The Accursed Chef and His Pair of Furry Foodies 1

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Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Prologue
4. Chapter 1: Starting with a Handicap
5. Chapter 2: Shiro and Kuro
6. Side Story: Carolina
7. Chapter 3: Dungeon Discovery
8. Side Story: The Young Man with Dark Eyes and Black Hair
9. Chapter 4: Dungeon of Malice
10. Side Story: Ares
11. Side Story: Carolina 2
12. Epilogue
13. Bonus Textless Cover
14. About J-Novel Club
15. Copyright

Prologue

I was surrounded by an endless, mysterious space. No up or down, no left or right—just a vast, infinite expanse. It seemed like my surroundings were blue, white, maybe even red. I couldn't even tell if I was lying down or floating. I was simply there, somewhere in this vast expanse.

Gosh. How did this even—

"Well done, indeed," a voice called out.

Huh?! Who was that? A girl?

It was a girl's voice, but it sounded like a grandpa's with the "indeed" thing...

Wait! A little girl who says "indeed"! I heard it loud and clear! A much-revered Indeed-Missy!

There was a pause.

"Regardless," the voice went on. "The child you saved was a yet-to-be hero—a soul destined to be reborn in my world in the next life. You gave your life to protect him, and for that, I am grateful."

Indeed-Missy's words jogged my memory. That's right, I'd saved a kid. The last thing I remembered was a thug who was about to thrust his knife down. I'd jumped in without thinking, desperate to save the boy.

My heroism surprised me. I'd never thought I was the type to do something like that, but my body had moved almost on its own. Oh well, it happens, I figured. I could never turn my back on a kid in trouble. One time, I'd tried to help a lost girl and nearly got the cops called on me.

Well, I must've died. I had tried to grab the guy's arm but couldn't—he'd stabbed me right in the chest. It had been unreal how strong he was, and something about his eyes had seemed off. He might've been high on something. I didn't remember the pain of getting stabbed, though—that was a silver lining.

Although, maybe I hadn't actually *saved* the kid. He did see someone get murdered right before his eyes.

My bad, kid.

So, does that make this the afterlife? It's kinda pretty. Heaven, maybe? Just the thought of it is actually making me feel good. It's like I'm drifting away, fading—

"You must stay focused on yourself, indeed!" interrupted Indeed-Missy's voice. "Lose consciousness here, and you shall truly be tossed back into the cycle of reincarnation! Indeed, hold on to who you are!"

Who I am? Uhh...who was I again?

"Very well then, I shall indeed assist you! Name: Koichi Suzuki. Died at age twenty-five. Office worker. Parents: deceased. Siblings: none. Friends: negligible. Girlfriend: none, of course."

Hey! I feel like there was an insult in there.

"Your hobbies were going to different restaurants and reading light novels and manga. Your goals in life were to eat delicious food every day and go to culinary school to become a chef."

Whoa, spot on! That's right, I'm Koichi Suzuki.

That realization snapped my mind into focus. I could feel my arms and legs again, and I was able to understand that I was drifting in some mysterious space.

"I am the overseer of a world beyond Earth," continued Indeed-Missy. "Indeed, in your world, I am what you would call a 'god.'"

Strangely, I understood everything she was saying without a second thought. I believed that this voice belonged to a god, no questions asked. Maybe it was some kind of divine aura?

"You saved the hero, but because of that, your soul was exposed to a mighty force, and the power from my world has now indeed become tangled up in you."

Does that mean this is a god from another world—an "isekai"? My soul, isekai powers...

I turned my attention to Indeed-Missy. *If I may ask, will that have some ill effects on me?*

"You've suddenly become so formal."

Heh, you are a god, after all! I responded in my head. *If you*

can't beat them, join them. And there's no way I'm beating you!

"No need for such pretenses. Indeed, mere formalities without true respect are simply unsettling."

Oh, got it.

"Hm, indeed, less than two-thirds of our time remains. We must move swiftly."

So there's a time limit?

"Ordinarily, the intrusion of an otherworldly force would spell great danger, indeed. In your case, however, it may very well be a blessing."

Meaning?

"Two paths lie before you," answered Indeed-Missy. "One is to return to the cycle of Earth's reincarnation. Should you choose that path, your current self will vanish, and you will indeed be reborn as a new soul in the next life. The other path is to reincarnate in my world, where I shall grant you a new life and body."

Huh? Y-You mean I'll be reborn in an isekai? S-So what sort of world do you come from, Almighty Indeed-Missy?

"Put simply, it is indeed a world of swords and magic. Your actions in saving the hero's soul deserve recognition, therefore before sending you there, I shall bestow upon you some modest powers."

Reincarnated with cheat abilities?! The thought reverberated inside my head. *No, hang on. Calm down, dude. She said "modest powers," right?*

I turned my attention back to Indeed-Missy. *What sort of powers might these be?*

"Your soul has mingled with the power from my world, which I shall convert into a beneficial form. Therefore, I cannot give you anything too incompatible... Perhaps the attributes of a magical chef?"

Attributes? Not like skills or anything?

"There are no skills or stats in the world I come from. Indeed, what you will have is the knowledge and talent required for the occupation of a magical chef. What you do with those powers is up to you. Embrace your new life."

I spent a few moments mulling over the idea. *I'm not totally sure what all that means, but it sounds pretty awesome. And honestly, I'm pretty stoked about becoming a magical chef. It's always been my dream to become a chef. Who would've thought it'd happen in an isekai?!*

Cooking with magic, huh...? I continued, again directing my thoughts toward Indeed-Missy. *I bet there's strange ingredients over there you couldn't even imagine back on Earth.*

"Indeed, in my world, there are giant creatures unlike anything on Earth. You will require magic to cook them."

Yeah, I figured as much. If there's magic, it's for sure an isekai. I bet there's dragons, unknown creatures, all sorts of stuff.

"Not all of my world's creatures shall be unknown to you. Some species from Earth have been copied over. Indeed, there are many you would recognize."

Copied over?

"Indeed, useful creatures are at times exchanged between the realms of the gods. Cows, for instance—worlds without them are truly the rare ones."

Wait, gods are trading animals with each other? That means there might actually be a lot of creatures I know. Well, if that's the case, it'll be great that I can use ingredients I already know. That'll work too. Now I'm really starting to warm up to this whole reincarnation thing! Except the "great danger" part...

Just give me one more reason! I thought to Indeed-Missy. *One more solid push, great god! Like, are there other races?! Elves? Dwarves? Beastfolk? Y'know, ones that are fluffy and fuzzy, like really fluffy and fuzzy?*

I repeated the last part just to make sure she got the idea.

"Oh yes, they are there—and many, many more beyond that," replied Indeed-Missy.

Whoooooa! Are you serious?! This is insane. I can't wait to meet them.

The truth was that I was a furry. In fantasy games with cute girls, I'd always go for the beastgirl first. I'd always choose beastfolk for RPGs with character creation. My favorite anime characters were

mostly beastfolk too.

A world where real *beastfolk exist? I am just so stoked. All right! I'm gonna fluff every furry pair of ears I see! That's a promise!*

There was another pause.

"So," Indeed-Missy said, "you would indeed like to be reincarnated into my world?"

Yes! I would love to be reincarnated into an isekai!

"V-Very well. Any last requests? I can tweak things like your magical aptitude or physical talents a bit. Non-cooking-related abilities would be fine as well. Oh, and it's already been decided that you'll have language abilities."

With that offer, I paused to think.

So, besides the knowledge of a magical chef, I get a little bonus in the form of talent or knowledge? It's a world of swords and magic, right...? Then maybe swordsmanship? But I've heard spears are actually mightier than the sword. Maybe some cheat-level spatial magic? Or would it be better to just boost my physical potential? Being physically gifted might already make me pretty strong. Oh, or maybe I could get some kind of crafting skill, like blacksmithing or alchemy. Wait, could I even change my appearance—?

"Hey, make it quick," interrupted Indeed-Missy.

Huh?

"We are running out of time, indeed! Make up your mind!"

Th-Then grant me talent with weapons! I want to master the spear!

"Understood, indeed."

Oh, and can you make me a bit handsome? One time, I asked out a girl I liked and she said I wasn't her type. I've been traumatized ever since! But being super good-looking might be a hassle, so just a bit handsome. Just enough so people won't dislike *me!*

"Y-Your looks? I can only grant one wish, indeed! You don't have enough power in your soul! Besides, it's too late to change your appearance!"

Then grant me talent with spears!

"W-We're out of time! Oh, these settings should do! I'll give you a talent for giving off a charming aura!"

Wait, that's so random! And you chose that over spears?!

"Indeed, that's because you kept interrupting! Besides, you didn't have enough power in your soul for the charming aura, so it was supplemented by your birth fortune!"

Huh? What does that mean?

"It means your circumstances when you are born will be below average, indeed! At least, you won't be born into a rich family. Indeed, if you *are* rich, be careful! It means you'll have other drawbacks."

What? So my parent lottery is gonna be a total failure? I asked. *Oh, it's suddenly getting dark...*

"The world is full of possibilities," said Indeed-Missy, "so just keep at it, no matter..."

The god's voice sounded oddly distant—like it was echoing from far away, and her words didn't exactly inspire confidence.

Before long, my consciousness was swallowed by light, and I drifted off into a deep sleep.

Chapter 1: Starting with a Handicap

Four years had passed since I had been reincarnated. That said, I hadn't fully regained my consciousness until I was about two and a half. Whether it was because my brain hadn't developed enough yet, or for some other reason, I wasn't really "aware" during my infant days. It felt more like I was drifting in a long sleep.

It hadn't been until about a year ago that I truly woke up—that I had realized I had been reincarnated. Imagine my shock when I suddenly remembered my previous life. I'd had a splitting headache and a wave of crushing anxiety, and had ended up bawling my eyes out for half a day. But once I had recalled the circumstances of my reincarnation, I'd managed to calm down—somehow.

Getting breastfed would've been so embarrassing, even if it were by my real mother. So in that sense, I guess it was actually convenient that I'd spent that phase of life as a clueless baby.

I'd learned a lot in the year after I came to. First off, my name was Thor, and I was a pretty boy with black hair and black eyes. Considering that I didn't have a family name, it was clear my parents were commoners. Actually, calling them commoners might have been generous. They were dirt-poor mercenaries.

In this world, being a mercenary wasn't just about exploring dungeons, doing security work, or collecting materials. Nope—these guys were more like shady, jack-of-all-trades types who didn't mind getting their hands dirty with looting or smuggling. In fact, they regularly got involved in wars and criminal activities like human trafficking. In a fantasy novel, they might have been close to an adventurer, but here, mercenary was the more fitting term.

Normally, when a child was born, the parents would take them to a temple or a mage to get their magical aptitude tested, but my

parents had skipped that part because they didn't want to dish out the money for it. Honestly, that was probably for the better since it would've caused all sorts of trouble if people had found out I could use magic.

My parents were so dirt-poor, they'd hesitate to make even the tiniest donation. Heck, we didn't even have a house; we lived in a grimy old tent where the floor was just the bare ground—damp and dirty. The tent was sturdy, being made from magic beast hide. It was the kind of tent that was meant to be used for adventures. Still, even low-class mercenaries usually managed to crash at cheap inns.

Compared to them, we were practically at rock bottom. So my parents lived out of this tent—about the size of an average Japanese bedroom—spending their days diving into dungeons and chasing after the dream of striking it rich overnight.

I didn't know all that much about dungeons myself, but from what I knew, they were these mysterious places created by gods, where treasures and magical beasts would spawn. Not that my parents cared about the lore or anything. For them, it was all about whether they could rake in the dough.

And this was the most important part: My parents were absolute scumbags. It was almost admirable how thoroughly terrible they were.

I'd had dreams about my reincarnated life. I'd wanted to worry about whether or not I should tell my kind, loving parents the truth about being reincarnated. I'd wanted to get all flustered when a maid spoke to me in baby talk. I'd wanted a cute childhood friend to start falling for me so I could pretend to be cool and say something like, "I'm not into little girls." I'd wanted to work in the fields with the friendly villagers. I had even dreamed of someone gently smiling and saying, "I'm your mother," and I'd just smile awkwardly in return.

But what did I actually get?

"Tch," I'd once heard my mother say. "Taking care of that brat's a pain in the ass."

"Just leave him," replied my father. "He'll live."

Those were the kinds of awful things I'd hear them say. I really

don't want to speak ill of the parents I ended up with in this life, but no matter how you spin it, they're scumbags.

What's more, they'd been planning to sell me off to a slave trader. I'd only found out about that little bombshell a month prior.

"Here. Food." It was my mother talking to my father.

"Fine... God, wheat porridge again?"

"We're broke. What do you expect?"

"Dammit. If only the twerp were old enough to sell."

"It'll take another year."

"How about we just lie about his age and sell him?"

"Slave traders can find out someone's age with magic tools. That won't work."

I'd overheard the entire conversation. "Twerp," of course, referred to me. And they wanted to sell me to a slave trader? Maybe I was in deep trouble here. Honestly, considering the kind of people my parents were, I wouldn't have put anything past them. It was a mystery they were even taking care of me in the first place.

A few days later, my parents were bickering once again.

"Three days in the dungeon and all we got is one lousy silver coin?!" my father exclaimed.

"You're the one who screwed up and used a potion!"

"Like I had a choice!"

"We need to feed the kid, so it looks like we'll be having porridge for a while again."

"Agh! Why do we have to go through all this for the stupid twerp?!"

"What else are we supposed to do? He's gonna die if we don't feed him. Besides, I didn't even want the kid. It was your idea to have him so we could sell him."

"How was I supposed to know that you can't sell them till they're five?!"

So to sum up this absolutely awful conversation, human children had to be at least five years old before they could be sold, because no one wanted a kid that was too young. Plus, kids that age died easily.

I also learned that kids went for about five small gold coins, or

fifty thousand golds. That was about a month's worth of living expenses for a commoner. Although, I based that estimate on what I'd overheard from my dirt-poor parents—who practically wore their poverty on their sleeves—so a family living a more normal life might've spent more.

Even so, it was cheap. Way too cheap for the price of a human life, but in a world where life doesn't have much value, I guess that was just how it was. My parents said they'd reluctantly take care of me till they could sell me, since that was the only option. It was a horribly bleak situation.

By the way, one small copper coin is worth about one Japanese yen, and ten of those make one large copper coin. The currency here goes from small to large: small copper, large copper, small silver, large silver, small gold, large gold, and the most valuable of them all, the orichalcum.

When I thought about it honestly, the way my parents treated me was so beyond careless that it made me question whether they really intended to keep me alive till they sold me. They didn't beat me, thankfully, but the meals were some disgusting slop that was a look-alike for oatmeal—with complete disregard for nutrition, of course. I probably weighed a lot less than other kids my age.

On top of that, I'd be left alone for days at a time. There were stretches when my parents would disappear into a dungeon for up to four days straight, during which I'd just be tied to one of the tent poles with a rope and left on my own. For food, they'd just dump a mound of that oatmeal look-alike into a bowl and plop it down like dog food—the same went for water.

Any other baby would've died for sure, most likely from starvation or dehydration, but choking on that sorry excuse for oatmeal or getting attacked by thugs or bandits seemed pretty likely too.

It's a miracle I survived till I got my memories back.

Maybe they truly didn't care whether I lived or died. Sure, if I'd been able to read, was born to beastfolk, or had some talent for magic or some rare aptitudes, they could've sold me for more—but it was clear they never had that kind of hope for me.

To start with, my parents were illiterate, so the idea of them

teaching me anything was out of the question. And magic? Like they'd ever believe their own kid could have a decent attribute. Basically, the way they saw things, if they could raise me by half-assing it, great. And if I dropped dead, no big loss.

So this is what was meant by having "bad birth fortune." I was convinced to say the least.

Anyway, my goal at the moment is just to survive—and escape from my parents before I hit five years old.

When I thought about it, it actually worked in my favor that my parents were away most of the time. I could test out the magical chef abilities that the god gave me without worrying about anyone seeing me. I'd developed a daily routine of practicing my magic. Wielding magical powers was—obviously—something I had never done in my previous life. Sure, I'd been granted knowledge and abilities, but you can't get the hang of things until you actually try them.

