later, the Archmage had been ordered to cease the investigation of the wards and to prioritize finding the original source of the problem—a task he hadn't had much enthusiasm to undertake. It was a reluctance I'd quickly found myself sharing. For how could we even begin to investigate the impossible made manifest?

And as I stared at the Magestone, I'd started to wonder if the attacks weren't just the result of Empras reaping what it had sown. What *we* had sown.

How many lives had been spent to strengthen the Magestone? The king might have ordered the sacrifices, but it was the Archmage

who'd wielded the sword—the Archmage and his direct subordinates. In other words, we Highmages.

The king had tested the Magestone's life-prolonging powers on the mages before he'd used it on himself. Four of us had undergone the potentially fatal experiment—the Archmage and three of his assistants, myself included. The rest of the world might be unaware of how many lives had been sacrificed, but not the four of us. I knew exactly how much blood had been spilled to strengthen the Magestone. I knew how many lives had ended so that my own could continue on. And I could still remember how many of those lives had been wasted in vain, to fuel attempts that ended in failure.

I've never been able to forget that girl—to forget the way she'd glared at me until the very end, refusing to look away. I was happy at the time. I'd been granted near-eternal life, and in doing so, I'd become something more—something *better* than others. In my mind, the girl had no right to look at me with such distaste. I was better than her after all. I'd hit her over and over again, but still, she hadn't looked away.

Back then, I'd still thought that I was superior.

I'd thought that power was everything. To those who held power, everything was possible. Everything was permissible.

Indeed, the days had passed smoothly ever since. Nothing had ever been powerful enough to stop us, and so, we hadn't. Tens of sacrifices had turned to hundreds; hundreds had turned to thousands.

But something had now changed. I couldn't shake the image of the girl's eyes from my mind, and the words she'd screamed echoed in my skull.

"The world will never forgive you."

The words spilled out of my mind and escaped unbidden from my lips. The mage beside me shuddered—one of the few people who'd heard the words before and remembered when they had been spoken.

The beast monarchs should have been suppressed by the power of the Magestone— No. They *had* been suppressed. Our investigations had proven that much at least. Therefore, the

monarchs weren't the ones attacking Empras, but something greater—maybe even something greater than we could comprehend.

The forest had long been regarded as the center of the world, and thus, a being who controlled the forest could also control the world itself, just as our king had always desired. But perhaps... Perhaps the position he'd fought to attain had already been taken long ago. Another king within the forest—a king of the world. Or perhaps the presence—if it did even exist—was more recent, something summoned by the beast monarchs. Otherwise, why had we continued unchallenged until now?

The king of the world...

I couldn't begin to imagine how much power such a being would hold. I didn't want to, for that divine power—that righteous anger—was now squarely directed at us. Retribution for Empras's crimes.

Guilt gnawed at my heart—guilt I hadn't realized still remained within me. I'd thrown away every emotion and belief save for those necessary to serve the king—particularly those emotions that hindered my duties. Guilt had been chief among them. Apparently, I hadn't severed the emotion as well as I'd thought.

I glanced at the Magestone again.

It's supposed to be the strongest thing in the world. I never imagined it could be damaged, let alone this badly. How many more lives will it cost to repair the cracks—if they can *be repaired? And even if so...*

Will the king of the world even allow us to try?

Side Story: Magic Practice... I Gotta Get Stronger!

A fair distance from the house, I found what I was looking for. It was a decently sized clearing, perfect for what I had in mind. I turned to Spider Boss and Shuri, my chaperones for the day.

"I've got some stuff to do here, so you might be waiting for a little while. Sorry."

They looked confused, which wasn't entirely unexpected. Interspecies communication wasn't easy the majority of the time. With dubious gestures, I eventually succeeded in getting them to move a safe distance away. After confirming that both of the larger insects and their many children were well outside of the clearing, I turned back around, rolling my shoulders.

"All right, let's give it a go."

Today's agenda was to test out all kinds of magic. As of now, my main (well, only) form of defense was the Barrier spell I'd hastily thrown together when first exploring the cave. It hadn't failed yet, but I wasn't sure how long it would last. I still didn't know anything about magic apart from my own questionable theories. It would be one thing if the Barriers failed while I was awake, when I could immediately put them up again. If they failed while I was asleep, though... If I woke up to find myself sharing my bed with a curse, I'd be very upset—and extremely terrified.

Yesterday, though, I'd realized that my anxiety regarding the Barriers—and a large portion of my anxiety in general—was the result of my poor understanding of magic. I'd briefly been annoyed with myself for not realizing it sooner, but really, starting a new life in a parallel world hadn't left me with much of a surplus of mental energy for any deep self-reflection. In fact, I was kind of surprised that I *had* realized it at all.

And so, I'd set out today with the goal of testing out what else I could do with magic.

I mean, I can probably give myself some *credit. I can make water and light after all—those are pretty handy. I can make the water warm too...*

"Well, I may as well start with what I know."

I'd conjured water a lot of times before, so I didn't need to visualize anything when casting the spell. I'd figured out that much, at least. Once I'd "assigned" a mental image to a word or a phrase, I could cast the spell whenever I wanted—no visualization necessary. However, if I said the same word while picturing a *different* outcome, the spell would be overwritten, so to speak, and I had to then revisualize the original image to reset the spell back to how it had been at first.

I struggled with this aspect of magic a lot of the time.

For example, there was my Water spell. Most of the time, I used it for maintaining my daily water intake, so I'd set the spell to produce a cupful of water each time I cast it. When it came to bathing, though, I reset the spell to produce enough water to fill the tub. Once my bath was finished, I'd cast the spell again and return it to the original amount, so that I didn't accidentally conjure a bathtub's worth of water in the middle of the kitchen when trying to fill a cup. I didn't need to imagine how disastrous that scene would look—because I'd already experienced it twice. The One Eyes had helped clean up the mess on each occasion, but I had a strange feeling that they'd been annoyed the second time it had occurred. If it happened a third time, they'd probably get genuinely angry—and given that, I needed to figure out a way to avoid making the mistake again. Of course, I could always cast a quick Clean on myself to avoid the problem entirely, but I never really felt clean from just the spell. To Japanese people, baths were an indispensable part of life—giving them up would be like giving up air.

Okay, lemme start with...

"**Water.**"

Splasssssssh.

Crap. Forgot to change it back again. Good thing I came outside,

or I really would *be in trouble. Well, my water spell still works fine, at least. Next is—*

"**Light.**"

Pop. An orb of pure light appeared in front of me. It was pretty bright (though it didn't seem so now, given that I was outside in the middle of the day) and came in handy whenever the cave's glowing walls weren't enough.