"All right, let's get started," I said to myself.

I'm going to escape and survive, no matter what. But first, I need to improve my magic—it's the only weapon I have with this tiny body.

So, alone in the tent as usual, I once again kicked off my daily magic training. To start, I let out a grunt and focused my mind on my fingertips. I felt a warm sensation flow from the center of my body to my hands—this was mana. Back when I'd first started, the feeling of this unknown substance sloshing around inside me had felt gross. At this point, though, I'd gotten used to it.

"Create Water," I chanted. At my command, water suddenly sprang forth from thin air and filled a bowl in front of me. Because I'd been gifted all this magical knowledge and talent right from the start, I could abbreviate most chants. For beginner spells like Create Water, simply saying its name was enough. If I practiced more, I'd probably be able to cast it silently—no words at all.

On a sidenote, the magic in this world was spirit magic. Basically, you used your own mana to call upon the spirits, and they would cast the actual spells for you. To learn a new spell, you basically had to keep using spirit magic over and over, building up your connection

with the spirits until the incantation naturally popped into your head. Your bond with the spirits was everything with this type of magic, but I'd never actually seen one of these spirits myself. Not that it mattered since I was able to cast spells no problem.

"Water Needle!" I chanted.

The water in the bowl formed into a tiny, sharp needle that hovered in midair. I started moving it around inside the tent, making it zigzag and spin like a bullet.

Magic was quite flexible in this world—you could customize it depending on how clearly and precisely you could project your vision of the spell to the spirits using your mana. Its effect and range changed depending on the amount of mana you used. Two casters using the same spell could create such different results that it was almost as if they'd used two entirely different spells.

Water Needle was an attack spell known for its inconspicuousness. But by tweaking its thickness and manifestation period, it could double as a pressure-point needle for preparing fish. Apparently, when dealing with spirit fish—magical creatures made entirely of water—only Water Needle could hit the exact spots needed to prep them properly. Thankfully, because it was used in cooking, my magical chef knowledge allowed me to handle it easily.

I channeled more mana into the needle and developed a clearer image in my mind. *Spin...spin...spin.* I visualized compressing the water and making it rotate like a high-speed drill. *Let's face it, rotation is king.*

"Haah! Water Needle!"

The needle spun at high speed as it pierced the ground. Seeing the gouged-out earth, I couldn't help but pump my fist at its penetrating power. It turned out exactly as I'd imagined. Then, I increased the number of needles to practice manipulating them separately as well as combining them into a single, larger one.

There were a few reasons I chose water magic for training. First of all, fire magic was out of the question inside a tent. There was the obvious risk of setting it ablaze, and even through the tent walls, the glow from the flames would be too noticeable from outside.

Earth magic was also something I wanted to avoid—it would

mess up the inside of the tent, and returning the soil to its original state would cost extra mana.

Then there was wind magic, the effects of which were hard to see clearly, so it was a no on that one. The same went for nonelemental magic that resembled telekinesis.

I could've tried holy magic too, which included a bunch of healing spells, but it would've been hard to test those out since I was healthy. Though, from what I knew, holy magic was also useful for things like getting rid of poison or keeping hunted prey fresh. There was also body enhancement, but after just a little practice, my muscles became incredibly sore. I didn't want to push it and risk messing myself up.

Apparently, elemental magic—earth, water, fire, and wind—was considered basic here, so it had made sense to start with that. This was according to the cheat knowledge I had gotten from the god, so I trusted it. So I ended up sticking with water magic for my training. It was low risk, and using it inside the tent didn't look suspicious at all. Plus, if I accidentally spilled some water, it would just soak into the ground without a trace.

"My mana control has come a long way. But I'm itching to try out some stronger spells," I said to myself.

But there was no way I could just blast a powerful spell inside this tiny tent.

"Some of the spells have seriously intense names."

It made me wonder if these spells in my knowledge from the god were really meant for cooking at all. Take, for example, the fire magic "Shadowflame Annihilation Circle," which totally sounded like something a goth middle schooler would come up with in their fantasies. It would embrace the target in pitch-black flames strong enough to burn right through dragon scales. As it turned out, there was actually a recipe that used that spell, made with dragon parts...

Actually, I guess it's the other way around—most of my cooking spells are actually battle spells repurposed for the kitchen. Of course, with the mana I have right now, I can't even hope to cast something that intense, so it's a waste of time even thinking about it. It's not like I have any dragon meat lying around either. And I

can't even imagine the kind of havoc it could wreak if I used it as a weapon.

I kept grinding away with water magic training. I'd probably been using magic for about thirty minutes when I felt a strong sense of fatigue.

"Mana's almost gone, huh..." I mumbled to myself.

The first time I ever used magic, I got way too excited and spammed spells nonstop. Naturally, I ran out of mana in no time. It didn't knock me out or anything, but the exhaustion was brutal—even lifting a finger felt like a chore. If that were to happen in the middle of a fight with a monster, I'd be dead for sure. That's why learning to recognize the signs of mana depletion was absolutely vital.

"Guess that's it for today. Time for some food."

I opened the storage space to start prepping a meal. It felt the same as always, like whatever I focused on just manifested itself from an invisible hole in the air. This was another perk of being a magical chef—basically, a time-stopping magic storage box, complete with auto-sorting, filtering, and instant retrieval functions. The storage was quite massive too, like *multiple gymnasiums* worth of space.

Magical chef is totally a cheat job.

I pulled out a spoon, a kitchen knife, and a pot. The storage was stocked full of parting gifts from the god. The list: an all-purpose kitchen knife, ladle, cooking chopsticks, spatula, large and small pots, a frying pan, cutting board, fine strainer, colander, small prep table, five spoons, five forks, five knives, five pairs of chopsticks, five flat plates, five deep plates, five cups, and five soup bowls. The materials were pretty standard—steel and ceramic—but the craftsmanship was top-tier. Like something made by a renowned artisan.

There was also a magic candlestick in storage that automatically lit up with magical light, but considering the situation I was in, it was way too risky to use. If my parents ever saw it, that would've been the end of me.

"Well, this kitchen knife technically isn't a magic item, but it's still

way nicer than anything I used back in my old world."

I waddled over to the entrance of the tent. Sticking my tiny arm through an opening, I felt around for any grass growing just outside. The moment my hand brushed against something, I yanked it free.

"Still looks like a bunch of weeds, as always."

What am I gonna do with this, you ask? Eat it, of course. This is my main course for tonight. Well...not just tonight. I've been eating nothing but *this stuff lately.*

I started humming to myself. At first glance, it looked like any old weed—something you'd find growing just about anywhere. A few tufts poked out in front of the tent, mixed in with the rest of the grass, and there was probably a bunch of it growing in town. But thanks to the food knowledge the god gave me, I knew that this wasn't just some random weed. It was a medicinal herb called "jörgyn grass." It didn't taste great, and the effects were nothing to write home about, so it wasn't something you'd go out of your way to harvest. Still, it was definitely edible.

Getting it was easy. First, I'd untie the rope wrapped around my torso, a feat that was probably impossible for an average four-year-old, but a piece of cake for someone with the mind of an adult. Then I'd just stick my hand out through the tent's opening, feel around until I found what seemed like jörgyn grass, and yank it out. I'd gotten pretty good at this point, and my success rate was around seventy percent.

Next up, I cast Create Hot Water into the pot. No need for too much since it was only to blanch the grass.

"Next, finely chop the jörgyn grass..."

The rhythmic *chop-chop* of the knife echoed inside the tent. Just hearing that sound made me feel like I was actually cooking—though in reality, it was more like playing house.

After I chopped the jörgyn grass into small enough pieces for it to get a little sticky, I put it in the pot. Then, I used magic to bring the water to a boil again as I stirred. The dish was already halfway done at this point.





Once the water started to change color, I tossed in some of the oatmeal look-alike my parents had left behind. For the final step, I added some salt to taste.

The salt was something I'd swiped from my mom's stash. It was some crummy black salt, but I'd cleaned it up with cooking magic. It wasn't pure white by any means, but it had at least turned a decent shade of gray.

As I stirred the pot, a sharp *ding* rang in my head. That was the cooking magic's notification telling me the dish was perfectly done.

"Jörgyn grass porridge, tent style," magical effect: slight life recovery, complete.

Just so you know, the name of a dish I create gets assigned automatically.

"All right, looks like I nailed it again today."

Two years ago, when I finally came to, the very first thing I did was start improving the oatmeal look-alike. Of course, without any real ingredients or seasonings, there wasn't much I could do. Still, by tweaking how long I cooked the jörgyn grass, I managed to cut down the bitterness and bring out a hint of sweetness. It was far from tasty, but it was way better than eating plain, flavorless oatmeal look-alike. Plus, the herb had decent nutritional value and improved digestive health. Since it's important to give toddlers food that's easy on the stomach, the herb actually made for pretty good baby food.

I'd never really felt its magical effect, but better than nothing, right?

"Man, I wish I had some spices."

Because we were so poor, there were no seasonings here except salt—definitely no spices. It was seriously disappointing.

"Well then, time to eat."

I carefully chewed the bland porridge. I had the mind of an adult, but my body was still that of a toddler. If I'd eaten it like I used to, my stomach wouldn't hold up. I'd already been sick once, and it hadn't been a pretty sight. It hadn't turned into anything serious thanks to holy magic, but since then, I'd been careful of how I ate.

"Yeah, I definitely need some seasoning besides salt."

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As I spent my days practicing magic and working through bowls of porridge, something unusual happened. My parents hadn't come home in seven days. Normally, they'd be back within three...

For mercenaries to go into a dungeon and not return, even after the day they were supposed to... There's really only one conclusion you could draw from that: something must've happened. To be blunt, there was a good chance they were dead.

But even when I thought that, I was surprised at how little I felt. No sadness. No grief. They were my parents, sure, but they never showed me a shred of affection. I thought it was cold of me, but I guess it was natural I felt that way, considering they practically abused me. If I did feel anything, I felt lucky that I was saved from the trouble of running away. But there *was* a problem...

"I'm starving..." I muttered.

It was unbearable. Mind you, I'd been left on my own for seven days. I'd run out of the oatmeal look-alike they'd left me, and I'd also used up my stash of the almo wheat used to make it.

Jörgyn grass was the only thing I'd eaten for two days. To make matters worse, I'd already picked the area around the tent entrance clean. I'd even poked my head outside to look for more—a risky move—but had come up empty. I had torn through every corner of the tent looking for something edible. Nothing. Thanks to the knowledge embedded in my mind, I could instantly recognize when something was safe to eat, so there was no chance that I had missed anything.

"All alone at four years old and left to fend for myself... This isekai really doesn't pull any punches."

Well, I did get the divine seal of approval for having bad birth fortune.

I urgently needed to secure some food before my body gave out. It seemed the time had come to step outside the tent. I'd originally planned to spend another year honing my magic and gathering intel,

but the circumstances left me no choice.

I was in a town called "Erunst" located right in the middle of nowhere. Right at the heart of this town was the entrance to a dungeon. Back in the day, the town had thrived, since the dungeon had drawn in mercenaries from all over. But after a few years, people had started to realize that despite the dungeon's massive size, the loot inside its treasure chests was underwhelming. There weren't many monsters that were of any use either. After that, the mercenaries all but vanished, and the town slid into decline at breakneck speed.

The only people diving into the dungeon nowadays are the kind of bottom-of-the-barrel thugs who'd get kicked out anywhere else. In other words, mercenaries like my parents.

To make matters worse, the person in charge of Erunst was an absolute scumbag. The local lord—some guy named Viscount Holm—was your textbook corrupt noble. He'd bleed the people dry with heavy taxes and use his private army to do whatever he pleased. Getting assigned to a backwater dump like Erunst pretty much screams "career over" for a noble, so he must've messed up big time and got kicked out here as punishment. Which meant that not only was he a jerk, he was probably useless too.

Thanks to all that, most of the people here were dirt-poor and barely scraping by—not to mention that the crime rate was through the roof. Half the town was practically a slum; when I peeked out of my tent to look for some jörgyn grass, the first thing I saw was a row of crooked shacks. Of course, they were still probably better than a tent... That being said, even with my cheat abilities, I couldn't help feeling uneasy about getting tossed out into a place like that all on my own.

"I've got no one to rely on but me," I said to myself. "Guess I'll stick with this tent for now and slowly expand my stomping grounds from here."

Right after I made that decision, I sensed something outside. I could hear footsteps rustling through the grass. The thought that my parents might have returned eased my mind a little. Sure, they were awful, but it's not like I hated them enough to wish death upon

them. If they'd made it back alive, then, that was fine too. At the very least, I might have gotten some food out of it.

"This it?" I heard a voice bellow.

The man who stepped into the tent wasn't anyone I recognized. He was huge, bald, and had an old scar running down his cheek like something had clawed him. He was probably around forty years old, with unkempt facial hair and filthy leather armor—he was exactly what you'd imagine a bandit would look like. Not that my parents looked any better.

Who is this guy?

"Huh, whaddya know, we got a little pip-squeak here," he said.

He flashed a nasty grin—the kind that would ruin your day in an instant. There was no way he was thinking about helping out a poor, abandoned kid. Those eyes were checking me out to see how much I'd be worth.

Am I, like, in trouble here?

"It's all crap here," he grumbled. "I'll just take whatever's valuable and get out. There's gotta be something here worthy of the great Gizmelt. Anyways, it's more use to me than to you, so you can both go cry about it in the afterlife," he added, cackling to himself.

Yeah, this is your textbook villain, all right.

The man, Gizmelt, started rummaging through the tent, paying no mind to me.

He certainly isn't a friend of my parents. Wait, afterlife? He said afterlife, didn't he? So are my parents dead?

"God, like hell I'm fightin' that thing," said the giant of a man. "Gotta grab what I can and scram."

So it turned out this guy robbed the dead. No better than my scumbag parents.

"Hey, you, get over here," he demanded.

Once it became clear that there was nothing of value he could steal, Gizmelt motioned me over.

Does he seriously think that'll get a kid to come up to him? No way in hell I'm going over there. If you're gonna try luring kids in, maybe get some plastic surgery to fix up that creepy grin.

I shook my head firmly, trying my best to look childish. I was

hoping he'd give up, but that probably wasn't going to happen.

"Your folks got swallowed up by dungeon malice, ya know that? Not that a twerp like you would understand. Just get over here already!"

As Gizmelt made a move to grab me, I twisted away on instinct. He clicked his tongue, clearly irritated. Honestly, I'd underestimated him. The way my parents raised me was bordering on child abuse, sure, but they'd never gotten violent with me. So I figured that this guy wouldn't either—that he wouldn't damage the goods he was thinking of selling to a slave trader. That naive little assumption shattered in the very next second.

"Hold still, you little shit!"

The hard tip of Gizmelt's shoe drove straight into my gut, and a sudden jolt of pain tore through my back.

"Gahhh!" I wheezed, coughing and retching. I didn't vomit since my stomach was empty—just bile rose up my throat. The pain, the fear, the nausea...it all mixed together, and before I knew it, tears started streaming down my face. I groaned. "Ugh..."

"Don't waste my time," said Gizmelt. "Get up. Before that thing shows up!"

Gizmelt grabbed my arm and yanked me to my feet. I was in so much pain, I couldn't even think about resisting. All I could do was tremble as this giant unleashed his violence upon me without a hint of reason.

This was a world of swords and magic, where death could come at any moment. I had *thought* I understood that. But in the end, that was just my imagination—just a naive fantasy born from the peaceful, sheltered life of a former earthling who'd never seen the real world. I had just come face-to-face with the rough nature of those who live in a world of violence.

"You talk back to me again, you get worse. Got it?"

All I could do was groan in pain.

"Listen up. I'm in a hurry, and I got no problem killin' you. A scrawny little twerp like you won't be worth nothin'. So, if you don't wanna end up like your parents, you'll do what I say."

Like my parents? Did he just say that he killed them?

"They were pathetic," he went on. "Both fell for a paralysis trap, so I offed them like *that*. Pitiful worms, always pissed me off, thinking they were on the same level as me." Gizmelt then burst into a booming laugh.

I felt like my ears would rot off, listening to him going on and on like that, grinning all the while with that filthy, twisted smile of his. A thought welled up from deep, deep inside me: I couldn't stand being near this guy for even a second longer.

Suddenly, Gizmelt hoisted me up under his arm. The strength behind it was unbelievable—there was no way I could break free.

"All quiet now, huh?" he said. "Should've just behaved from the start. Not that I mind if you act up. Roughing up a brat before killing him doesn't sound so bad either."

If I were to let him take me like this, there was no chance I'd ever have a normal life. All that awaited was a future filled with violence and hunger. I had to run.

This was the man who killed my parents. And yet, even after learning that, I felt no anger. No hatred. No grudge. What I felt was something else entirely. Even so, one thing was clear in my mind.

There is nothing wrong with killing this man.

He was probably a mercenary—and without a doubt, way stronger than I was. A half-hearted attack wasn't going to cut it, and I didn't even want to think about what would happen if I used magic on him and failed to finish him off. There was no way this greedy bastard would let a magic-wielding kid go free. I'd get a brutal beating and a one-way ticket to life as a slave. I had to kill him in one shot.

I picked a spell without hesitation. It was the one I knew best—quick to cast and perfect for a sneak attack thanks to its stealth. Just the other day, I'd finally managed to activate it without an incantation.

I cast the spell in silence.

The most important thing was developing the right image in your mind. I focused on the image of a needle of water—compressed to the limit to make it razor-sharp and rock-hard—driving straight through Gizmelt's head. I decided to throw in some rotation as an

extra bonus.

I braced myself and fired away. The Water Needle manifested in midair, then pierced straight into the back of Gizmelt's skull.

"Grah!" he shrieked in agony.

His arms went limp. I dropped to the ground, unable to break the fall. I yelped as a sharp jolt of pain shot through my elbow.

"Huhhhh?" said Gizmelt.

He must have had no clue what had hit him. Gizmelt touched the back of his head with a dumb, vacant look on his face, trying to make sense of the pain. He froze. The next moment, he collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. There was a gaping hole in his skull about five centimeters wide.

"Whew..." I sighed in relief.

I had killed someone. Even after I'd been hit with that realization, I strangely thought nothing of it. I was simply overcome with relief that I was still alive. Normally, this should have been where you started feeling sick to your stomach, where your conscience kicked in and made you question everything—but it wasn't like that at all.

"No way I'm letting this scumbag mess with my head," I said.

I'm going to live, no matter what it takes.

I silently looked down at Gizmelt's body. It was a grotesque sight. His eyes were wide open, and his tongue lolled out of his mouth. Paired with his unsightly features, he looked like some distant cousin of an orc or a goblin. Actually, the most rotten thing about him had probably been his heart.

At the same time, I felt power coursing through my whole body. I'd heard that when you killed a creature, you absorbed its mana and that boosted your capacity. Apparently, that applied to killing humans too. It was no wonder people never stopped fighting each other.

"But this mana boost is barely noticeable," I said to myself.

Gizmelt had obviously been a seasoned mercenary, but all I got was this meager little boost? That wasn't the most pressing matter though.

"What am I going to do with his body?"

I had no clue what to do, and nowhere to hide the corpse.

"Even if I dump it outside, someone might see me."

Should I bury it here? I wondered to myself. *No, then I won't be able to use the tent. Should I burn the body? I don't have the mana for that. Plus, I'd probably burn down the tent while I'm at it.*

"I guess...that leaves the storage space."

It wasn't exactly a pleasant thought, but it'd be less of a psychological burden than burying him and sleeping right above the body. Besides, it wasn't like the body was going to brush up against my other belongings in storage.

"Oh well. Store," I commanded.

I held my hand out over Gizmelt's corpse and stuffed him into storage. I used the vault's sorting function to separate his weapons and gear—there was no telling when they could come in handy.

I wasn't done just yet though. Using magic, I gathered up all the blood-soaked dirt and clumped it into a ball before throwing it outside. After one final sweep of magic to flatten the ground, all the evidence had been destroyed.

"Phew... That should do it."

I was completely wiped out, both mentally and physically. I decided to leave anything else for tomorrow. I crawled into my bed in hopes of getting some shut-eye, but it didn't happen.

"Great. I'm too wired to sleep."

It was probably because my nerves were still buzzing—though I couldn't blame myself after all that had happened. Still, even after I had lain there for what felt like forever, I couldn't fall asleep. My hunger was surely to blame. I'd gone over half a day on just some water and a bit of jörgyn grass—my stomach hadn't stopped growling.

"Tomorrow, I *have* to find something to eat," I promised myself.

How tragic would it be if I got reincarnated just to die of starvation? Even if I have to hike out farther, I'm gonna get my hands on some food!

As soon as I'd made that promise to myself, I noticed that it was unusually noisy outside.

"What's going on?" I wondered.

When I listened closely, I heard a commotion, like a group of

people arguing, mixed in with some occasional piercing screams. Then came some loud, echoing blasts. Arguments had been par for the course in this town, but this many people screaming? That was a first.

Boom! Boom! BOOM!

"I-Is the ground shaking?"

The explosions echoed one after another. Inside the tent, my few belongings rattled.

"It's *definitely* shaking!"

Unless I was imagining it, the sounds were getting closer too. I stayed hunkered down in the tent for a while, but the situation outside didn't seem to be changing. I crept toward the tent entrance and pressed my ear against the flap, trying to make out what had been going on. Sure enough, the explosions were drawing nearer—and mixed in with them were voices of people panicking and fleeing.

"Where d-did that thing come from?!" a voice said.

"It's gotta be from the dungeon!" replied another.

"That's ridiculous! No way that monster could fit through the entrance!"

"Then maybe it flew in from outside!"

"Whatever—just run!"

Monster? Run? I questioned myself.

"They're saying the West District is up in flames!"

"Wh-What?! Where are the guards?!"

"They were the first to run!"

"I heard those high-ranked mercenaries are fighting it!"

"And what good are *they* gonna do?!"

"Look, it's right there!"

From what I was able to make out, the town was under attack by some giant monster—the explosions had probably been its doing too. The guards had already fled, leaving only a handful of mercenaries to hold the line.

"No wonder that damn Gizmelt was in such a hurry." I panicked. "He was running from *this*!"

Things were looking grim.

"I need to get out of here before it's too late."

They'd said the West District had been engulfed in flames. The fire might spread here too, but how was I supposed to get away? I was *four years old*. Where would I even go? Was there a shelter nearby?

Then came a deafening roar.

I screamed as the air trembled with an intense vibration. A terrifying howl, like the cry of some monstrous beast, caused a ringing pain in my eardrums. The source of the noise was alarmingly close.

"I-Is it in the air?"

I instinctively looked up. Of course, all I could see was the tent roof.

The creature—whatever it was—could fly.

"Just go away already..." I muttered, cowering in fear. However, the thunderous booms and the monster's howls showed no signs of stopping. After a while, I started to get used to the chaos; I'd already stopped flinching at every noise.

But then—

Boooom!

A massive tremor shook the tent mercilessly, throwing me off-balance.

I let out a scream as I lost my footing and fell to the ground, overwhelmed. Everything had been happening so fast, I barely had a moment to catch my breath or even think. I gritted my teeth against the aching pain in my knee and grunted as I pushed myself up. Making my way to the tent's entrance, I cautiously poked my head outside to survey my surroundings—but the night, thick with dust and smoke, had swallowed everything in darkness.

"I can't just sit around here."

I quietly crept outside, wearing some makeshift sandals I'd woven from grass in preparation for a day like this. They weren't much to look at, but they certainly beat going barefoot.

"Light Wind," I chanted.

Using a magic spell for blowing wind into a furnace, I blew away the dust and smoke. As the haze thinned, the monster appeared right in front of me.

"Whoa! Th-That's insane!"

Its majestic presence made me gasp in awe before fear even had a chance to set in. I stood there, admiring what lay before me.

"Is this a dragon...?"

There, just beside the tent, lay a colossal dragon easily fifty meters from head to tail. The earlier tremors must've been caused by this giant falling from the sky. Its scales glowed a deep crimson, shimmering like crystal or enamel. Its shell resembled a massive boulder, while its horns were thick and gnarled like tree trunks.

It was my first encounter with an otherworldly creature—it radiated a divine majesty. Then I calmly registered where the dragon could've fallen, and a cold sweat broke out across my body.

"That was so close!" I said in shock. "If this thing had fallen a few meters over this way, I would've been flattened!"

The image of myself being crushed—tent and all—beneath the dragon's massive body sent a chill down my spine. I'd come within inches of death. Even if one of those claws had grazed it, the tent would've been torn into pieces. The thought of being reincarnated and getting crushed to death without even knowing what had killed me was downright terrifying.

"But who took this thing down?" I wondered.

Its wings had been slashed wide open. That must've made it unable to fly, and the impact of the crash had finished it off. I could tell the dragon in front of me was completely lifeless thanks to my knowledge of ingredients, because to my eyes, every part of its body looked like a massive collection of edible parts. If it had still been alive, I wouldn't have been seeing it broken down by cuts; it would've appeared to me as just one edible magical beast.

"Heaven dragon meat, heaven dragon marbled cuts, heaven dragon blood, eyes, bones, fat, liver..."

A dragon was a treasure trove of rare and precious materials that could not only be used for blacksmithing or alchemy but for cooking too. I tapped into my ingredient knowledge, digging up everything I knew about the creature before me.

Name: heaven dragon. Species: wyvern-type. Rank: nine. Average body length: thirty meters. True to its name, it possesses

exceptional flight ability. The meat has an inherent sweetness and a clean flavor that works with any cooking method. In terms of taste, it is mid-tier among dragon species, but as a material, it ranks among the best. It holds a high concentration of mana and must be cooked using at least mid-level fire magic.

If I'd wanted to, I could've stuffed the entire dragon into my storage, but if a creature this huge had vanished without a trace, it would've no doubt caused an uproar. Whoever had defeated it would have the rights to it, and if anyone discovered I'd taken it, things could get way too messy. That said, there was no way I could just walk away from this giant dragon.

"Over there!" a voice called out.

"Did they get it?"

In the fraction of a second I hesitated, some people had come rushing toward the dragon.

"Crap!" I said in a panic. "There's got to be something I can grab!"

I reached out without even thinking, in hopes of grabbing even a part of the creature. Hunger had taken over me, and it didn't matter that the meat was rare or valuable; the heaven dragon was nothing more than a massive slab of meat in my eyes. I grabbed a severed right claw and a torn piece of wing membrane that lay nearby—and for some reason, I also scooped up an eyeball that had fallen out of its socket. I shoved everything into storage.

I turned to dash back into the tent—but froze.

"M-My tent! It's on fire!"

The heaven dragon's breath had set the area ablaze, and stray embers had leaped onto my tent. By the time I'd realized it, more than half of it had burned down.

"Ahhhh, dammit!" I screamed.

I hurled the tent and its content into storage. I'd made sure to exclude the flames, so that should've extinguished it, but I was also sure the tent had been scorched beyond use. And just like that, I had obtained heaven dragon meat—but had lost both my parents

and home.

***

The room, richly decorated and opulent, was unmistakably meant for a noble or someone of similar standing. Some, however, might have called it the taste of a new-rich—gaudy even. It lacked any sense of cohesion, like someone had bought flashy furnishings on a whim and tossed it all together without a second thought. Every piece was expensive, yet their conflicting styles collided, canceling out any charm they might have had individually. What's more, anyone with a keen eye could have seen that beneath the flashy look, a considerable number of pieces were counterfeit. The owner of the room had proudly plastered it with flashy decorations, clueless that many were fake, oblivious to the mockery behind their back. The room was a physical embodiment of the owner's vanity and folly. In the midst of this flamboyant display, two men were facing each other.

"What?! You still haven't found them?" the older man reprimanded.

He clearly looked like a noble and was wearing a loud robe that perfectly complemented the room's interior. A staff hung at his side, marking him as some kind of mage, but his movements were slow and clumsy, hardly those of a seasoned practitioner—any skills he had were merely for self-defense.

This was Viscount Holm, the master of the room and lord of Erunst. He was thin, though not quite withered, and gave off little sense of vitality—understandable, perhaps, given his age. His eyes blazed with a fierce, unnatural light, glowing so intensely they lent him an almost demonic or undead aura.

His voice carried anger and a faint trace of panic. The stout man in front of him started bowing frantically, visibly the more shaken of the two. Having sensed the old man's mood, he may well have feared for his very life. Even as he forced a flattering smile, his eyes spoke of the terror within him—the beads of sweat covering his body weren't from the heat.

"I-I'm terribly sorry!" he said. "It's been sheer chaos in town ever since—"

"Shut up!" Viscount Holm snapped back. "They may be beastfolk, but they're just two children! Chaos or not, you should've found them by now!"

"W-We are searching!" shrieked the stout man.

Holm paused for a moment and said, "I should've finished the task sooner!"

He slammed his slender arm down on a nearby nightstand. The dull thud made the stocky man's shoulders tremble.

"Eld, take a look at this," said Holm, taking out a small pendant adorned with two gemstones. "This is linked to the health-monitoring spell I'd cast on them. If the girls are hurt, the stones turn red. If they are dead, they lose their glow. Yet they both shine blue, do they not?"

"Y-Yes," replied the stout man, Eld.

Holm pressed the pendant close to Eld's face and leaned in. The blue light flickered across the old man's face, warping it into something not quite human.

"This means the girls are still alive, and they are close enough that the spell's link remains intact!"

"I-I see..." replied Eld in fear. "Would you be able to tell their location with the spell?"

"It's not that convenient. It's merely for monitoring the physical condition of sacrifices. But there is no doubt they are still in this town! Find them! Turn over every stone if you must!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" said Eld as he rushed out of the room.

Holm stood there, staring into a mirror, the pendant clutched tightly in his hand. He muttered the same words over and over, unaware that his face had twisted into something truly demonic...

"I will get back the sacrifices... I shall live...!"

There was no mistaking the madness in his clouded eyes.

***

It had been a week since the dragon had descended from the

sky. I'd somehow survived—though just barely—but I'd seriously underestimated the level of crime in this town. It had never been a safe area to begin with, but with the flood of refugees after the dragon attack, the streets had become a breeding ground for chaos.

Hunger had gnawed at me relentlessly, forcing me to swallow my pride and beg for scraps. Nobody had even spared me a glance, though. I was lucky if they'd ignored me—some had yelled at me, while others had resorted to violence to drive me away. Money and food had been scarce for everyone. Occasionally, I'd get a look of pity from someone, but nothing more.

In the past seven days, I'd been attacked eight times. *That's an average of more than one encounter with a kidnapper per day. What kind of lawless town is this?!*

I couldn't be sold to a slave trader since I hadn't turned five yet, but I guess you couldn't tell how old I was just by looks alone. I'd managed to avoid trouble by taking advantage of my small size to slip into narrow alleys and patches of grass. Thanks to that, I'd gotten surprisingly good at using wind magic to muffle sounds and mask my presence.

"I *could* use magic to fend off attackers...but word of a magic-wielding baby would just draw even more unwanted attention—especially from thugs who deal with slave traders."

I had no idea what price I'd fetch, but I knew I wouldn't come for cheap. After all, my magic was top-tier and I was as calm as an adult.

"Well, I've got some food now. I guess I'll head back to my hideout."

Keeping low and careful, I navigated through the grass, and after a few minutes, I found myself at my current refuge: the entrance to the sewer.

This town—or rather, the urban areas of this world—seemed to be fully equipped with water and sewage systems. Magic had made it possible to carry out large-scale construction with ease, weaving countless pipes and tunnels beneath the ground.

There was a sewage treatment facility as well, where wastewater was carefully treated before being released into the river. A wide

canal had been built to channel the clean water, which flowed steadily from an outlet along the riverbank. The entrance to the facility had been solidly built from a strange material resembling brick and concrete. It almost looked too modern for a fantasy realm.

My new home was inside an underground ruin accessible through the sewer system on foot via a narrow inspection path that ran alongside the waterway. As it turned out, the sewer wasn't just a maze of water channels in the ground; the remnants of an ancient kingdom existed too. The ruins had already been surveyed, revealing that they'd been a simple residential area, devoid of any treasures.