This one's still working fine too. Okay, next... I should probably come up with something apart from Barrier to protect myself, just in case. Protection... Defense... Walls? I could make a wall out of dirt or mud... Wait, mud walls are just a normal part of Japanese architecture, though. They're not very strong... Well, I can just make a thicker one. If it's solid enough, it should be able to withstand an attack. I'll give it a go.

All right, so it's a wall made of dirt... Hmm. Where does the dirt come from? The ground, I guess... I'll picture it kinda amassing itself from the surrounding dirt. Make it nice and tall... Okay, now it's just a big pile of dirt. That's not gonna do much. I have to make it solid! Um, how does dirt become solid again? Clay's pretty solid. Or is that more sticky? It wants to be more like concrete... Okay, I'll imagine the dirt turning to clay and then hardening like concrete... Cool. Lemme put it to the test.

"**Earth Wall!**"

The ground shook beneath me.

Ah. Guess using the dirt around it wasn't the best idea... The ground around the wall is a lot lower than the rest of it now. It should probably be a little taller too. Even if it wasn't a little sunken, it's still only about three meters tall. Most of the animals here would be able to jump over it.

"Oh, how about the hardening? I wonder if it worked..."

The best way to see if it would withstand an attack was going to be an attack, so I picked up a nearby pebble and flung it at the wall with all my might.

"Gah!"

The pebble bounced off the wall with a barely audible *plink.*

Well, that was depressing. I mean, seriously—no matter who or

what attacks me, it's definitely not gonna be as pathetic as that. Also, my shoulder hurts... I really gotta start exercising more.

I sighed.

Okay, I gotta try something more powerful... Oh, I could shoot a pebble at it with magic—that'd be a bit closer to an actual attack.

I picked up another pebble and held it tightly, imagining it shooting from my hand with enough power to piece through a sheet of iron.

For some reason, my mental sheet of iron is really thin... Make it thicker. No, thicker— *Why is this so hard to imagine?! Calm down, me. I'll make it simpler to picture... Yep. A meter-thick sheet of iron; that'll do. And the pebble shooting through like a bullet... Got it!*

"**Shoot!**"

Crack.

It's no good. The wall's not solid enough—the pebble went right through. I gotta make it stronger. Hardened clay won't hold up against a real attack if it won't even stop a magical pebble-bullet— Oh yeah, magic. I can probably just reinforce it with magic. Duh. Okay, let's see... A Barrier's probably the best way of doing it. It's made of dirt, so I'll set the Barrier to repel water. There's probably fire-breathing monsters around here somewhere, so the Barrier should absorb fire—it'd be bad for the forest if I repelled it. What other kinda magical attacks are there? Lightning? Probably. Lightning...can be repelled as well. Anything else? Hmm... Nothing's coming to mind. Well, I'll add this to the wall for now and see how I go.

"**Enhance** the wall."

I felt like I saw the wall shrink slightly, like it had been squeezed by an invisible hand.

Something definitely happened—I just hope it worked.

I grabbed another pebble from the ground. "**Shoot!**"

The stone hit the wall with a thunk before shattering into countless pieces that fell to the earth below.

Cool, that's the first box checked. Gotta see how it holds up against magic now. Attack magic, huh... A fireball's the first thing coming to mind. A fireball that destroys everything in its path and

leaves a trail of hellfire in its wake... Yep, that'll do.

"**Fireball Attack.**"

Crap, I only meant to say Fireball.

Fwoosh.

Oh... Damn.

Half the wall had been entirely reduced to ashes, and what remained was barely standing. It still wasn't strong enough.

"Argh! Oh, it's only you, Spider Boss."

When did you creep up behind me? You scared the crap outta me!

Spider Boss was staring at the wall.

Is there something wrong with it?

I inspected the wall too, but I couldn't see what had attracted the giant spider's interest, so I looked around the rest of the clearing, only to find Shuri and all of the baby insects staring at the wall too. Every eye in the clearing—and there were a *lot* of them—was fixed on the wall.

"Uh, Spider Boss?" Spider Boss jumped at the sound of my voice. "Are you okay?"

I've never seen Spider Boss look shocked before. I guess none of them were expecting me to start slinging fireballs around... It's not like I could have explained it first, though—"Everything's fine. I'm just trialling out a bit of magic, okay?" Like they'd understand that—Oh, wait! "Everything's fine"— I think they've started to get what I mean whenever I say that. So...

"Everything's fine, Spider Boss. Okay? Everything's fine."

Wait, now Shuri's coming over... Maybe experimenting with magic here wasn't a good idea?

However, after a quick encounter between the two huge insects—possibly a conversation, although not one I could understand—both Shuri and Spider Boss returned to the edge of the clearing.

So... Can I keep going? Yep, it's fine... I think.

Working under the assumption that Shuri and Spider Boss didn't have a problem with what I was doing, I went back to experimenting. Next, I needed to figure out how to make the wall even stronger and adjust the image of it being formed in the first

place. The first wall had been made up of the dirt surrounding it, but if I was throwing up a wall to block a sudden attack, it would mean having the ground swept out from beneath my feet—literally.

There's gotta be a safer way to gather enough dirt. What if instead of pulling it in from around the wall, I picture it pulling up from underneath? That way we'd be fine, no matter how close we were to the wall! Oh, hang on. Then I'd just be making a hole directly below the wall—that wouldn't be a particularly stable foundation, would it? Wait... I'll just conjure the dirt with magic. Duh.

"No random pits and no massive holes—just a massive dirt wall. Perfect."

I decided to try for a five-meter wall this time, spanning the entire width of the clearing. Now it just needed to be stronger. I pictured the hypothetical wall in my mind. Dirt clung to dirt like glue, refusing to yield. Fire was absorbed, water was repelled, lightning was reflected, and tornadoes were about as effective as a spring breeze. The final image in my mind was of a wall so sturdy even a four-ton truck crashing into it wouldn't leave a dent.

I reckon this'll be enough to block most attacks... I feel kinda bad for any monsters or animals that might run into it, though. I mean, it would seriously hurt. If they hit it with enough force, they'd probably die. They'd definitely wake up with a headache. Yeah, I'll make it so they don't get hurt, add something to absorb the impact... Oh, like a car airbag! I can't make an airbag out of dirt, though. Airbag... Air. I can probably make it out of air. But compressed air can be pretty painful too, I think—I dunno if it'll actually help. I'm sure as hell not gonna be the one to test it. Oh well. An airbag is better than nothing. It'll make me feel better about it at least.