At first, I'd fled into the sewer itself. Truthfully, I'd never planned to stay for long—it was meant to be just a temporary refuge. The sewage that flowed through had been treated, but it was still foul and filled the air with a stench. The humidity was horrible too, making it impossible for a child to live there in good health.

Then, something changed. One day, I'd felt that something was off about a section of the sewer wall through sheer luck. When I nearly slipped on the slick walkway and instinctively grabbed the wall, a peculiar sound echoed beneath my palm. I tried knocking on the walls elsewhere, but only that one spot answered back with a different resonance. There was clearly an opening there.

I used earth magic to bore a hole into the wall and discovered a small room. It seemed to be part of the ancient ruins. The walls were solid stone—probably a storage room of some sorts. There was nothing inside but dust, but it was more than enough for a hiding place.

Since then, I'd remodeled the interior using earth magic. I'd created a cookstove with three separate openings—one each for a large pot, a small pot, and a frying pan. I'd also made myself a table, chair, bed, and even a bathroom, which was easy enough to use since I could purify my waste with magic and send it down the sewer. As for lighting, I'd been using the magic candlestick the god had given me.

The original entrance had collapsed long ago, which meant no one else could wander in—a huge bonus. Plus, the entrance to the sewage system itself was blocked off by iron grates too narrow for

anyone but a child to slip through. The only real drawback was having to use earth magic every time I wanted to open or seal the passage. Still, it doubled as good training, and I hadn't had any trouble with it for the time being.

"Got my hands on some mushrooms today," I said to myself. "Dinner's gonna be a little fancy."

I'd managed to gather four ingredients. First, there were three types of wild plants that were borderline edible after some toxin removal with holy magic. They didn't have names because, unlike Earth, there'd been little in the way of scholarly research in this world. As a result, these plants, which had low toxicity and no medicinal value, had gone nameless.

So, I'd decided to name them myself. All three had presented a striking resemblance to garlic chives, but differences in taste and scent had set them apart. I'd dubbed them mustard green look-alike, water dropwort look-alike, and watercress look-alike.

Then there was the mushroom that just screamed poisonous. Its cap was a murky blue, dappled with gray spots. When I gave it a light shake, it sloshed; there was liquid inside. It was a little-known fact that this fungus was edible, as most people were deceived by its appearance. The mushroom itself had no flavor to speak of, but the liquid could be used as a vinegar substitute. Of course, that sour taste was the reason everyone had assumed it was toxic in the first place. For me, it was a blessing that no one had bothered to pick it. I'd decided to call it vinegar mushroom.

I started humming. "Tonight I'm having sour-stewed wild grass and roots."

The main dish was a tree root I pulled from storage that looked like an oversized burdock root—something I'd found two days back. I had been coming home to the sewer when an unfamiliar sound brought me to a halt. I stayed vigilant, scanning my surroundings, but I jumped when I realized the noise was coming from above.

"Gch, gch, gch..." the strange sound echoed.

"Ugh! Gross! That's absolutely disgusting!" I said out loud as something resembling a giant sea anemone fell from the ceiling. Its dark brown body was the size of a mug, and from it sprouted dozens

of tentacles that looked like burdock roots. At its center, what could only be described as a mouth was ringed with countless fangs. It was repulsive.

"Wait, I guess it's edible... I can't believe it."

Data about the thing then popped into my head.

Name: gabul root. Classification: magical root beast. Rank: one. A root-type creature with its entire body encased in a tough shell. The lowest grade magical beast, found in all warm regions. Easily defeatable, even for a ten-year-old child. Beneath the shell on its tentacles lies a small edible portion. Although nearly tasteless and carrying a pungent odor, it is nontoxic.

So it wasn't a sea anemone; it was a magical beast resembling a large root, about the size of a small dog. I could see how a ten-year-old might've taken one down without breaking a sweat—but I wasn't ten! As I stared at its sharp teeth, I realized that it might not have been an enemy a four-year-old should face. One bite would've sent me to a world of pain and then some.

Still, I had my magic.

"Not sure if it'll work on magical beasts..." I muttered under my breath.

But there's no backing out now!

The gabul root dragged itself toward me, its tentacles scraping across the ground. I glared at the creature as I turned my focus to my mana.

I fired off my specialty: water magic. The needle of water pierced straight through the gabul root's shell and pinned its body to the earth. The sea anemone look-alike convulsed violently before it stopped all motion. By then, it looked like an ingredient to my eyes, so I must've defeated it.

"It didn't put up much of a fight..."

I'd now learned that I could take down a low-class magical beast, and more importantly, I had food to last me a few days. The only problem was I was low on salt and really needed some seasonings, so the vinegar mushroom had presented itself at the perfect time, as if to answer my plea.

Time to get cooking with this vinegar! I'll turn this root into

something tasty! Let me grab the wild herbs—wait, I should wash my hands first.

Tucked away in storage was a small supply of clean water I'd been conjuring whenever I had a free moment. It was quite convenient as I could use it for both washing my hands and cooking. Even better, the spell let me choose between hard and soft water. The magic in this world might've been a little *too* accommodating.

Next, I cast a sterilization spell on my entire body. Not flashy by any means but incredibly useful. The spell did exactly what its name suggested, except it only killed bacteria and microorganisms that were harmful—beneficial bacteria, gut flora, bacteria used for fermentation, and the like were left untouched. I'd been toying with the idea of brewing my own fermented seasonings using this trick, but that plan had been on hold since I hadn't obtained the necessary ingredients.

By the way, I wasn't wearing those ragged old clothes my parents used to make me wear. I'd been wearing my father's black clothes, which had a stiff, standing collar. They'd been way too big for me, so I'd folded up the hem and cinched it at the waist with a rope. Not the most comfortable thing to move around in, but it was tough, probably made from some kind of magic beast hide. It was for sure better—and warmer—than plain fabric clothing. Whenever I went outside, I'd also throw on a cape I'd stitched together from the charred scraps of my tent. I'd lined the inside with felt and added a hood, so it had kept me pretty warm. At night, I'd spread it out and sleep on it. It'd been a lifesaver.

Once I'd gotten rid of all the grime on my body, it was finally time to get cooking.

"First, detox, detox." I was almost singing to myself.

To be honest, all I had to do was chop up some detoxed wild grass and roots, toss them into a pot, and season with salt and vinegar.

"Hmm? It feels just like burdock root when I cut it. I'll try shaving it into thin strips."

With that, I cut the gabul root's tentacle—basically a burdock root look-alike—into thin shavings and dropped them into a pot filled with

water. Back on Earth, I would've had to worry about getting rid of the astringency and skimming off the scum, but not when I had cooking magic. Scum Removal was specifically for that purpose—the spells that the god had given me really came in handy.

If only I could've cooked the heaven dragon meat, all my food problems would've been solved, but I still didn't have the mana for it. The meat was packed with mana, so a regular flame didn't stand a chance against it; you needed to cook it with fire magic for a specific amount of time. I'd finally gotten my hands on a huge chunk of meat, but I couldn't do anything with it. I needed to get stronger—strong enough to maintain magic for longer.

"All right, the roots should be done."

One of the perks of cooking magic was being able to tell whether an unfamiliar ingredient was cooked through. I turned the heat off, scattered in a pinch of salt, then drizzled the vinegar in a circle over the surface—I'd held off on adding the vinegar-mushroom juice until the very end to preserve its sourness.

I had myself a pale broth with burdock root and garlic chives floating across the top. *I guess it doesn't look terrible.*

"Bitter and sour soup of bitter demon root and wild plant, cave style." Magical effects: slight life recovery, slight life boost, complete.

I gave the soup a quick sniff. It was earthy and not exactly appetizing. *But it's the taste that matters!*

I gave it a quick sip and exclaimed, "Whoa, it's sour! I'm finally tasting something sour!"

It hit hard like someone had dumped vinegar straight into some green juice, but to someone who hadn't had anything sour in four years, it tasted great.

"I'll tweak the recipe a bit tomorrow," I muttered to myself. "I think I can cut down on the smell and bitterness."

The only problem was that I'd already used up half the vinegar mushroom, and I only had enough gabul root left for one more meal. Securing a steady supply of ingredients had proven to be a serious issue.

If only I could find a patch where they grow thick and clustered together. That had been my hope as I went out foraging, but even

the next day, I couldn't find anything even half decent.

There'd been no shortage of wild plants, but having them as soup wasn't nutritionally balanced, and they got tiring pretty quickly. Worse, the scum in those herbs could be toxic for a child's digestive system. I had to be meticulous in removing it, but stripping away too much robbed the plants of their flavor too.

Despite all that, I'd kept experimenting—bundling the herbs to give them some texture, chopping them finely to soften the aroma... Maybe it had made a difference, even if just a little. Through it all, I'd begun to notice how the flavor would shift ever so slightly depending on the ingredients and magic I'd used. I'd already known that ingredients rich in mana tasted better, but even a hint of magic added a depth to the flavor. By channeling more magic into my water and fire, I'd managed to improve the taste even more. That was a huge breakthrough! There was a catch, though: Better flavor didn't equal more nutrition.

"I'm going to have to venture farther out..."

I'd been playing it safe, only going out within twenty meters of the sewer entrance, but if I wanted better ingredients, I had to push my boundaries.

Keeping low, I slipped into a thick forest, rustling through branches and leaves. The first thing I stumbled upon was a tree that sprouted edible shoots resembling angelica, but the season had passed, and the leaves were already thick and green.

I kept foraging, focusing on trees, but to no avail. There was fruit-like stuff here and there, but it was all unripe or overripe. Still, I didn't want to resort to wild plants and have another meal of soup and blanched greens. *I want something different. Something meaty or sweet!*

"Nothing here."

"Nope."

"This is no good either."

I'd been searching for about an hour but had found no nuts or fruit. All I'd come across were two kinds of wild plants and a pair of mushrooms. At one point, I'd all but lost hope and had given in to gathering wild plants, although it wasn't like I'd just pulled out

random weeds.

One of the plants had turned out to be a new species—it resembled a wild onion, and its small roots were supposed to taste like turnips. I'd named it turnip-onion. This stuff was good. The mushrooms were edible too, with a flavor close to shiitake. They had a faint ammonia smell, but simply grilling them was enough to make them palatable. I now had myself a feast.

I know. These are promising finds, but they're not what I'm looking for.

"Guess I have no choice..." I said out loud.

I started contemplating the idea of using magic. Temperature-sensing and smell enhancement spells might yield a breakthrough, but there was a catch. Although the gods had gifted me with skill and talent, I still didn't have much mana. Things would turn ugly if I got attacked when I was out of magic, but just wandering around aimlessly meant slim chances of finding any meat.

"What should I do?" I said after a pause.

I'd already cast Thermo-Sense once today. It had used up a lot of mana, so I could only afford to cast it once more if I wanted to save enough power for cooking. Plus, I'd be left with no mana for other strong spells. *Should I really use it now?*

"Hmm..."

What to do, what to do? Do I really want to give up? Am I really gonna fill up on weird-tasting wild plant soup again? No way!

"All right. I'm going for it!" I declared to myself.

I've made up my mind. I'm eating good food tonight! And I'm gonna find the ingredients for it right here and now!

I could only keep up Thermo-Sense for about five minutes—that was my time limit.

"Grant me the sight to see warmth, heat, and life. Thermo-Sense!" I chanted.

As I felt mana gather in my eyes, my vision changed—heat now glowed red, just like a thermal camera. I desperately scoured the ground, grass, and dense foliage above before time ran out.

Then, just before the magic faded, I spotted it.

"Is that...a bird's nest?" I asked myself. "And some nuts too?"

The source of the heat was coming from up in the branches. A closer look revealed a tangled cluster of twigs, woven together like a basket. Most likely, there were eggs inside, but the parent bird was nowhere in sight. Just around the nest, I also spotted several faint flickers of heat—probably ripe nuts. The bounty was at least five meters up. It wasn't anything I could reach with my tiny body, so I stood there, weighing my options.

"How should I do this?"

Making them fall with magic felt too risky—the eggs could crack. I needed something that wouldn't drain my mana dry. As I sifted through my knowledge, the perfect spell came to mind.

"Unseen arm! Take hold and rise at my command! Mana Arm!"

This spell for manifesting a long, translucent arm was usually used for handling bulky ingredients. While it didn't have monstrous strength, it was easily stronger than my toddler body and moved with finesse too. I used the magic arm to gently grab three eggs that were nestled in the branches. I also plucked every ripe, dark nut I could. What a haul.

The nut I'd found was the ancestral species of the casse nut. Its shell was tougher than stone. That was probably why the birds hadn't gotten to them even though they were ripe. I guessed that small animals ate them, but maybe they'd fled in the wake of the fire. Either way, I was lucky that the nuts had been left behind.

"I scored something worthwhile," I said.

I referred to them as the "ancestral species" because cultivated varieties existed. Casse nuts contained a trace amount of mana that, when carefully extracted and concentrated, became a healing agent—in short, it was potion material. That said, the ancestral species held only the faintest sliver of magic. No matter how much you squeezed out of it, you'd end up with nothing more than a bottom-tier potion. The nut had been selectively bred to address that problem, resulting in cultivated varieties with high mana content being sold on the market. Thanks to that, the original wild strain had been all but forgotten, giving me the chance to harvest them—fortune was on my side.

"Casse nuts have lots of different uses."

The seeds looked like acorns and had a small amount of oil in them too. Brewed into a potion, they gave off a subtle sweetness, so it could double as a seasoning—they also added a nice crunch to a dish.

"I could whip up all kinds of stuff if I add in some eggs."

I headed back to my abode with a spring in my step and a smile across my face, even breaking into a skip here and there. Today's haul had brought me that much joy.

But the moment didn't last for very long.

Startled by voices coming from a path beyond the underbrush, I dropped low into the shadows. The banter didn't sound friendly.

"Found 'em yet?" one of the voices called out.

"No," replied another. "They've probably gone far off. We've been searching for two days now."

"Tch! Find them no matter what! You've got no idea how much those runts are worth!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"Dammit! Where the hell did they go?!"

Judging from their conversation, the thugs seemed to be looking for some runaways. The one had called them "runts." Were they children? My guess was that the thugs were slave traders.

I decided to head home before I got caught up in the mess. The last thing I needed was to get attacked simply for being nearby. I made sure to move with even more caution and slowly made my way back home, but when I arrived, I immediately noticed something was amiss.

"The entrance wasn't like this when I left," I said under my breath.

The sewer's opening had been dotted with footprints. They seemed to belong to children—barefoot but coated in dirt. The trail of tiny prints disappeared deeper inside.

"This can't be good."

Like, really *not good!*

I scowled as I wiped away the footprints. Anyone who saw them would know that someone had been slipping in and out of the sewer. Intruders were a problem I couldn't ignore. If they were homeless

kids like me, it could mean a turf war, and local kids might let their parents know I was around and blow my cover.

"If these footprints belong to the kids those thugs were after..."

That would be even worse. Those thugs could easily come snooping around here. I needed to find these intruders before they found me, if only because I had no clue who they were.

I silently summoned a Wind Barrier around myself, without uttering a single word. It was actually a spell for blocking out foul smells of pungent ingredients, but with a few tweaks, it could block both scent and sound for covert operations.

The footprints trailed deep into the passage. The sewer wasn't pitch black; faint shafts of light would pour in from rainwater inlets scattered along the way.

There were two sets of prints. Judging from how dry the mud was, some time had passed since they'd entered—most likely right after I'd left. As I kept wiping away the footprints, I clicked my tongue in irritation; I'd sensed a presence right in front of the hole that led to my hideout. Faint voices drifted through the air.

"M-Myah..." a voice said with a sniffle.

"Hic..." another voice sobbed.

I could barely make out some pained whimpers. There were two intruders, or so it seemed, but something felt wrong. I noticed three shadows, but one had remained completely motionless—without even the slightest sign it was breathing. Was one of them dead?

I carefully moved toward the shadows. One of the figures caught sight of me, stirring a little in response. That tiny movement was enough to alert the other. They both strained their necks and looked at me with wide eyes, the fear in their expressions unmistakable. They looked like they wanted to run, but their bodies wouldn't budge. All they could muster was a feeble headshake. They'd been so overwhelmed that even the sight of someone younger than themselves had terrified them.