"Something like this, then..." I focused on the improved wall in my mind, and shouted, "**Wall!**"

A massive sheet of earth rose out of the ground about three steps in front of me. It was around five meters tall, just as I'd planned, and when I looked around, I could see that it stretched from one side of the clearing to the other.

Perfect.

"Why does it feel like everything just got quiet, though?" I looked behind me to where Shuri and Spider Boss had retreated. They were frozen in shock.

At least, I think it's shock. Why do their expressions have to be so hard to read?! It's probably shock—kinda expected, really, when a giant wall pops out of the ground in front of you. Sorry for the lack of warning, guys.

"Spider Boss, Shuri—everything's fine, okay?"

Their expressions changed. I still couldn't quite understand what they meant, but they definitely weren't happy with me.

I'm gonna ignore that for now because I want to keep experimenting, but I'll make it up to you later—promise.

The wall was certainly bigger, but the real question was whether it was stronger. I picked up a fist-sized rock and visualized it shooting toward the wall like a bullet.

"**Rock Attack!**"

The rock smashed into the wall and shattered—not into pieces, but into dust, quickly carried away by a passing breeze.

Okay, physical attacks are no problem. Lemme hit it with a bit of fire now. I'll make it even more intense than my last attempt.

"**Fireball Attack.**"

There was a sudden *whoosh* as the fireball soared toward the wall...and vanished just as quickly as it had appeared. The sound—and the fireball itself— were absorbed by the wall, just as I'd pictured.

Sweet! It's holding up pretty well! Okay, what's next? Right, lightning. That's easy enough to picture—I've seen plenty of lightning bolts before. One bolt's probably not enough for a proper trial, so I'll picture about five bolts striking the wall, and...go.

"**Lightning Strike!**"

It sounded like a bomb going off.

"Jeez, that was loud..." I shook my head, trying to stop the ringing in my ears. "I probably shouldn't have conjured it while I was standing so close."

I carefully shuffled over to the wall. It looked exactly the same as it had before. I wasn't sure where the lightning bolts had struck it,

but wherever it was, they hadn't left any evidence. I couldn't check the top of the wall, though—it was too tall now.

Well, I'll assume it's fine too.

Last on my list was a wind attack. I'd seen plenty of tornadoes on TV, so visualizing one was easy enough.

"Torn— Wait, no. If I conjure a tornado here, we'll all get caught up in it."

Not a tornado, then. What else could work? Hmm... Oh, what were those folktale creatures who attacked with gusts of wind? Weasels... That's right! Sickle weasels! I don't want to conjure a weasel, though... Hang on, I can just plagiarize their attack. A gust of wind as sharp as a sickle, something that can cut through a dozen trees in a flash... Sounds good.

"**Wind Attack.**"

There was another *whoosh*, but this time, the attack did leave a mark on the wall: a long, thin gash now ran along its side.

Crap, it's still not strong enough? Oh man...

I ran my fingers along the mark.

It's pretty shallow. I can consider this acceptable wear and tear, right? I don't know how strong the monsters in the forest can get, but maybe this'll be good enough to protect me. It's good enough for today, at least. My head hurts from all the thinking.

"Well, that's our defensive wall all figured out! Just 'Wall' is a better name for the spell too. Shorter spells are easier to remember under pressure."

But man, that wind attack was really cool. Throw up a wall to protect my friends and bam*—hit 'em with a counterattack. Maybe I'll use wind as my main form of offensive magic... Water's too splashy—I might accidentally hit my friends. Fire and lightning are both pretty powerful, but I'd just end up turning the monsters to ash. Plus, if I can kill one with a neat wind blade instead, the meat will taste a lot better than if it's half burnt or soaking wet.*

"All right, I'm calling it a day. Spider Boss, Shuri, thanks for wait— Wait, what's wrong?"

Why are they all huddled up and shaking in fear? Did I miss something? Hmm... Nope, nothing here but the wall. Hang on, what

do I do with the wall anyway? It feels like a waste to just get rid of it, especially when I can use it for target practice. I'll just leave it here.

"Did something scare you? I'm sorry for not realizing sooner."

Must have been something pretty scary for them to be shaking so much.

I scanned the forest around us, but it looked the same as always: full of trees.

Is there something hiding in there? But if it's scary enough to make Spider Boss and Shuri react like this...

I shuddered.

Nope. Too scary for me. I wouldn't stand a chance.

I nervously cast a rudimentary detection spell to scan the trees, but it didn't pick anything up.

Maybe it already left? If it was even there in the first place... Well, I reckon we're safe for now.

"Everything's fine, guys. There's nothing out there." I slowly moved toward Spider Boss and stuck out my hand for a reassuring pat, but to my surprise, the spider—and everyone else—shrank away at the motion.

Wait, am I *what you're all so scared of? Why? Oh, I guess I probably look like I've gone crazy—making a wall just to attack it over and over again.*

"Everything's fine, okay? Don't worry. I was making it to protect us, that's all. I haven't gone mad or anything."

I reached out again and stroked Spider Boss softly on the head, hoping that either the words or the gesture would get my message across. I snuck a peek at the spider after a minute or two, repeated the words, and gave it another gentle pat.

Spider Boss still seems a little sad... I guess thinking I'd gone crazy was probably a little distressing for it. Crap! Speaking of stress, I completely forgot about coming up with a fail-safe for my water spell! Oh, man... Wait, can't I just use a different spell for each? Like "Cup of Water" and "Bath Water"? Yeah... That'll work. Problem solved.

— From Spider Boss's Point of View —

Master raced through the forest at quite an impressive speed. My children and I, as his designated escorts for the day, were close beside him—as was the Anferfurmi Shuri, though her presence was entirely unnecessary.

"Why are *you* here?"

"I could ask you the same question," Shuri replied with an arrogant sniff. I wanted to roll my eyes.

Why do I always end up paired with her?

True, our relationship wasn't as bad as it used to be, but we certainly couldn't claim to be "getting along." We were simply incompatible; everything she did irritated me beyond reasonable understanding.

"It's because you're so similar, isn't it?"

I wasn't entirely certain what one of my children—whoever it was—had said, but that's what it had *sounded* like. Surely one of my own wouldn't dare to make such a ridiculous statement. I peered over my shoulder, but no one spoke up to claim the statement. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Shuri mirroring my movements, examining her own spawn with suspicion.

How dare she mimic me— No. I must remain composed. Master is nearby.