Actually, I'd approached with my hood up, and as small as I was, I'd surely presented myself as a suspicious individual with my face hidden. Then I was overcome with a rush of emotion that was completely out of place at that moment.

"Beastfolk children...!" I said in awe.

It was an inexcusable thing to say to these children frozen in fear, but my gaze had been drawn to their ears. *I can't believe I'm looking at real beastfolk with my own two eyes!*

A pair of ears grew out of each of their heads, while long tails poked out from behind them. Their dirt-smudged appearances made it hard to tell, but one had blond hair and pale skin—the other, silver hair and a deep brown complexion.

It made my stomach turn, but I recalled my parents talking about how beastfolk fetched high prices—dozens of times more than humans—due to their rarity and abilities. There was no doubt that these were the ones those thugs had been after.

After observing them for a bit, I was able to piece together the situation. The third shadow that had remained motionless was a rat roughly the size of a small dog—a magical beast called a poison rat that often lurked underground beneath large cities. True to its name, it carried a potent venom within its body. It was inedible unless you removed the toxin—not that people tried to eat it in the first place. It wasn't a particularly powerful beast either.

Blood oozed from the poison rat's hind leg, as if something had bitten a chunk out of it. The beastfolk children's mouths were stained red. Most likely, they had escaped from the slave traders but had gone hungry without any means of obtaining food. That was when they'd encountered the poison rat in the sewer—or perhaps they'd hunted it down themselves using their keen sense of smell.





Either way, they'd somehow managed to take down a poison rat, but from the looks of it, they'd had no clue what to do with it. The carcass lay untouched save for a few signs that they'd tried to grill it—thin wooden sticks lay scattered at their feet, and the ground nearby had been faintly blackened with soot. They must've tried to rub the sticks together and make a fire—maybe they'd seen their parents or someone else do it that way—but of course, just rubbing sticks together without any kindling would never work.

Judging by the fact that the body hadn't been cut up at all, they probably didn't even have a knife between them. In the end, they must've bitten into the raw meat, and the poison had taken hold. By the looks of their condition, they'd had their snack a while ago, and they'd be in serious trouble if they didn't get any help. However, even if I saved them, it wasn't like I could just wave goodbye and walk away. Taking them in would probably put a target on my head for the slave traders—and there was no guarantee that the beastfolk wouldn't blab about me in the future.

There was no sugarcoating how huge a burden it'd be to have two more mouths to feed. *Seriously, is that something I can handle? I'm barely scraping by as it is. We're not talking about picking up a stray dog or cat here. But still...! There's no way I'm abandoning beast ears! I may look like a four-year-old, but on the inside, I'm a twenty-five-year-old man from Japan. I can't just leave these kids to die.*

"All right then!" I said, determined.

I'd made up my mind. I slowly started approaching the beastfolk girls.

I knelt down in front of them, their terrified faces growing even more tense as their bodies shook uncontrollably. The convulsions were so intense that moving their heads even slightly was a struggle.

"Listen to me," I said gently. "I'm not here to hurt you. I'm going to save you."

Maybe they understood me, maybe they didn't. They did, however, seem perplexed that I wasn't attacking them.

"I'm not your enemy," I reassured them, forcing a smile. I knew

full well that it was an awkward attempt—I'd barely smiled since being reincarnated—but it was better than nothing. Carefully, I reached out and patted their heads to show that I meant no harm—not because I wanted to admire their fluffy beast ears, or fluff-ears as I called them.

The blonde beastfolk girl looked like a cat-type with her sleek tail. The silver-haired girl with the cute, bushy tail was most likely a dog-type. I felt like these kids—I say kids, but they were clearly older than me—were slowly becoming less afraid of me.

"Antidote," I chanted, curing one of the girls before turning to cure the other. "Again."

The magic worked almost instantly. The pale, ghostly color drained from their faces and was replaced by a faint, healthy flush. Their trembling calmed, and the pain must've faded too, judging by the way their strained expressions softened.

I could see the surprise in their eyes.

"Now, sterilize. Again." Better safe than sorry. I'd gotten rid of the poison, but I had no idea what kind of germs a sewer rat could've infected them with.

"So, can you walk?" I asked.

"Myah."

"Arf."

They were so drained that they could barely open their mouths. There was no way they could walk, let alone stand up. I had no choice but to open a hole in the wall with magic and bring them into my hideout. Carrying two girls who were bigger than me was no easy task, especially when their bodies were limp and unbalanced. At the same time, dragging them across the floor felt a little too heartless, so I did my best to lift each one onto my back and carry them, one at a time, into the room.

"You'll have to forgive me for not having a mattress," I said to them.

Still, I did what I could by layering my former tent threefold and laying the girls down on top of it. I then reached out and lightly patted their heads in hopes of letting them know that they were all right now.

Man, their fluff-ears are ridiculously fluffy. I could do this all day—
Grrrroooowl!
"Meow..."
"Arf..."

Their stomachs suddenly roared in protest. It made sense considering they'd been starving to the point of collapse. I had to cook something for them.

"Well then," I said. "I guess it's time to make use of the poison rat."

Thanks to my knowledge of ingredients, I knew the beast's meat had a minor stamina recovery effect. It wasn't particularly impressive, but the two girls needed everything they could get. I drained the poison rat's blood and butchered it in an instant. Then, I put everything away into storage, sorting the carcass into its individual components: toxic meat, fur, poisonous blood, bones, mana stone, and other bits. It was quite handy magic, really, but it couldn't go as far as removing the poison. In that sense, the magic mimicked real-life butchering.

I took out the toxic meat and immediately cast an antidote spell on it.

"All right, it should be safe to eat now." The pungent smell clinging to the reddish-purple meat had vanished. I could tell that it was more tender too—the toxins had clearly had a strong effect on the meat. The poison rat was fully edible now, thanks to my cooking magic. It almost felt like cheating, being able to completely remove the poison without even knowing anything about it. Restaurants serving pufferfish would've killed for an ability like this.

Then, I filled a pot with water, dropped in the now-harmless poison rat's spine, and set it over the fire. This rat could be cooked with a regular flame, so it was much easier to manage than heaven dragon meat. Using a heating spell, I gradually brought the pot up to a gentle boil, extracting a rich broth. Once the water took on a faint yellow tint, I fished out the bones and added the wild plants I'd gathered earlier: freshly chopped turnip-onion, mustard green look-alike, and shiitake look-alike. Mushrooms taste better when they have a bite to them, but I focused on making them easy to eat,

being careful to skim the surface of the broth.

"Next up, these." I placed some casse nuts on the ground and bashed them with a stone to crack them open. After breaking about ten, I transferred the nuts into a frying pan. Using a heating spell to speed things up, I roasted them, careful not to burn a single one. Once they were cooked, I crushed the nuts into a fine powder and moved them into a small pot, separate from the broth. Then, I boiled the mixture with magically conjured water, adding a pinch of powdered mana stone.

What I was brewing was one of the lowest-tier potions: a simple mixture of casse nuts, water, and a magical catalyst. This was considered "cooking" since it had casse nuts, so I guess the god hadn't been very exacting with her definition of what cooking was—not that I was complaining.

After straining the liquid through a sieve, I finished it off by concentrating the potion with magic. The final yield was only about half a small cup even though I'd used ten whole casse nuts. It offered a healing effect—a faint one at that, as it was of the lowest tier—and doubled as a tasty seasoning.

Once the big pot was simmering nicely, I added the rat meat, which I'd pan-fried like little bite-sized steaks to save time and bring out some aroma. It didn't exactly taste good, so I had to at least make it smell good. After the meat was in, I brought the broth back to a boil. Then, I poured in beaten eggs while stirring the pot. *Eggs sure look good when they fluff up like this.* For the final touch, I seasoned the soup with the potion I'd brewed as well as a generous amount of salt.

"Poison rat and wild greens egg soup, cave style." Magical effects: slight life recovery, slight stamina recovery, slight life boost, complete.

Thanks to the occasional magic here and there, the whole thing came together in just ten minutes. The light-yellow soup held cubes of rat meat, and the bright green grass added some nice color to the dish. The poison rat's meat was an unusual reddish-purple, but somehow it didn't look too threatening. Was it appetizing because of its aroma? Or maybe it was the contrast with the vibrant greens?

Either way, I took a sip and, surprisingly enough, it was pretty tasty. The rat broth carried a subtle richness, something like a beef bone soup, and the soft, beaten eggs were a perfect complement. The sweetness from the potion gave it a taste that reminded me of Chinese soup—this definitely had some health benefits.

The poor girls, though, were too weak to drink it on their own. I gently helped the blonde girl sit up and gave her a spoonful.

"Here, can you eat this?" I asked.

"Myah..."

I gave her just the soup at first, no meat. She seemed cautious, but after a few sniffs, she couldn't hold back and started taking in tiny sips. She must've liked it, as she flashed a smile, looking like she was holding back tears. That smile stirred something deep inside me. It made me want to hold her tight, but I restrained myself—*that'd be a crime, right?* Instead, I settled on giving her a reassuring pat on the head. I fed her about ten spoonfuls before turning to the silver-haired girl, who'd been eyeing the soup. I held her up and started feeding her. She wasn't hesitant to try it, probably because she'd seen her friend try it already.

After I had taken turns feeding them until the bowl was all but empty, the two girls started to show change. They did just eat food with magical effects, cooked by a magical chef, after all. Maybe the potion had worked too? They'd become able to sit up on their own and drink the soup without my help. They might have lacked manners, drinking straight from the bowl, but that was perfectly fine for the time being.

"Feeling better?" I asked, relief washing over me.

The kids gulped down the soup at a startling pace, then looked up at me, eyes gleaming with hope. They hadn't uttered a word, but their eyes said it all.

"All right," I told them, "but you don't want to drink too much of this, so just one more bowl, okay? I'll throw in some meat for you this time."

"Meow!"

"Arf!"

As soon as I'd said it, their faces lit up with joy and they started

nodding eagerly. They began devouring the soup the moment I gave them more.

"Make sure you chew it well," I said.

"Meow!"

"Woof!"

Was that a yes or a no? Well, whatever the case, it was clear they liked the soup enough that they couldn't be bothered to answer me. They drained their second bowls in under three minutes.

After watching them flop onto their backs in bliss, I deactivated the wind magic barrier I'd set up to keep the smell from escaping. Handy thing, really—it even blocked smoke while I was cooking. I could just funnel the whole cloud into storage afterward and be done with it—though I did have to eventually dump it somewhere.

The kids lay there on their backs, gazing wistfully at their empty bowls. I took the opportunity to ask something that had been bugging me.

"So, do you two have names?"

I'd been getting tired of calling them "kids" or "beastfolk," but instead of answering, they just gave me a blank stare, as if they didn't even understand the question.

"N...ame?"

"Name?"

The two girls tilted their heads in unison. *Wait, they don't even know what a name is?*

"What did your parents used to call you?" I asked.

"Parents? We don't have any!" answered the pale-skinned blonde cat girl, a strange enthusiasm in her voice.

"Don't have aaaany," the silver-haired, dark-skinned dog girl lazily mumbled with a drowsy look.

You can't be serious. No parents?

"Okay," I said. "Then what did people call you? They must've called you *something*."

They casually took turns answering.

"You there."

"Twerps."

"Beastfolk."

"Mutt."

Those aren't names!

"All right, all right," I said. "I got it. I'm sorry for asking."

Their situation had been pretty bad—actually, worse than I'd expected. It made me look somewhat fortunate. They'd been abandoned from the start *and* enslaved.

Really, if I were to take them in, I bet the only ones that would complain would be the rotten slave traders. If anything, I should *take them in. It's my duty! And for the record, I'm not thinking of this as my first step to building my Fluff-Ear Kingdom or anything, all right? Jokes aside, throwing them out now would be heartless. I saved them, so the least I can do is take responsibility and see things through.*

"Still, not having names is gonna be pretty inconvenient."

While I was trying to figure out what to do, the girls tugged lightly at the hem of my clothes.

"We want you to name us," said the cat girl.

"Name us, name us."

I hesitated before asking, "You sure?"

"Yeah!"

"We're sure."

"Fine then," I said.

I had to say yes, the way they were looking at me, eyes sparkling with hope. They were so young it was hard to tell at a glance, but both of them were definitely girls. I wiped their faces and hair with warm water, and underneath all the dirt, two surprisingly beautiful faces revealed themselves.

"So excited!"

"Sooo excited."

The blonde girl stared at me, the sparkle in her eyes not once fading. She had a long, sleek tail that swayed elegantly and eyes that were almond-shaped like a cat's. It was as clear as day that she was a cat. Her bobbed hair was a pale gold—*champagne blonde, is it called?*

The dog girl, meanwhile, still looked like she was halfway to dreamland. She had long, silver hair and dark brown skin. Her ears

were sharp and triangular, her tail fluffy but shorter than the cat girl's. She almost looked like a fox at first glance, but her tail wasn't as bushy. She was most likely a shepherd-type beastfolk.

I could name them after their colors and call them Gold and Silver. That's not cute, though. What about the Japanese words for them: Kin and Gin? No, there's a manga about gamblers that has the same name. I'll go with whatever feels right! But the only other names I can think of are generic Japanese ones like Tama and Pochi.

I thought for a moment and blurted out, "I'm going with Shiro and Kuro!"

What, you two have a problem with that? It's just "white" and "black" in Japanese, but you better not complain. You were the ones who asked me to name you. I stole a glance to gauge their reaction. *N-Not because I know I'm terrible at naming things. I swear. But if you don't like it, I can think of something else. S-So, what do you think?*

"Shiro?"

"Kurooo?"

"Yeah, cat girl, you're Shiro. Dog girl, you're Kuro."

As soon as I delivered the news, they both started happily pointing at themselves and saying their names.

"Shiro!"

"Kurooo!"

Then they started pointing at each other.

"Kuro!"

"Shirooo!"

"Kuro, Kuro."

"Shiro, Shiro, Shirooo."

Why are they hugging each other? Once again, they started pointing at themselves and saying their own name.

"Shiro, Shiro, Shiro!"

"Kuro, Kurooo."

I didn't really get it, but they seemed to be happy. They were enjoying themselves.

"Shiro!"

"Kurooo."

In the end, Shiro and Kuro struck a dramatic pose in sync—the kind that made you think they were gonna shout "We are *PreCure*!" *The first duo was black-and-white too, I suppose.*

Shiro's large cat eyes sparkled with delight, her joy unmistakable. Kuro, on the other hand, wore a sleepy expression that gave little away, but the way her tail wagged vigorously was a clear indication of how she felt.

"I'm glad you like it," I said to them.

"I like it!"

"Thank yaaa."

They both bowed at me.

"Master," said Kuro.

Huh? Did Kuro just call me something crazy? Or was that my imagination?

"Did you just call me master?"

"Yes. Important people are called master."

"Oh, Shiro knew that too!" Shiro said. "You're master."

"Yeah, master."

"Master!" exclaimed Shiro. "You are Shiro's master."

So it wasn't my imagination! But it makes no sense. Why "master"?

I listened to them patiently. From what I could gather, they'd picked up the term while a slave trader had held them captive—apparently an older man in the cage beside theirs had taught them. *Well, if they had been sold off, then yeah, they would've called their owner "master," but...*

"No! You can't call me master!" I exclaimed.

Maybe stuff like that flies in this world, but my soul—formerly belonging to an average guy from Earth—is screaming in defiance. I mean, being called "master" by a young beast ear? That's for sure a crime. It's making me shudder.

"My name's Thor," I told her. "Just call me that."

"Master Thooor?"

"Master Thor!"

"N-Not master!" I pleaded. "Just Thor is fine! Please, I'm begging you!"

Their age came as a surprise too. They looked like they were six, but they were actually only four years old. Humans and beastfolk must grow differently. This was just my guess since they didn't even seem to know what sort of beastfolk they were.

"Yay, Thor!" said Shiro.

"Thor, nice to meet yaaa."

"Well, I've come too far to back out of this now. I guess we'll be sticking together, Shiro and Kuro."

"Sticking together!"

"Tooogether."

Shiro and Kuro shot their hands up in response to my words, smiling innocently.

Chapter 2: Shiro and Kuro

"Myah."

"Wuffu."

Shiro and Kuro were dozing quietly on the mat, their ears and tails twitching softly—just like a real cat and dog. As I watched that gentle, comforting sight, my thoughts drifted to the future.

There's no question that I'm going to take them in and raise them. I don't care what anyone says!

Honestly, if I tossed them out onto the streets, they'd be heading straight down the slave route. Even if the thugs searching for them didn't find them, they would get swallowed up by the crime in this town.

I couldn't say whether living in the sewer with me would be better than being slaves, but I was determined to give them a good enough life that they'd think so. To do that, I needed to be stronger, but they had to become stronger too, in order to find food and survive. I couldn't teach them how to use weapons since I had no cheat abilities in that field. All I could do was teach magic and cook for them.

Magic was the more important of the two, but I couldn't afford the kind of hefty donation the church demanded for identifying magical aptitude. Not that it mattered; I didn't even know where the nearest church was, nor did I have the means to get there. That meant starting from the basics and seeing which ones were easy for them to learn.

I didn't think that would pose too much of a challenge. I'd already checked Shiro and Kuro with a spell used for measuring the mana content of ingredients, and they both carried surprisingly powerful mana. Maybe their race naturally possessed high magical potential. It made sense the slave traders had been frantically searching for them.

"It looks like things are gonna get busy starting tomorrow," I said, glancing over at the two.

They'd already drifted off, breathing softly and looking just adorable. *Oh, those fantastic fluff-ears!* That alone was reason enough to protect them, but it wasn't just that. Even though we'd just met, I was already getting attached to them. The thought of them being dragged back into slavery made my blood boil. I'd never actually seen the slave drivers, but I still hated them enough to kill them.

I'm gonna make you two stronger.

The next morning, Shiro and Kuro were back to full strength, digging into breakfast with gusto. Once they'd eaten their fill, they looked up at me, as though they were trying to find the right words.

"We wanted to ask. Are you a wizard?" questioned Shiro.

"Thaaat," said Kuro, as they both pointed at the magic candlestick. I'd also been pulling out ingredients from storage and detoxifying stuff in front of their eyes, so it was a fair question.

"Yeah, you could say that," I answered.

"That's amazing!"

"Kuro wants to use magic too!"

I could tell from the sparkle in their eyes that even those living in a world of magic were still fascinated by it.

"I think you two will be able to use magic in no time."

"Huh? Really? Shiro can use magic?" Shiro said in disbelief.

"Not fair, Shiro. Kuro wants to tooooo."

It seemed like a good idea to dive straight into training. I was worried that it might be too difficult for kids, but if they were eager, then that changed things.

"All right, I'll teach you simple magic."

"A-okay!"

"Yeah."

I picked out a few beginner spells and asked, "Which one do you want to try? Probably something for protecting yourself first."

"Shiro wanna try a cool one!"

"A strooong one for Kuro."

"I think we'll save that for when you've had some practice," I told

them.

I figured I'd start with the basics: Fire Starting, Light Wind, Water Droplets, and Earth Manipulation. I even considered beginner light and dark magics.

I had all the elements thanks to my cheat abilities, but a normal person wouldn't be able to teach all those different kinds. That was probably why people went to the church to determine their aptitude, even though it came with a hefty price.

To keep them safe from the slave traders, I had no intention of letting them leave the room for at least five more days, during which we'd train extensively.

"All right, let's start by sensing your mana. Hold your hands out in front of you."

"Aye!"

"Okieee."

"Now, focus," I said. "Try to bring the mana in your body to your palms."

"Mana?"

"I don't really get it."

I'd been able to sense my mana easily thanks to my cheat abilities, but I guess it was more difficult for them. *They definitely have mana, so it should be possible...*

"Just watch closely."

"Thor, you're shining!"

"Is this manaaa?"

"That's right."

"Wow, it's warm."

"Feels niiice."

"Remember that feeling."

I could've patted myself on the back for how patiently I was teaching them. They did a great job too, considering their age. I figured their focus was lasting because they were learning the magic they'd always dreamed of.

After about two hours, they'd become able to sense mana. *I must say, I'm strangely exhausted, myself!*

"Next up is the incantation." This might actually be the harder

part. They were only four, after all. Even if they were growing a little faster than usual, they didn't exactly seem like the type to excel in academics.

Just as I'd expected, even after more than two hours, Shiro and Kuro still couldn't recite a spell from memory.

"Wind, heed m-m-m-meoooow!"

"Shiro, that was embarrassing. Kuro can do it fine now. Earth, h-h-he...!"

"Meeeow!"

"Awoof!"

The incantations were short, so memorizing them wasn't hard. The problem was that they kept stumbling over their words.

"Wind, heeee!"

"*Eawth*, heed my *well*."

Two more hours passed. Shiro and Kuro pushed themselves hard, and it paid off. They finally managed to master beginner spells.

"Wind, heed my will and blow! Light Wind!"

"Earth, heed my will and move. Earth Manipulaaation."

Shiro successfully activated wind magic, and Kuro, earth magic. Feeling a bit too confident, they started casting spells left and right...

"*Myah,* I'm kinda tired."

"*Arf,* Kuro toooo."

"You're just about out of mana," I told them.

It'd be pretty exhausting, but I decided to make them use magic every day. The goal was simple: The more they practiced, the better they'd get. The incantations would get shorter too.

"You can go to sleep now," I said to them.

"Okay."

"Okieee."

The fatigue must have been unbearable, but they drifted off with a sense of accomplishment written on their faces.

***

Seven days after I'd saved Kuro and Shiro, I found myself deep in the sewer with them.

"Kuro, how's it looking?" I asked.

"I smell a bug over there."

"Good," I said. "Shiro, you corner it from that side."

"Roger! Shiro's on it!"

Our objective was to gather food and level up. The sewer was home to three types of magical beasts: gabul root, poison rat, and giant spider crickets known as giga-sprickets. They were the lowest-tier magical creatures—barely a threat to normal humans. They weren't even worth hunting or exterminating, save for a large outbreak. They were basically the equivalent of roaches or sewer rats back on Earth; you'd deal with them if they showed up near your home, but you wouldn't actively go into the sewer to exterminate them.

They did, however, pose enough of a threat for three young children, and true to their low-level status, defeating them didn't offer much in terms of mana. Still, they were the perfect prey for us as we could hunt them in the safety of the sewer and eat them.

To be honest, at first I was pretty reluctant to eat stuff like the giga-spricket's legs, but since my survival depended on it, I forced myself to try it. To my pleasant surprise, it wasn't all that bad. It was basically a flavorless crab, and it was easy to eat when just boiled with some salt.

After sticking with the steady hunt for these magical beasts, we'd managed to secure a decent amount of food while also slowly increasing our mana reserves—*pretty solid.* On top of that, the more we hunted, the more comfortable we became with combat and began developing our own fighting styles.

For me, magic was the core of my approach. I'd been refining a tactic that kept enemies at a distance, casting spells without incantation to snipe them from afar.

Shiro's main weapon was her claws. Being a cat beastfolk, her claws were large and strong, perfect for battle. What's more, by wearing my father's old leather bracer on her left arm, she was able to deflect enemy attacks. The bracer was old and worn, but it was more than enough to handle lowest-tier magical beasts. Shiro also had good eyes and could handle surprisingly fast enemies with ease.

Her magic had improved a lot too. Not only had she mastered Light Wind, but she'd also learned Wind Barrier and Wind Blade. It was clear she had an aptitude for wind magic as her progress with it was noticeably quicker than with other elements.

Wind Barrier, as the name suggested, created a protective shield, while Wind Blade was a long-range slicing attack that could also be used for close combat when Shiro coated her claws with it. It was quite useful against poison rats since she could attack them without making direct contact.

She also seemed to have some potential with light magic, though for now, she could only briefly conjure a faint light as bright as a tiny light bulb. Until her magic leveled up some more, I decided it'd be best to focus her training on wind magic.

As for Kuro, I'd given her my mother's short sword. It was broken, reduced to little more than the length of a dagger, but it could still cut, and its weight was just right, so all was well.

When compared to her feline companion, Kuro's agility and physical strength were a bit lacking. However, she more than made up for them with her magical prowess. It was hard to believe, but she had managed to learn dark magic—a special element—at a practical level. She could cast Darkness Blade, which simultaneously drained both the mind and body of a target. Whether as a projectile or by coating her sword with it for close combat, she could cast it effortlessly, even shortening the incantation. She'd also mastered casting Concealment without an incantation, and although a little rough around the edges, she'd begun to experiment with illusion spells as well. Kuro had also easily picked up magic for starting fires, so it was clear she had a natural affinity for both fire and dark magic.

As for their clothes, they were no longer dressed in the tattered rags they'd been wearing when they'd escaped. Instead, they were wearing long blouses that had once belonged to my mother, cinched at the waist with a rope as makeshift dresses. They weren't much in terms of defense, but certainly better than rags. Oh, and they were also using my mother's old underwear, but it was far too big for them and looked like poofy baby underwear.

"Shiro! Over there!" I shouted.

"*Hiyah! Meeeow!*"

"Darkness, cut! Darkness Blade!"

We instantly took down two giga-sprickets with Shiro's Wind Blade claws and Kuro's Darkness Short Sword (the broken blade cloaked in Darkness Blade, named by yours truly). Having killed three of them that day, we'd secured a solid haul for dinner.

The girls moved efficiently, and it seemed like they could handle opponents of this level with no problem. Shiro was a bit more straightforward in her approach, but her speed was impressive, while Kuro's spellcasting was smooth and graceful.

Still, I couldn't shake a feeling of disappointment.

"Our mana didn't increase again."

Since yesterday, none of us had seen any growth in our total mana even after taking down magical beasts. We must've reached a point where these chump monsters no longer provided enough to boost it. I'd been hoping that once the two of them could chain spells more easily, we'd be ready to leave the sewer and get things going, but it looked like that wasn't happening anytime soon. I needed to move up our plans.

I decided to wait just one more day since I still wasn't sure whether the slave traders had given up on Shiro and Kuro.

"All right, you two go back home and practice your magic. I'm heading out to gather some ingredients."

"A-okay!"

"Aye aye."

I'd greatly widened my area of operation, and there were times when I found myself walking close to an hour from the sewer entrance. The circumstances called for it, as I needed to search a large area to gather enough food for the three of us. Thanks to that, I'd managed to find more than just the usual casse nuts. Among my most notable discoveries were lemon look-alike, bird eggs, shiitake look-alike, shimeji mushroom look-alike, and bloodsucking snakes.

Despite their intimidating name, the snakes were only about thirty centimeters long and weren't magical beasts. They'd earned their name from feeding on cattle and other livestock, latching onto

their backs and licking blood. They had a mild taste, and if you could stomach the slight odor, they weren't all that bad—and meat was a precious commodity.

Actually, my greatest discovery was the chili pepper look-alike. A nut that resembled chili peppers both in flavor and scent, it was perfect for masking unwanted odors of ingredients. I couldn't use too much because Shiro and Kuro didn't care for it, but I'd been using it to change up the flavor of my cooking. It was, after all, the first spice I'd encountered since coming to this world. They were hard to come by, so I had to be careful not to waste it.

"I wish I had some salt, though," I complained to myself. That was my top priority at the moment. Sea salt, rock salt, a salty ingredient...I didn't care. I was craving a salty kick. Vinegar mushroom and lemon look-alike had sourness covered. Chili pepper look-alike offered spiciness. Sweetness I could get from the lowest-tier potion, and lots of grasses were bitter—but I just couldn't get any saltiness. My supply of salt from the tent had been running low too.

I'd even experimented with extracting salt from blood using cooking magic, but it was way beyond my capabilities. Even if I could pull it off, I'd need to use up all my mana just to get a few tiny crystals. Given that I needed my mana for hunting and other tasks, that wasn't a viable option.

"What should I do?" I pondered.

There were two main options. The first was to find ingredients that were inherently salty. My knowledge of ingredients led me to consider things like salt fungus or salt herb, a plant that produced salt from its leaves. The region seemed to suit these plants, but there was no guarantee that I could find them.

"My other option is buying some," I thought out loud. That was the obvious choice. Just go to the store and buy some. That's what most people would do.

"But that's not as simple as it sounds."

Money was a problem. I'd picked up some copper coins while foraging for ingredients, but that wasn't nearly enough. That left selling stuff—except I barely had anything of value. The heaven

dragon parts would definitely have been valuable considering how rare they were, but a kid having that stuff? Suspicious to say the least. It'd only been a few days since the dragon attack, so anyone would have guessed that I was responsible for the missing parts. An honest business wouldn't buy that stuff from me; a sketchy place would probably try to kidnap me. So, that plan was off the table.

The potion I was able to brew from the ancestral species of casse nuts was another option. Lowest tier or not, a potion was still a potion, and people would probably pay some money for it. I wasn't sure if that'd be enough to buy salt though. Plus, people might find out that I was doing some borderline alchemy. Another plan off the table.

There was also the danger of venturing into a crowded area and getting attacked by slave traders or thugs. Merchants with secret connections to slave traders were entirely possible too.

"Well, I can't worry about every worst-case scenario forever," I grumbled. But now I had Shiro's and Kuro's lives in my hands too. Being overly cautious wasn't just smart; it was necessary.

"Anything else I could sell?" I barely had enough ingredients for ourselves, and the burnt tent and the gifts from the god would attract too much attention.

"Maybe," I said, "the giga-spricket's shell?"

Yes. That's it! Novice mercenaries sometimes used the shells as makeshift armor. I might be able to sell some if I went to the right place. I had mana stones too. The giga-sprickets and poison rats only carried small ones—the size of a pinky nail—but they were still mana stones. Surely someone would buy them? It wouldn't be strange for a kid to try and trade a few for pocket change, after all. By the way, gabul root mana stones were too small to even recognize.

"But I don't think an ordinary store would buy mana stones." No way a grocery store would take them off my hands.

It came down to this: "First things first, I need to find a shop."

***

The next day, I found myself in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the town. I was standing in a small plaza lined with a handful of open-air stalls.

I got worried that I was drawing attention. It felt like every eye was on me—maybe I was just being too self-conscious. The faces around me looked unusually gaunt. Unlike the last time I'd glimpsed this place when I was out foraging, there was no chatter, no energy. The mood had clearly soured.

I grunted, carrying a sack stuffed with giga-spricket shells and mana stones on my back. I obviously couldn't magically bring stuff out of storage inside a shop, so I'd taken out everything I planned to sell beforehand.

"There should be a general store sign around here," I said as I looked around. I thought I could sell the mana stones at a place like that, so I left Shiro and Kuro at our shelter and made my way here alone. Sure, I could've headed downtown or to the main shopping district, but thugs and other unsavory types were more common there—and after the heaven dragon attack the other day, who knew what the place was like now? It seemed the fire had spread across a wide area, and some buildings had even gone up in flames. There was no telling whether any of the shops were still open.

That's why I chose this quieter plaza near our shelter. It was one of the smaller public squares in Erunst. There weren't many stores, and it was probably mostly locals, so that meant less danger. At least that had been my hope—

"You damn thief!" yelled a man. "Back again, are you?!"

"Whoa!" I yelped as a wooden stick came slicing through the air with a sharp whoosh. I barely managed to dodge it in time.

Crash!

I screamed when I saw that the stick had struck the bag I'd dropped, hitting it dead-on. A sickening sound followed as fragments of shattered mana stones spilled out from the torn opening. Giga-spricket shells are supposed to be tough, so I hoped they had held up—although there was probably a crack or two now.

"Damn you! Damn you!"

The man kept swinging the stick at me with reckless fury. The

dull, heavy thuds as it smashed into the stone pavement echoed with an intimidating resonance. The guy attacking me wasn't some thug or slave trader. He was a regular middle-aged man, balding, with a bit of a gut. He had some muscle on him, but his movements were amateurish.

"Always pulling this crap on me!" he continued.

"H-Hey!" I pleaded. "Hold on a second!"

"I'll beat you to death!"