Although...where is he going? We're still within the protective barrier, but he usually doesn't go this far from the house. Perhaps something is wrong— Oh, he's stopped. But there's nothing here?

I surveyed our surroundings again. Apart from the slight lack of trees in our current location, nothing stuck out as being particularly out of the ordinary.

"Spider Boss, do you know why he came here?"

"No clue," I replied, cross. Apparently, Shuri was just as much in the dark as I was—a fact that brought me some relief. With a start, I realized Master was making the gesture that meant he wanted us to distance ourselves.

"Let's move."

"Indeed."

I examined the forest all around us as we retreated to the treeline. It was as far as I was willing to distance myself from him. If anything happened, I needed to be able to reach him in an instant.

"I've asked all the others already, but do *you* have any idea how much mana Master truly has?" asked Shuri, somewhat aloof.

What a ridiculous way to phrase a question... But Master's mana, huh?

He was powerful enough to constantly maintain the barriers around the forest and around all of us creatures of course. His magic had also penetrated many of the caves, lakes, and groves nearby, keeping them free of the Magic Eye's control—all of which must demand an incredible, incessant supply of mana. Yet in spite of that, Master threw his mana around on a daily basis like it was infinite, using it for everything from creating golems to filling a large tub of water. I couldn't even begin to measure his true capacity—I doubted anyone could.

"No clue," I simply replied.

Hmm?

My eyes narrowed as I felt the tug of Master's unique magic. *What's he doing—?*

Splasssssssh.

Confused murmurs sounded from around me, mirroring the sound that had escaped my own throat.

Why would he conjure so much water here of all places?

I looked to Shuri, only to find her looking at me. Our heads tilted in unified confusion.

Ah— Now he's conjuring light?

"Whatever is he doing?"

How should I know?

I glanced back at my children, who were visibly dazed.

Watching Master has made them let down their guard—and if we cannot guard him, what use are we? I should warn them—

Even as I opened my mouth, a low rumble shook the clearing, as well as those of use who stood around it. I'd never experienced such shaking. I made to rush toward Master but froze in surprise before I could take the first step.

A wall stood before him—a large, earthen wall.

The rumbling and the shaking—was this the cause?

"Is that wall made of dirt? What purpose could it possibly serve?" asked Shuri, her head tilted in confusion once again. Her question was a valid one; however, it pained me to admit it. A dirt wall would serve little use in a fight. Even if it were to be magically reinforced, a half-decent jet of water magic would turn it to mud, and it wouldn't fare much better against wind magic.

"It's a fine wall, but still, dirt..." she continued, and I found myself nodding in spite of myself. A dirt wall was probably only good for surprising a foe at best, and only momentarily at that.

Perhaps it's a diversionary tactic? Wait, what's he doing now? Throwing a pebble at it? Nothing happened... Now he's propelling another pebble with magic. That'll make the wall crumble— Or not. It's not breaking?

"Why didn't it crumble?"

"I'm not sure. The stone went right through it..."

So she saw it too.

The wall shone for a split second.

Has he reinforced it, then? At the end of the day, it's still just dirt, though. It can't withstand a much more powerful attack—

"Wha— ?!"

The next stone shattered as it hit the wall.

I didn't think that was possible... What's he done to the wall?

Whoosh. Flames shot toward the wall.

This'll be impossible for it to withstand, surely...

I was right.

But even so, how much power did he put behind those flames? I've never heard of dirt being reduced to ash.

"Ah! What *was* that? Those flames?" spluttered Shuri, her voice tinged with worry. I'd managed to restrain the shout of surprise that had threatened to burst from my own lips, but she—and the majority of our children—couldn't claim the same.

"Pull yourself together. It's not like he's going to turn his attacks on *us*."

"I'm— I'm not scared of Master or anything! How ridiculous!"

I didn’t try to hide the smirk that arose at her reaction, nor did I care when the giant ant fixed her steely glare on me. It was her own fault for being scared.

Still, I was surprised that the wall *hadn’t* collapsed entirely. While a large part was now ash, the lower half still stood, albeit unsteadily.

I’m curious... I’ll have to take a closer look. I’ll sneak up quietly, so as to not disturb Master.

I was immediately detected, much to my embarrassment. The thought of distracting Master from his work—whatever purpose it served—was unpleasant, but, to my great relief, he didn’t seem angry. Unfortunately, I’d been so focused on the wall that my immediate reaction after he sensed me had been to freeze in shock. After all, my kind were feared for our ability to mask our presence—and yet Master had noticed me straightaway, as though I’d all but strolled directly in front of him.

“Spider Boss?” My own name made me jump.

I was startled, that’s all! And I definitely wasn’t trembling! I thought, although there wasn’t much point in trying to convince myself of the lie.

I found the sound of my name pleasant. Every time Master said those words, my ears pricked up with delight. I could understand my name, at least. The rest of his sounds were still nonsense to me.

Oh, he said something else... I know those words too. He says them to us quite often. What was it again?

I strained my ears, hoping he’d repeat the phrase, only to hear the sound of unpleasantly familiar footsteps from behind me.

“You shouldn’t disturb Master like this, you know.”

To think the day would come where she *would feel the right to reprimand* me*... Fortune is certainly not on my side today.*

Shuri smirked, apparently pleased—likely, she considered the warning payback for my earlier comment.

How irritating.

“I wasn’t planning to disturb him, but he sensed me even though I hid my presence. Master is simply too powerful.”

“Or perhaps you’re not as stealthy as you thought?”

How dare you! I am a master of stealth! All tremble in fear at the

thought that I might be lurking just out of sight! Just because Master noticed me... You impudent—

"Master is simply too powerful! I'm going back!"

I *had* been detected—that I could admit at least—but Shuri being the one to point it out was frustrating beyond belief.

This is all her fault.

"They really *are* alike."

"Lord Shuri's children said the same thing, right?"

I could faintly make out some of the conversation our collective children were having.

What are they saying? I definitely heard her *name.*

"What's this about me?" Shuri asked sweetly, obviously having heard it too. Our gathered children shook their heads in unison.

Playing the fools, are you...? Why are you all looking at us like that? If you've got something to say, say it! Hmm—

Ah. What's he doing now? He's using even more mana this time...

"Ah!" I hadn't been able to suppress the cry this time. Fortunately, neither had Shuri, judging from the shame on her face. I sighed with relief—as did she. I turned to glare at her, only to find her mirroring my movements exactly.

We held each other's gaze for a few moments, neither one of us speaking. Eventually, the frightened murmurs of my children pulled me away from our staring contest, and I instead turned my gaze toward Master. What I saw shocked me.

What in... What is that?

It was another dirt wall, clearly, but I'd never felt so much mana packed into *anything*, let alone simple soil.

"Spider Boss, what is that?"

"How should I know? I've never seen anything like it before."

"Yeah... Of course."

She's beginning to sound more like me.

I thought to mock her for the lapse in her usual, irritating formality, but before I could form the insult, I felt the tug of magic once again.

I'm not gonna let anything slip out this time, for sure!

There was a crash, followed by the sound of something

shattering. Shouts of surprise pierced my ears, my own mixed among them.

What—? Was that a rock? I could barely see it! And the wall didn't get damaged at all?

Whooooooosh.

We all shrieked.

They weren't mere flames... That was hellfire or possibly something even stronger.

It was strange. Fire that hot should have turned the wall to magma, but instead, the flames had simply vanished, leaving no trace of hellish heat in their wake.

A sickening crash shook the clearing, followed by another chorus of shrieks.

What now?!

The world turned white, and for a moment, I assumed I'd met my end.

No... I'm fine. Everything's fine. My heart's still beating. But what was that? It was too violent to have just been lightning...

There was another whooshing sound. This time, no one cried out.

A gash? Every other attack left it unscathed, but wind *damaged the wall? How much mana could he have compressed into one gust of wind?*

"Is Master preparing to fight a god or something, do you think?"

"I don't know."

Is something bad about to happen? Wouldn't he tell us if it were, though? He looks like he's finishing up for now... Nothing's coming, is it? Everything's truly fine?

Tremors I couldn't suppress overtook my body as Master started walking toward us. Shuri and our respective young weren't faring any better. We weren't scared of Master but of what was possibly to come—of what had made him feel the need to attempt such devastating attacks.

He's looking around— I was right. He must be preparing for something.

"Looks like we'll need to be ready for a fight before long, Shuri."

"Indeed, he's being incredibly cautious. We should let the others

know to be on their guard too."

But really... Whatever is coming, if these spells are Master's intended weapons... Do any of us really stand a chance at defeating it?

Something was beside me—reaching for me. I jumped before I could realize it was only him. Reflexively, I started shaking again, vivid memories of his insurmountable attacks flashing through my mind.

I wouldn't stand a chance.

Master, obviously noticing my reaction, frowned sadly.

No! It's not you, Master!

It was hopeless. Confusion clouded my mind, until—

Mana flowed into me, soft and gentle—*his* mana. My limbs, stiffened by anxiety, began to relax, as did Master's expression.

Thank goodness... He doesn't think I hate him...

Side Story: Not a Chance... Er, Chai?!

When I opened my eyes that morning, I found myself staring directly at another—a single eye, to be precise. One of the One Eyes was kneeling beside my head.

What on—? What the hell is it doing there? How long has *it been there? Why do I feel so scared... Must be my imagination.*

In general, I wasn't particularly quick to get out of bed in the mornings—I preferred to sink back under the covers for a while, waiting for my brain to catch up with my body—but my ominous hovering bedmate was enough to make today an exception. I shot out of bed.

"Uh... Good morning?" I said, stumbling over the words a little.

Couldn't it smile or something at least? Instead of just staring at me like that... Why isn't it saying anything? Oh, I didn't give them a talking function. My brain's still half asleep. Why is it staring at me, though? I don't know what it wants me to do...

We stared at each other in silence for a while.

Eventually, a flash of movement caught my eye and startled me enough to break away from the stare. It was another One Eye entering the room.

I really wish they'd stop appearing outta nowhere... Seriously, this isn't good for my heart.

I examined the newcomer with some curiosity (and a healthy dose of fear). It was holding something.

Clothes? Oh, are those today's clothes? But why is a One Eye bringing them?

Usually, I woke up to find my daily outfit neatly folded on top of the headboard. I didn't have much time to wonder about the suspicious change in routine before the One Eye handed me the

bundle of clothes. I took it, still confused. Both dolls stared at me, as though waiting for my reaction.

Scary. You're really scary, you know?!

I immediately began to strip, hoping they'd leave after I put on the new outfit. I unfolded the clothes and spread them out on the bed—before hastily refolding them and holding them back out to the One Eye, firmly shaking my head.

"I'm not gonna wear that. No way."

No way in hell*. I don't care how much they hope otherwise, I'm not gonna wear it. Seriously, why a* skirt*? Where did they even learn about skirts?*

The clay dolls had gained sentience. I didn't know how—or why—and I didn't particularly care either; until now, their sentience (while unintended) hadn't caused me any trouble.

But a skirt was taking it too far.

I stared at the One Eyes, shaking the outstretched bundle slightly. They tilted their heads in obvious confusion.

So cute! But there's still no way.

There were some things even cuteness couldn't overcome, and this was one of them. Eventually, they gave in and took the clothes back, looking extremely disappointed as they did so.

"Good. I mean, can you imagine me in a pink skirt? I'd look like a real creep."

Indeed, not only had they made me a skirt, it was also—for some reason—pink. And though I hadn't tried it on, it definitely wouldn't have been long enough to reach my knees.

Seriously, I would look— Nope. Not imagining it. I don't want that image in my head all day. Hang on, there is *another outfit on the headboard! So was the skirt just something* those *two came up with, then? Oh, who knows.*

I quickly changed into the freshly laundered outfit and turned to leave the room, only to find the two previous One Eyes returning with yet another bundle of clothes.

"More new clothes? Sorry, but I'm all set for today. Can you bring them back tomorrow—?" I cut myself off suddenly, a foreboding thought flashing across my mind. "No, wait a minute."

I took the proffered bundle, spread the clothes out on the bed, and folded them up just as quickly.

"It's not the length or the color that's the problem, okay? It's the fact that it's a *skirt*. Do you get it?"

My new outfit had included a long, light-green skirt this time; they'd clearly misunderstood the reason behind my earlier refusal. The One Eyes looked at one another, clearly puzzled.

Did you get it or not— Oh, great, what now?!

A third One Eye bustled into the room, holding, of course, more clothes. I sighed and accepted the bundle, laying it out like I had the others to confirm my suspicions.

Great, a dress... Hang on, just how many of these have they already made?! I'm too scared to ask.

"Um, okay— See this loose, flowing bit? I can't wear anything like this." I pointed to the lower half of the dress and made an X with my arms. All three of the dolls nodded in unison.

Okay, I think they finally understand. Phew. I was starting to think I'd just be presented with hundreds of different skirts until I just gave up and put one on...