His swings were wild and easy enough to avoid, but the bloodshot look in his eyes made my skin crawl. *People, don't you see this defenseless kid getting attacked by some lunatic old man? Somebody do something.*

I glanced around, only to see that not a single person looked like they were going to help. If anything, the crowd looked on with cold, indifferent expressions, and a few people were even egging the guy on—I was definitely in the wrong place.

"You damn street brats think you can just waltz in here and steal bread?!" the old man yelled.

"That's enough!" a woman called out.

"Shut up! Let go of me!"

"He's just a kid!"

"Kid or not, a thief's a thief!"

"Run, boy! Get out of here!"

A woman—probably his wife—tried to hold him back, but he was too worked up to listen. There was no way I could use magic with all these onlookers. With no other choice, I abandoned the bag and bolted from the plaza.

"You come around here again, I'll smash your head in!" he screamed. With the man's angry shouts fading behind me, I tore through the streets, my heart pounding wildly. After putting some distance between us, I slipped into a back alley and put up a barrier of wind to mask my presence. I stayed hidden for a while, but there was no sign of anyone chasing me.

As the adrenaline began to fade, I was overcome with regret.

"Damn it. That was stupid of me, risking it like that."

The giga-spricket shells and the mana stone shards weren't

exactly treasures and were replaceable. Still, that nagging frustration wouldn't let go. *Couldn't I have been a little more careful? Did I come off as suspicious to anyone in that crowd?* I started to have doubts, but I decided right away to put those thoughts behind me. *Mulling over things isn't going to change anything. I should be happy about what I've gained. This isn't sour grapes; I really did learn some valuable information.*

First off, judging from what the old man had said, there were other homeless kids out there, stealing as a group. I guessed that they'd already caused quite a bit of trouble around town. If I ever crossed paths with them, dealing with their turf and all the politics could get messy. On the flip side, we might be able to exchange intel, so maybe I shouldn't have just written them off completely.

Another thing I'd taken away from all this was a renewed understanding of my physical capabilities. I'd managed to dodge the attacks of an adult man without breaking a sweat. Had the god gifted me with a strong body? Or was it thanks to hunting magical beasts and boosting my mana? If I kept growing stronger, maybe I could outrun street thugs easily. Although tough mercenaries? Probably not.

Finally, looking on the bright side, I guessed you could say I'd learned a new lesson: Don't trust adults so easily. The town had always been a hub for crime, and the heaven dragon had only made things worse. People's spirits must have been more broken than ever.

Dejected, I let out a sigh. "Guess I'll go home." I was more emotionally drained than physically tired. I just wanted to get home to Shiro and Kuro, and fluff their tails and ears to my heart's content. As I drifted through the woods a little ways off from the plaza, I thought I heard voices coming from behind the bushes.

I ducked into the shadows instinctively as a group of rough-looking men emerged from deep within the forest. They weren't ordinary townsfolk—most likely, they were mercenaries or thugs. I wondered what they were doing there, fully aware that I didn't really belong there, myself.

"I bet those kids are long gone by now," one of the men said.

"That or they're dead," another replied, "but the buyer's telling us that we gotta find them no matter what."

"Seriously? What a pain."

"Quick little brats, those beastfolk."

Suddenly, it all made sense. I'd thought they were after me, but no. These men were working for the slave trader, and they were still hunting for Shiro and Kuro.

"How long are we supposed to search for?"

"Until the buyer gives up, I'm guessing."

"Can't we just find some other beastfolk that look like them?"

"Dunno."

By the looks of it, the person who was going to buy Shiro and Kuro still hadn't given up on them. In that case, walking around out in the open might be more dangerous than I'd thought.

I let the thugs pass and quietly resumed walking, only to stumble upon a few men who looked like soldiers poking through the bushes.

"Is looking for some runaway beastfolk slaves really our job?" one of them asked.

"Just get to work. If you get caught slacking, they'll lock you up."

"Yeah, yeah."

Wait, Shiro and Kuro's buyer has enough pull that he can get soldiers to search for them? Is he a lord? Or one of his knights? Or maybe even a state-approved merchant? Whatever the case, things had officially gone sideways. Still, even if I'd known all this from the start, it's not like I would've abandoned the girls. Leaving them back at our hideout was the right call. *It looks like we'll be stuck down in the sewer for a while, which means we have to keep making our way deeper inside...*

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I heard a woman's scream ring out nearby.

"Dammit! Get outta my way!" one of the soldiers yelled, shoving her to the ground. Maybe the soldiers were pissed about failing the search and had decided to take their frustration out on her. The woman wore drab clothes with frayed hems, and her body was wrapped in bandages from head to toe.

"Ohhh, my cane," she said wearily. "Where is it?" She stayed on

the ground even after the soldiers left, feeling around with her hands—apparently, she was blind. I couldn't just leave her there. I spotted her cane, which the soldier had kicked aside, and brought it to her, my steps silent.

"Are you all right?" I said, my tone gentle.

She shrieked. *Oh, right. I had my presence cloaked. My bad, I didn't mean to scare you.*

"Huh? What?" she said, turning to face me, clearly frightened.

Her hair was chopped short and tangled with dirt, but underneath it all, I could tell she was probably a natural redhead. Her skin was caked in dust, but I guessed she was of East Asian descent, maybe in her early twenties. I'd thought she was blind, but it turned out that wasn't quite the case. Her right eye was completely clouded over and didn't move at all, but her left eye shifted slightly—it didn't seem to focus properly though. Her vision in that eye must've been extremely poor.

"Here, your cane," I said.

"Oh, thank you."

She grunted softly and used the cane to push herself upright, but her frame swayed unsteadily, as if she couldn't quite hold herself up. She was wrapped up in bandages—*was she injured?* I didn't smell blood, but through the haphazard bandaging, I caught glimpses of raw, red skin that looked badly burned. Burns that severe would've been life-threatening back on Earth, but in a world where magic existed, maybe she stood a chance. Then again, she was clearly nowhere near a full recovery.

I couldn't just leave her like that and walk away. I hesitated a bit before saying, "I'll take you home."

"Huh? Oh, I couldn't ask that of you—" She cut herself off with a sharp cry as her balance gave out again. Maybe she still wasn't used to the cane. Without thinking, I reached out to steady her.

"See? You can barely walk." I didn't mean to, but I spoke to her the same way I'd talk to Shiro and Kuro. She didn't seem to mind though. Besides, it would've been strange for someone who looked like a street kid to speak too politely anyway. I decided to keep using that tone.

"Ugh. I'm sorry," she murmured. She'd let her guard down far sooner than I'd expected, possibly because I was just a child. Without a second thought, she told me where she lived and, as we walked, began telling me about herself.

She said she'd been living a normal life until just the other day, when everything had come crashing down. The fire caused by the heaven dragon had severely burned her entire body, but her misfortune didn't end there. She'd just managed to survive, but a greedy temple had stripped her of nearly everything she owned in exchange for treatment. Even her home had been seized. Now, she was staying in a dilapidated shack in the slums, loaned to her by an acquaintance.

"I don't know how much longer I'll be able to stay there," she confided in me.

"Why not?"

"I lost my job today. With my eyes and hands like this, there's not much I can do."

"I see."

She'd kept working through her injuries, but as she was unable to do anything in her condition, she'd been let go earlier today. She told me her name was Carolina, and that she used to make copies of books, but now her vision was little more than a blur, and her dominant hand wouldn't move. In this world, where human rights were nothing but a fantasy, people like her were cast aside without a second thought.

"Considering my condition," she went on, "I can't even sell my body—that is, uh, never mind, sorry."

I answered with a soft, "I see." She'd stopped herself, probably because I was still a child, but it was true; someone like Carolina couldn't exactly become a courtesan now.

She let out a weary sigh and continued, "How did it come to this? I used to think I was better off than the ones who perished in the fire, but..."

It was the face of someone at a dead end, someone who didn't know what to do anymore. Not hopeless enough to have given up, not detached enough to simply accept her fate—but she already

understood, deep down, that becoming desperate wouldn't change a thing. There were probably many others in this town in a similar situation.

We walked the rest of the way in silence. It took us about thirty minutes to reach her home, a shack right by one of the worst corners of the slums: the sewage canal. Inside, there was little more than a straw mat to sleep on and a handful of cooking utensils.

"I don't even have a drink to offer you," she said softly.

"Oh, don't worry about it."

I couldn't even imagine accepting anything from someone living like this. Even so, I found myself wondering if there was a way to make this chance encounter mean something more, something that could benefit us both—and there was. The only question that remained was whether she could be trusted to keep the secret.

Now that I'd failed to sell the mana stones and materials, Carolina was the only person I could rely on. Maybe it was worth taking a chance on her. We'd only just met, but she didn't seem like a bad person.

"Say, if your eyes and arm got even a little better, do you think you could work again?" I asked.

"Of course," she replied, "but it's impossible. I don't have the money to see a priest or buy potions."

She sank to the floor with a quiet, bitter laugh, looking even smaller than before. Without a word, I quietly cast holy magic—I didn't want to say anything, in case promising to heal her and failing crushed any shred of hope she still had.

After a few seconds, Carolina suddenly gasped. "Huh? My eyes!"

"Can you see?"

"J-Just a little! B-But it's definitely gotten better! This is better than the high priest's magic! I'm seeing more light in my right eye too!"

I wasn't arrogant enough to think that my magic was better than a high priest's. What had probably happened was some low-ranking priest had claimed to be a high priest and either scammed her by padding the treatment fees or just half-assed the treatment because she was poor. The church was supposedly riddled with corruption, so

either scenario seemed all too likely.

The only problem was, my mana was draining quickly. The spell was consuming far more energy than any holy magic I'd cast before—after all, her wounds were severe. Realizing my power was nearly spent, I limited the treatment for the time being.

"I focused on your eyes and hands," I told her. "It's not a full recovery, but do you think you could get back to work again?"

"Yes! I can! Absolutely! Oh, thank you so much!" Carolina dropped to her knees, clasping her hands tightly as she cried out in gratitude.

"Wait, you have to be quiet. No one can know about me."

"Oh, right," she said, quickly covering her mouth. A child who could use holy magic would've been exploited in countless ways, for good or ill. Carolina seemed to understand what was at stake too.

I was a bit relieved that the risk of her talking about me seemed low. I'd kept my hood drawn, so she hadn't seen my face either. Her hazy vision meant she probably wouldn't be able to point me out.

"When my mana recovers, I'll come back for more treatment," I promised her.

"What? You'll come back for me?"

"Yeah, but there's something I need from you in return."

"Wh-What might that be?"

Carolina swallowed hard. She was all too familiar with the price of holy magic. Her imagination must've been running wild with grim scenarios.

"I want to keep a low profile," I said deliberately, "but it's not easy for someone like me to stay hidden. So, once you're able to earn a little money, I want you to buy me some food and supplies. I'm not asking for all your earnings or anything like that."

I spoke as gravely as I could, hoping that if she felt a bit uncertain about who I was, it might keep her from betraying me.

"What?" she said. "That's all?"

"It may not sound like much, but it's important. If word gets out about me, this treatment ends immediately. If you want to get better, you'll keep our secret."

"O-Of course!"

"Tell people your eyes healed over time," I instructed her. "Keep the bandages on your burns for a while and say you bought some potions."

"A-Absolutely! I'll do exactly as you say," Carolina said, nodding earnestly.

At last, I've forged a fragile link to the outside world. I hope I can get more than just salt.

***

A few days had passed since my failed attempt to sell off the mana stones and materials. With a price still on Shiro's and Kuro's heads, going aboveground wasn't an option, which meant that if we wanted a decent supply of food, we had to find it down in the sewers. Up to that point, we'd stuck close to our little hideout, but that wasn't sustainable. If we kept hunting in the same spot, sooner or later we were going to run out of prey. Carolina was still recovering and barely keeping herself afloat. So, we'd come up with a plan to push farther into the underground and had finally worked up the nerve to put it into action.

Using wind magic to mask our scent, we ventured deep into the tunnel. We bagged a gabul root along the way, but that was it. *Yeah, living off sewer critters alone is gonna be rough.*

And just as that thought crossed my mind, we discovered a new creature.

"Wuffu? I see something."

"It's a little one!"

"That's a sickball!" I warned. "You two stay back!"

"A-okay!"

"Okie."

What we'd stumbled upon was a wriggling gray puffball. It resembled an old, soggy mop, but yeah, it was a magical beast. It had a fitting name too; the thing was a clump of all sorts of diseases. It wasn't strong in combat, but most mercenaries stayed far away from it. Just getting splashed with its fluids could make you sick, and it barely dropped any useful materials anyway.

For us though, it was actually a pretty solid find. You could eat it so long as you purified it properly. It wasn't supposed to taste great, but being edible was good enough.

I dropped the sickball with a spell, gave it a thorough round of sterilization magic, and tossed it into storage. There was barely any meat on the thing, you'd have to catch a bunch to make a meal out of it, but I didn't want to take the risk of having Shiro and Kuro hunt them on their own. Who knew what they could've gotten infected with. My holy magic could sterilize ingredients, but I didn't know how much of an effect it had on bacteria inside someone's body. So yeah, this wasn't exactly a miracle solution to our food problem.

As we wandered around, Shiro suddenly stopped dead in her tracks.

"What is it, Shiro?" I asked.

"Ummm, something feels weird."

"Weird?"

"Yes, it's weird!" she said, glancing around nervously, like she didn't really know what to make of it.

Then Kuro's nose started twitching. "Wuffu?"

"Kuro, you're picking up on something too?" I asked.

"Hmmm?" Kuro seemed to sense it too, but she just cocked her head, confused.

Something had to be amiss. Shiro and Kuro were beastfolk with senses way sharper than mine. If they'd both picked up on the same disturbance, it meant we were heading in the right direction.

I composed myself and tried to tune in to what was going on around us. That's when I caught it—a faint leak of mana trickling out from the wall nearby. As I stepped closer, Shiro and Kuro also figured out what was causing all the fuss.

"It's coming from here!" said Shiro.

"Heeere."

"Something feels weird!"

"Yeah."

This barely noticeable trace of mana must've been what they'd picked up on—beastfolk really did possess far sharper senses than humans did.

"Stay back, both of you," I instructed, urging them a few steps away before turning my focus to the wall and casting earth magic on it. "Huh?"

It hadn't worked the way it always had when I'd manipulate the wall to our hideout. Here, the magic altered the wall's surface part of the way, but beyond a certain point, it simply wouldn't budge. There had to be another wall hidden behind the ancient ruin's wall, and it felt like this mysterious second wall was pushing back against my magic, as if my powers were bouncing off it.

"How's this?" I exclaimed, amping up my mana and casting Earth Manipulation. This time, it worked.

I was speechless. "This is..."

"Whoa."

"Coooool."

Shiro and Kuro were just as surprised. A hole just big enough for a kid to squeeze through had opened up, revealing a space beyond it. Carefully, I stuck my head inside and saw the space stretching left and right.

"A corridor?" I muttered.

It didn't feel quite like the ruins we'd been living in. The stone material looked similar, but there was no dust, and it was light inside. Was there a light source nearby? And unlike our hideout, I could feel some sort of life. It felt lived in, like the place itself was alive.

With the wall gone, the mana leaking through was clear. I was no expert, but I knew that stronger mana meant more magical beasts. *So are they up ahead?* Strangely, the entire corridor had a faint glow, which made it easier to move through.

The real question was how strong the magical beasts might be. Even with my magic, if something too powerful showed up, we would get wiped out. Then again, there was a good chance we'd get food.

"Let's go in deeper and see what we can find," I said after some thought.

"A-okay!"

"Got it. Let's dooo it."

"But safety first," I warned. "We're gonna be more careful than ever."

I steeled myself and crawled through the hole.

Then I felt it. *What was that?* Had something brushed against my skin? Was it just air? The temperature hadn't changed, and there was no breeze either, but there was no denying that the atmosphere had shifted. It was as if that narrow opening led to an entirely different realm.

I couldn't quite explain it, but I started getting goose bumps. Shiro and Kuro shared the same uneasy sensation.

"Eek!"

"Whoa!"

They too had their backs arched, goose bumps rising on their skin. I guessed it was the strong mana we'd been exposed to.

The three of us scanned the area cautiously—there was no sign of any living things around. The passage split left and right. I wondered which way we should go.