After making sure they'd left the room for good this time, I collapsed onto the bed.

"I'm beat already. I mean, I didn't expect to be attacked by skirts first thing in the morning..."

It seemed like I'd got the point across, though. After a few minutes, I got to my feet and left the room successfully, skirting any further surprises.

I need to clear my head after that... Maybe I should go for a run after breakfast.

Breakfast was simple—salad and soup. After gorging myself on meat the night before, I needed a light, refreshing meal to start the day. After breakfast, I moved outside to the deck and relaxed on one of the many seats, watching the Farm Brigade at work in the fields (which I was now prohibited to enter). Many of the spiders and ants seemed to be helping out too.

Why am I the only one who can't go into the fields? Surely there must be a reason...

I racked my brain but couldn't think of an explanation.

"*Grrr*."

I looked in the direction of the sound and jumped as I locked eyes with Koa. Her face scared me just as much as it always did, but her movements—like gently headbutting my hand—were adorable. Actually, even her face had become kinda cute lately.

"Morning, Koa. Looks like another nice day, hey?" I said, starting to pet her. She wagged her tail from side to side excitedly, which only made me start petting her even more enthusiastically, ruffling her fur between both hands. Tail wagging ferociously, she pressed her head against my chest.

She really is adorable when she's like this. How could an animal lover like me ever stay away from such a cute doggie? Cute, but strong...

I winced a little. She'd barely brushed me with her head, but it hurt quite a lot regardless.

I hope I'm never on the receiving end of one of her less gentle shoves...

"Whoa!" I snapped out of my Koa-haze as something shoved me from behind—something I soon discovered to be none other than an indignant-looking Chai.

What? Did I do something? Nothing's coming to mind...

"*Grrrrrr*."

"Oh, sorry, girl!" I'd stopped patting her on account of the sudden shove, which she clearly wasn't pleased about. I resumed my duties as requested, scratching her behind the ears and around her face. She seemed to enjoy it most when I scratched the spot between her eyes.

A minute later, I got shoved again. Chai looked even more annoyed than before.

Wait, do you want some pats too?

I shifted slightly so that I could reach both of them. One hand still on Koa, I reached out with the other and scratched Chai lightly between the eyes.

Huh? Koa seems to like it, but your reaction isn't quite the same... What's up?

Chai accepted the scratches motionlessly for a moment—before headbutting the arm scratching Koa and shoving himself between us.

Huh? None of them have done something like this before... Hang on, does he want special Chai-only pats? You big softie—

I reached out to give him double-handed pats but pulled back after seeing his expression.

Not special Chai-only pats, then. Hmm... Wait, if he's not jealous of Koa...

"Chai, you're not jealous of *me*, are you?"

It would explain his behavior... He and Koa are always together these days, after all. They're built a really close friendship... It is *a friendship, right? They're different species after all. But maybe they're similar enough? Hmm...*

My head was still reeling with theories when Koa huffed lightly, almost as though she was exasperated.

Not lovers, then, or she wouldn't have reacted like that... I guess maybe Chai likes her, though. Poor boy, getting huffed at by the girl he likes.

"Chai, you're so damn cute," I said, voice tinged with affection. Both canines looked at me blankly.

I can't help but want to cheer him on... Even if they are different species. With animals, it's usually all about making sure your own kind doesn't go extinct, I guess... He's gonna have his work cut out for him. Oh, but this is a parallel world, so maybe it's not so impossible?

"You got this, boy."

Well, maybe not, but a little encouragement isn't gonna hurt!

"Oh yeah— I was gonna go for a little run through the forest to clear my head. Do you wanna come with me?" I asked, well aware of the futility of the question. The animals only occasionally seemed to understand me at all—and even when they could, it wasn't like they could reply. I received two identically confused expressions in return, just as I'd predicted.

You do look cute together.

"Okay, um... Forest," I said, pointing to the trees. Koa and Chai

nodded. Next, I pointed at myself, and imitated a running motion. They nodded again.

Looks like we're mostly there... Crap, I never know how to communicate "together," though!

"*Grrr*." Koa tapped me lightly with her nose and stood up. She ambled off the deck and into the clearing beside, and turned back toward me as if waiting—

Wait, she did understand me! Who's a smart girl?

"Thanks," I said, hurrying after her into the clearing.

I'd taken to going for a run whenever I felt especially stressed or when I simply needed to refresh my mind. It didn't leave me too tired afterward, and in fact, I usually came back feeling better than I had when I'd left.

"Oh, Chai—you're coming too? I get it. You don't wanna let Koa out of your sight, huh?"

He's freaking adorable. He looks scary, but his behaviour is so damn cute.

I grinned at Chai, failing to stifle a chuckle. He huffed and looked away pointedly.

Yep... Super freaking adorable. Argh, I wanna pat him so badly! But he'll definitely get mad at me if I do.

Knowing that I wouldn't be able to control myself if I kept looking at him, I averted my own eyes and willed myself to calm down.

"All right, let's go!" I took off, flanked by a canine on either side. I was rather impressed with Chai for managing to prioritize my protection over Koa's, although I quickly noticed that he was constantly glancing over to check on her.

It's a real shame you're not the same species. You guys would have the cutest puppies.

I scanned our surroundings as we ran through the forest. The remaining traces of the curse had faded even more over the past few weeks, and there were barely any shadows to be seen. Life inside the Barrier was getting close to being one hundred percent curse-free.

"Ah!" I let out an involuntary shout as a huge rabbit bounded right past us.

Hang on, didn't I deep-fry you yesterday? Or one of your friends at least...

Walking outside yesterday to find a rabbit twice my size waiting to be butchered had been fairly surprising. More surprising, though, had been said rabbit's taste and texture—both of which were a pretty near match for chicken.

That's parallel worlds for ya! Also, it turns out that karaage's a real crowd pleaser in every world...

I shuddered, remembering how the wolves had responded to the meal last night.

Oh, hang on—that's one of the wolves over there, right? Which means...they're mid-hunt? Oh, cool! I never get to see them hunting! Ha ha, it kinda seems like the rabbit is coming this way, though... Actually, make that rabbits*. Three of them.*

Koa and Chai darted in front of me, lowering themselves to pounce.

Um... What do I *do? Because I reckon standing here like a statue isn't the right answer. Oh, I should probably get out of their way!*

I shuffled an inch to the left, only for the foremost rabbit's bloodshot eyes to snap to mine, long, wicked fangs bared.

Scary!

"**Wall!**" I shouted, the spell more of a reflex than a conscious decision.

Crash. Crash. Boom.

Three successive sounds echoed through the forest like a series of explosions. Koa and Chai turned to stare at me. I could have sworn they looked reproachful.

Yep, I did a bang-up job of getting completely in the way. Sorry.

I'd also just figured the downside to my new defensive Wall spell—it was, well, a *wall*. I had no idea what things looked like on the other side.

I can't hear anything, though... Maybe it's fine to dispel it?

I carefully approached the wall, straining my ears for any sound of danger, but it was still unnaturally quiet.

Guess there's only one way to find out.

After getting Koa and Chai to move to a slightly safer distance via

charades, I decided to call out a warning just in case. "I'm gonna bring the wall down, so watch out!"

If any of the rabbits were still alive on the other side of the wall, they wouldn't understand me anyway, but it made me feel better about potentially crushing them. I took a few steps back and visualized the wall collapsing.

"**Crumble!**"

The wall shuddered and shattered into countless pieces, turning from a sturdy structure to something resembling ancient ruins in seconds. A sudden screech cut through the sounds of destruction.

What was that? It... It wasn't one of the other wolves, was it?!

"Is everyone okay?!" I shouted, but I could barely hear myself over the chaos—there was no way the wolves would have been able to. As soon as the last chunk of solid dirt finished tumbling, I scrambled over the mountainous ruins. "Is everyone okay?"

"*Grr*."

I sighed with relief as the trio of growling wolves padded over.

No injuries as far as I can tell. Thank goodness. Did I imagine the screech, then? I looked around. *Er, where are the giant rabbits? Oh...*

I glanced back at the wreckage of the wall.

Yep, that's a foot. Crap, I probably turned them into pancakes... I can't just leave them like this, though.

Preparing myself for the potentially ghastly sight, I used Ascend to lift the remains of the wall away.

"No pancakes... Jeez, that's a relief."

The four giant rabbits had a decent mix of superficial injuries between them, but they still, thankfully, resembled rabbits. Whether from running into the wall or having it fall on them, I wasn't sure, but all of them were unconscious but still breathing.

No idea where the fourth one came from, though... Oh well. What do I do with them now?

Before I could even begin to think it over, one of the wolves approached—Shion.

Hey boy, what's up? Whatcha doing— Oh.

I hastily looked away as Shion darted from one rabbit to the next,

dispatching each with a skillful—and terrifying—bite to the throat.

Well, they're definitely dead now. I shuddered. *Well, they were hunting these when I blundered my way in—either way, the rabbits weren't getting outta here alive... I just added insult to injury by dropping a wall on them first. Sorry, bunnies. I'm gonna turn you into delicious karaage, if that brings you some peace. You won't go to waste,* I thought, closing my eyes in a brief and somewhat tactless prayer.

Okay, that's over. What should I do now? I could watch them hunt for a little longer... Nah, I still want to run a bit more.

"Koa! Chai! Let's keep going," I said, pointing farther into the trees. "See you later, Shion!"

I'd briefly considered helping them transport the rabbits back to the mountain but ruled it unnecessary after realizing the four carcasses were already floating in midair. The wolves didn't need my help at all.

The wolves are all really good at magic, huh? I'm kinda jealous.

— From Koa's Point of View —

My morning training finished, I returned to the clearing in front of the house and began slowly stretching out my body. I was becoming faster and faster with every passing day, and I knew the reason—power. Under Master's divine protection, the power the Magic Eye had stolen from me was returning bit by bit.

"It's all because of him."

I finished my stretches and returned inside, checking on the golems working in the fields as I did. Just inside the cave, I encountered a small group of the one-eyed golems.

What are they holding? Is that cloth? It's quite an unusual shape—it doesn't look anything like the garments Master usually wears.

"Is something the matter?"

"Hmm?" I replied. "Ah, Shion. No, I was just thinking that the cloth they're holding looks odd, don't you think? They look rather

disheartened too."

"Master's golems, you mean? You're right, they do seem a little out of sorts. Hmm..." He trailed off for a moment, thinking. "Aren't those clothes the sort worn by females?"

"Female clothing? But Master is male."

"Indeed. So why are they holding clothes for females?"

"I haven't a clue. They were already here when I came in."

Shion and I peered at the golems curiously, but no answers were forthcoming.

"Where were you off to anyway?" He'd been on his way out when we'd crossed paths.

"We were heading out to hunt for a couple of killeragus."

Killeragus? Oh, the monster Master cooked for us last night. I remembered the strange dish. It had been crispy on the outside, juicy on the inside, and remarkably tasty. My mouth watered.

"Secure as many as you can. There's little point asking Master to make more without a more suitable stockpile of the meat."

"Of course," Shion nodded as he padded past, Kurou and Hio close behind.

Excellent. They're three of our best hunters. Hopefully we'll have another feast tonight—I didn't eat nearly enough yesterday. Master needs to use more than one killeragus next time... Oh, this is unbecoming. I'm drooling at the mere thought— Master!

"Master!"

I rushed over to him, soaking up the gentle flow of his mana. Master's side was my favorite place to be. It felt so warm and comforting—

Hm? Chai? I eyed the dire wolf, amused. *It's rude to interrupt, you know. What's that, Master? You want to pat me more? Of course! Ah... This might be the best feeling in the world...*

"Chai! Don't shove Master. You're bothering him."

"My apologies," replied the dire wolf, after a pause. "It's just..."

"What is it? Speak clearly."

He paused again. "Nothing. It's nothing."

"Chai."

"What?"

"Master will think you're jealous of him, you know."

"What?!"

Oh, he's flustered, the silly thing. How cute. Of course, I wasn't so foolish as to not realize Chai's feelings for me; they were as obvious as the sun.

"Koa, er..."

However, for some reason, Chai remained oblivious to my own feelings. If he would just calm himself and think clearly for a moment, surely he'd figure it out. After all, I'd allowed him to walk beside me and hunt alongside me; I'd let him draw closer than even the other Fenrir dared to. Everyone else was likely aware of my fondness for the dire wolf.

"Yes?"

I can't make myself any more obvious, really. Hurry up and notice, won't you? I'm beginning to run out of patience.

"Hmm? What's Master saying?"

Forest? He wants to go to the forest... He wants us to go with him?

"Of course I'll join you, Master. What about you, Chai?"

"I'm coming too, obviously."

"Good, you can guard Master's right side, then."

"Huh?"

Chai seemed surprised. Clearly, he'd expected to run by *my* side, as always. However, my duty to protect Master took priority over all else.

A moment later, Chai nodded. "Sure... I understand," he continued, still seeming a little upset.

Oh, don't be so glum. Do you think I care for Master in that *way? Good grief, I never expected my future spouse would require so much hand-holding. Alas, it can't be helped.*

"When we return from the forest," I said slowly, "I'll need you to groom me."

"Really?" Chai replied, fur bristling.

"Well, it appears Master is ready. Let's be off."

"Koa, you didn't answer me!"

I hadn't. I couldn't bring myself to repeat such an embarrassing

request. It was the first time I'd felt this way about *anyone*. I felt hot and itchy all over. Hopefully a run through the forest would clear my head.

I furtively examined Master as we ran.

Where are we going?

When I focused, I could hear the voices of my kin in the distance.

The hunters... Are we headed into their path? Will Master be in danger?

"Chai, I assume you've noticed too?"

"The hunters nearby? Yeah. What are they up to?"

"Hopefully, they've found some killeragus."

Chai let out a low, excited growl in response, probably remembering the previous day's meal. "I hope so too," he replied, licking his lips in anticipation.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who'd enjoyed yesterday's dinner.

"Do you think Master came all the way out here because he's worried about them?"

Chai's suggestion wasn't particularly implausible. Master had an incredibly nervous temperament. He'd even gone so far as to place the same wards around me—a monarch of the forest—as he had the others. A ward powerful enough to withstand even a lightning bolt from the heavens, at that.

"What should we do? Should we stop him?"

I hesitated. *Should I interfere with Master's plans? After all, what if there's a problem, and he's going to help the hunters?*

"Hm?"

Killeragus... Ah, Shion and the others are chasing them down. Something's odd, though. They're too fast... Mutants.

They'd started appearing after the curse had spread through the forest—mutated versions of monsters, far more powerful than the rest of their kind. Even I had to be on my guard when mutants were around.

"They're coming this way— Koa, watch out! They're mutants!" called Chai, dropping into a battle stance. I, too, prepared to attack.

They're aiming for Master... How foolish. They'll see what happens to those who dare—

Crash. Crash. Boom.

Huh?

I thought I'd heard Master say something, and then all of a sudden, the killeragus had appeared to turn into a wall. I quickly glanced around, confirming my suspicions. A wall had appeared out of nowhere, separating us from the killeragus.

Did... Did Master summon this wall? It's well within his powers, I suppose.

Indeed, he didn't seem surprised at the sudden change in scenery; it must have been him.

"Still, summoning something this magnificent in mere seconds..." I glanced over at Master. He approached the wall and rested his hand upon it, closing his eyes in apparent contemplation.

"What is he doing, do you think?" I asked. Chai simply tilted his head, puzzled. A moment later, Master gestured for us to retreat, and shouted something. The wall crumbled, shaking the ground beneath our feet.

"He's astounding..."

A second later, Master began scrambling over the wreckage of the ruined wall, and I rushed to follow. Shion and the others stood safely on the other side, but the killeragus were nowhere to be seen...

"Oh." I followed Shion's gaze, turning back to the destruction behind me. "Apparently, the killeragus are underneath."

They must have been crushed... What a waste.

The next moment, the chunks of solid earth began to float into the air, gliding to the edges of the clearing.

Is there anything he can't do?

Before long, I could make out the monsters that had been trapped beneath. Fortunately, all four were still relatively whole.

"Master always seems to know just how much force to use," Chai said.

"My thoughts exactly." *When you're as powerful as he is, you need to be able to control your magic precisely, lest every spell end in chaos.* "Shion, finish them off."

Shion responded to my command at once. Master started to walk away as Shion made the first kill, obviously wishing to avoid getting in the way. I heard him call my name, and looked to see him pointing farther into the forest.

Perhaps there's more he wishes to check on?

"I trust you'll handle everything here?"

There'll be killeragus waiting when we get home... I'll definitely get Master to make more of yesterday's fare.

"Of course," replied Shion, as he and the others nodded assertively.

I followed after Master.

He'll need to cook a lot more tonight, though... I'll have to make sure we start heading back soon.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Honobonoru 500. Thank you for choosing to read *Flung into a New World? Time to Lift the 200-Year Curse!* I'd also like to thank Yosuke Ishibashi for their wonderful illustrations.

This novel started as an online publication, which means I've already received many wonderful comments, impressions, and error reports, along with countless ratings and bookmarks, all of which continue to encourage me. I'd like to thank everyone profusely, and I hope you'll continue to support me as the story continues.

I came up with the pen name "Honobonoru 500" when I decided to write five hundred "honobono" (heartwarming) short stories. Unfortunately, it turns out that short stories aren't all that easy to write. I couldn't transform the thoughts in my head into words on the page. So I gave up pretty much immediately and decided to write a classic isekai story instead, and the result was *Flung into a New World? Time to Lift the 200-Year Curse!*

Until about halfway into the story, I was determined to stick to the basics: to write a tale of an average man, flung into a strange world, who fights against evil demons alongside his friends—or something along those lines. As I wrote, though, I began to have my doubts.

Would it really be so easy to take a life, even if it was a demon?
I don't think I could do it.
Even if I had no other choice, I'm still not sure I could...
I know! I'd just hypnotize them instead!
And so on.

This novel is the result of my own answers to many similar doubts, which has ultimately made it quite a different type of isekai fantasy. It's a story about a man who finds himself in another world, but instead of running into people, he finds himself surrounded by monsters he can't communicate with. It's a story about a scaredy-

cat, his band of affectionate monsters, and a whole lot of misunderstandings. All in all, it's a heartwarmingly ordinary story.

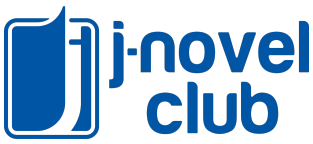
Somehow, this novel is also receiving a manga version, so please check it out! Also, please consider having a look at my other series, *The Weakest Tamer Began a Journey to Pick Up Trash*. It's about a cute tamer, a friendly slime, and their heartwarming journey!

Thank you to everyone at TO Books for their continued support with both my previous work and this one. I'd especially like to thank my manager for their constant help and care. It's because of everyone's support that I was able to successfully publish this novel. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I look forward to working with you all on the next volume too.

Finally, I'd like to once again thank you, the reader, for choosing to pick up and read this story. I look forward to meeting you again in volume 2.

Honobonoru 500
December 2019





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Flung into a New World? Time to Lift the 200-Year Curse! Volume 1
by Honobonoru500

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