"Let's take a right for now," I said.

"Got it!"

"Okie."

I led the way while Shiro and Kuro stayed sharp behind me. Step by step, we cautiously crept down the hidden corridor, only to hit a dead end. Well, not exactly. There was a massive hole that gaped in the ceiling above us. I craned my neck, but the shaft stretched so high I couldn't see the top.

Was this the bottom of some pitfall trap? Or maybe a vertical shaft you had to climb down to get here? Either way, we couldn't advance any farther.

"Let's go back," I said.

"A-okay."

"Yeah."

Doubling back and heading left this time, we soon came upon a small, dark chamber about fifteen meters wide.

"What is this—" I stopped mid-sentence and yelled, "Shiro! Kuro!"

"Meow!"

"Woof!"

The moment I spotted it, Shiro and Kuro slipped into combat mode. *All that sewer brawling paid off!*

A low growl echoed through the room.

"A beast? Heads up! It's a poison beast!"

It had been curled up in the far corner, tucked just out of sight from the entrance. With all the magic hanging thick in the air, its presence had been hard to pick up.

The thing was about the size of a large dog, with reddish-brown fur stretched over a muscular body. Purple drool dripped steadily from its mouth—probably the same liquid covering its coat. A poison beast's body is laced with venom way deadlier than a poison rat's. This creature was in another league entirely.

Sure, I could detox it and eat it but...

"Can I even kill this thing?!"

That, honestly, was the big question.

The poison beast stood up with a menacing growl and slowly began to move. I could only tremble at the guttural sound—a primal reaction to being confronted by such a monstrous predator. It might only have been the size of a large dog, but for a child like me, it was a terrifying presence.

"Meow."

"Awoof."

Shiro and Kuro flattened their ears, their faces twisted with fear. Like me, they were shaking, paralyzed with fear.

The poison beast let out another roar as it bared its fangs, eyes locking onto us. Perhaps it sensed how scared we were. It seemed to smirk, as if savoring the thought of easy prey. The mana radiating from the beast was far more potent than any monster I'd faced before. According to my knowledge, the beast wasn't particularly strong as long as you kept your guard up against its poison, but for us, it was still a formidable opponent.

If we managed to take it down, we'd get a massive haul of meat, but that would be meaningless if we died in the process. *Can we get out of here?*

I probably shouldn't have glanced behind myself, even for a moment. At that instant, the poison beast sprang at us with

explosive speed.

Uh-oh! It's way faster than us! The red-brown monster was already in front of me, and before I even realized it, I cast a spell.

"Wall!" I chanted with no real plan in mind. I had acted purely on instinct.

A wall of earth surged upward, barely intercepting the beast's charge. Although it dampened the beast's momentum, the wall crumbled with a single strike. It was poorly made. *I didn't mess up—okay, I did mess up, but it wasn't my fault. The ground and walls here are weird.* Mana seemed to flow through them poorly, like they had unusually strong resistance to earth magic, similar to the entrance wall. Could it be that objects with higher mana were harder to control? Whatever the case, I was only able to conjure a thin, feeble earth wall, far weaker than I'd intended, and the poison beast had tackled it to the ground.

"Gaww-gagh!"

A massive, gaping mouth loomed before me, its foul breath hitting me at close range. I could see its yellowed fangs just inches away, slick with a purple liquid that gave off a sharp, stinging odor. The monster's suffocating presence sparked a surge of panic and fear. *I want to run. Just forget everything and run.*

But I didn't. Behind me, I felt the warmth of two figures, the girls, cowering close to me. I had to protect them.

Gathering all my strength, I shouted. "L-Let's get him!"

"Myaaah!"

"Awoooof!"

At the sound of my voice, Shiro and Kuro sprang into action. They shifted slightly to the right in unison, ensuring I was out of their line of fire, before invoking the magic they had trained to use.

"Darkness, cut. Darkness Blade."

"Wind! Take form as a blade and cut through the foe! Wind Blade!"

Their movements were faster and more graceful than I could have imagined. Without a hint of hesitation, they chanted their spells and unleashed them flawlessly. Even though fear must have gripped them, they did exactly as they'd been taught. *This is incredible!*

The magic they'd fired off hit the poison beast squarely in the flank.

"We did it!" said Shiro upon hearing the beast's pained cry.

"Did it," followed Kuro.

"Not so fast!"

The beast's hide had been torn open, blood spewing out, but it stood undaunted. Shiro and Kuro had always felled magical beasts with a single strike, so they likely believed the same would happen this time. This poison beast, though, was no ordinary opponent—its sheer size and raw power eclipsed anything we'd encountered. That wound wasn't enough to even slow it down.

"Gaaarrr!"

As the two girls basked in their moment of delight, the red-black behemoth lunged at them, eyes burning with fury. The two girls yelped as the massive beast barreled toward us, and they froze in place, fear locking their limbs.

Damn it!

I threw myself in front of them, nearly tripping over myself as I chained off spells. I was casting without incantations, so they were pretty weak, but they were sure to hit at this close range.

"Aaaggghhh!" I screamed, the poison beast roaring in response. The Water Needles I shot out stabbed its face, piercing through its eyes and mouth, but there was no stopping the momentum it had. Its hulking body crashed into me, and together, we were thrown to the ground in a tangled heap.

"Gwah!" the beast yelped.

I grunted as my back hit the floor hard, knocking the air from my lungs. I could feel the poison beast trembling on top of me, its body spasming. *Is it still not dead? I have to finish it off.* But I couldn't move. Was it the poison on its skin? I couldn't believe it; one touch and the toxin had already taken hold. Things were turning *seriously* south. The paralysis was spreading rapidly. I could feel my movements growing more and more restricted.

Then, Shiro and Kuro sprang into action.

"Myaaah! Get away from Thor!"

"Woof! Thoooor!"

In a wild frenzy, they unleashed spell after spell, each strike sending splatters of blood from the poison beast's body as it shook violently. Some of the spells hit its head, and brain matter oozed out from the gash. *Uh, hello, the stuff is dripping on me!*—but I couldn't even talk.

The poison beast lay utterly still. Thanks to my cooking magic, it appeared to my eyes like nothing more than an ingredient, meaning it was dead at last. Summoning every ounce of strength I had left, I sealed the enormous body away in storage. The oppressive weight that had pinned me down finally lifted—I was free.

"Thor! Are you okay?!"

"Thor, you good?"

It must have been the beast's blood and body fluids soaking me—I couldn't even cry out, and each breath grew harder to take. I cast a detox spell on myself. With a few repetitions, the numbness began to lift. A few more, and the paralysis had all but vanished. *Practicing silent casting really paid off. If it weren't for all that training, I might've suffocated right then and there.* Still, the fatigue lingered even after the paralysis was gone. I must've burned through a good chunk of both stamina and mana.

"I'm fine now," I said to them.

"Ooohhh! I'm so glad!"

"Thooor!"

"W-Wait," I blurted out. "Don't hug me! Agh!" The instant Shiro and Kuro threw themselves onto me, a searing pain tore through my body. *Something's broken—a rib maybe?*

To make matters worse, ignoring my warning and pouncing onto me caused them to be paralyzed on the spot. It was hardly a surprise, given that I was soaked in poison beast fluid, which was also splattered all over the ground.

"H-Huh? My *meowth weerd.*"

"Huhhh? *Weerd.*"

"Gosh," I breathed. "Hold on."

First, I cast a detox spell on them, and on the blood around us too, just to be safe. Then, as I tended to my own wounds and drank some potion, a sudden glow lit up the center of the room. Was it

another enemy?

Fighting off my fatigue, I readied myself, but what stepped out of the light wasn't a magical beast. It didn't even seem alive.

"It's a box," said Shiro.

"A box?" I said. Yes, what had appeared was a set of three wooden boxes. Even from a distance, their ornate designs and hint of luxury were unmistakable. The purpose of this room finally became clear.

"This was a dungeon?!" I exclaimed.

"*Dun-jun*?" said Kuro.

"What's a dungeon?" said Shiro.

The two girls tilted their heads at the unfamiliar word.

"It's hard to explain," I said. "It's a mysterious place."

They looked perplexed, but that was understandable since I'd barely given them an explanation. Not that I knew much, myself. Dungeons were said to be strange places ruled by laws unlike those of the outside world. Monsters would spawn from nowhere, treasure chests appeared with no clear origin, and sometimes mystic herbs grew there as well. Some claimed dungeons were divine trials, while others believed they were traps set by demons to lure in humans. Of course, this was all just stuff I'd overheard from my parents.

What really mattered was this: magical beasts spawned there. Unlike in games, they didn't vanish when killed; after all, I was able to put the poison beast away in storage. In short, if you could defeat a beast, you could get its meat.

"I'll explain when we get back," I said. "Let's just open the treasure chests. I used up too much magic, so my mana's—huh?"

What's going on here? I still have mana, maybe around twenty percent of my full capacity. But how? After all the spells I threw out, I'm lucky I'm not completely drained. Was it because I defeated the poison beast? Did absorbing its mana increase my limit? That's the only explanation I can come up with. That thing must've been way stronger than I'd thought. Now that I think about it, treasure chests only appear when you take down a boss or some kind of special enemy. The way the poison spread so unnaturally fast...it would all make sense if that thing had been a special boss variant.

"Thor?" said Shiro.

"What's wrooong?"

"Oh, nothing," I answered. "I'll use Mana Arm to open the chest, so you two stay back."

It could've been booby-trapped—or worse, it could've been a mimic-like monster.

"All right then, opening it up!" I said.

"Opening it up!"

"Up!"

With a wall of wind raised just in case, I reached out with a five-meter Mana Arm and grabbed the lid of one of the chests. It had no lock and opened pretty easily. A heavy clunk echoed, and in the next instant, there was a sharp pop, followed by a blast of fire erupting from inside. My magical wall was blown away, and a wave of heat rushed toward us. *This is a nastier trap than I'd expected!* If I'd been careless, I would've turned into a walking fireball.

I opened all three chests from a safe distance, then waited a moment before cautiously approaching. The air still carried the faint scent of something scorched, but surprisingly, the contents of the chests were untouched—no burns, no ash.

"Umm, are these clothes?" I wondered out loud.

"These are clothes too!"

"Aaand a staff."

The spoils were modest: two sets of cloth armor and a short staff, roughly thirty centimeters in length. The staff was one thing, but the clothes were far too large for us to wear and were clearly meant for adults. *Wait, didn't equipment from a dungeon have a feature that resized it to fit the wearer? Or was that only for higher-tier gear? We'll try them on when we get back.* I grabbed the items from the chest to get a closer look and saw that there was a set of dress shirt and pants, along with another outfit that could only be described as a maid's uniform. *Why a maid outfit? Wait, does that make the other one a servant's uniform for men? Again, why?* The staff was clearly mage gear, but the clothing? That part didn't make sense.

We trudged back home, our bodies worn and battered. We didn't encounter any magical beasts on the way, which was lucky. Even a

poison rat might've taken us out with the condition we were in.

For the record, the treasure chests couldn't be stored in my inventory. As soon as I took the loot out, they dissolved into light and vanished—probably just another one of the dungeon's strange mechanics.

"We made it back," I said, sighing with relief.

"I'm *tie-urd*," said Shiro.

"Tired," Kuro agreed.

The two of them crumpled to the ground and flopped onto their backs, utterly spent. It looked like their strength had given out the moment the tension lifted.

"Nice work out there," I said. "You can rest for a bit. I'll cook something for you."

"Thanks so much."

"Thaaanks."

I was exhausted too, but hunger pressed harder. I decided to use the poison beast meat we'd just acquired. It was dangerous stuff, full of lethal toxins, but thanks to my storage space, it had been completely broken down. I took out just the meat and used holy magic to detoxify it, making it safe and edible. *Better detox and sterilize the cutting board while I'm at it.*

"What should I make?" I wondered aloud. They say that poison beast meat is best served as a stew, but I didn't have any of the proper ingredients for that. I guessed that meant simmering it would be better than grilling it, so I started out by making a broth with the poison beast's bones. I cracked them open with a handmade stone hammer to let the marrow seep out more easily, then laid them out in the pot. Then, I cast one spell to fill it with water, and another to rapidly bring it up to the proper temperature.

Slow cooking would bring out more flavor, sure, but I was more concerned with putting something in my stomach. Using fire magic for heat and water magic to concentrate the flavor, I skimmed off the scum as it rose. After about five minutes, the broth was ready.

I tossed in some Japanese wild onion look-alike, water dropwort look-alike, shimeji mushroom look-alike, and chopped meat. After a short simmer, I seasoned the broth with salt and a splash of vinegar-

mushroom extract. And with that, the dish was complete.

"Mutated poisonous beast and wild plant soup, cave style." Magical effects: small life recovery, small mana recovery, very small life boost, and small mana boost, complete.

I've never seen the mana boost effect before. Honestly, I've never really felt the life boost either, so I'm not sure how much of an effect it really had. And "mutated poisonous beast"? So it was a mutated specimen? I knew that, in the dungeon, some monsters mutated and became stronger because of the mana—it looks like that's what we faced. No wonder it was so tough. I'm surprised we managed to beat it. The mutation must've only boosted the strength of its poison, not its physical strength. That was a blessing since we could wield holy magic, but if it had been one of those specimens immune to magic, we'd have been doomed.

As I mulled things over, I heard some soft, adorable growls echo from the entrance. I turned to see two little faces peeking in through the kitchen doorway.

"Thooorrr," said Shiro.

"We're so huuungryyy."

"I know, I know," I said. "I just finished."

"Oh, that's perfect!"

"Perfect."

If I wanted to keep feeding them proper meals, I'd have to keep hunting magical beasts in the dungeon. There was no telling if we'd run into another mutated poison beast, but either way, I needed to stay sharp.

"All right, let me through," I said.

"A-okay!"

"'Kay."

I gently nudged them aside and moved toward the table. There was no way I could carry the soup bowls by hand. Now that I had the body of a child, I'd probably spill it all over the floor. Instead, I put the bowls in storage and pulled them back out at the table. And just like that, dinner was served.

"Let's eat," I said.

"Let's eat!" the girls followed in unison. They clapped their hands

once in appreciation, their minds clearly fixed on the food in front of them. Then, they immediately dove into their bowls, practically shoving their faces into the soup.

"Myah!"

"Arf!"

"So good you can't even contain yourselves, huh?" I said, trying the poison beast soup myself. I felt a flicker of mana stir back to life. *I just ate a tiny bit, and I can already notice it? Seriously? This stuff might just be the real deal. Even the lingering bruises across my body and the dull ache in my side are completely gone. Must be the life recovery effect kicking in. Honestly, it's way beyond anything the lowest-tier potion can do. The soup only had a "small" mana recovery tag on it, but if this is what "small" feels like...what would "medium" or "great" do? I've never actually seen anything above "small," but supposedly the ranks go: slight, very small, small, medium, great, very great, and ultimate. "Ultimate," huh? That sounds like the kind of thing that would turn you into something not quite human. Well, if we ever wanted ingredients with effects ranked higher than "small," we'd have to take on even higher-level magical beasts, but right now, that would be nothing short of suicide!*

Besides, we had enough poison beast meat left for five or six more meals. The bones were thick and heavy, so we didn't get as much meat as I'd hoped, but it was still a decent haul. I should be able to get by with this for the time being.

Plus, maybe it was because it came from a mutated specimen, but the meat was extremely good—easily the best thing I'd eaten since coming to this world. I'd only used salt and vinegar as a seasoning, but the broth came out incredibly flavorful. I had more bones than I knew what to do with, and the broth alone would elevate any dish going forward. *I gotta say, we scored big with this one!*

Shiro and Kuro seemed to like the soup too, and their bodies must have been crying out for something with recovery effects. They were noisily slurping it down with such fierce enthusiasm, it was like they'd decided this soup wasn't for anyone else. *It's a rewarding feeling, but...aren't they pigging out a little* too *much?*

"Make sure to chew," I told them.

The two kept chowing away and ended up finishing their meat-loaded soups in about three minutes.

"So happy."

"I'm fuuull."

The two of them lay sprawled on the floor, their bellies perfectly—or terrifyingly—round. They might've burst if I poked them. *A-Are they really okay? I think they ate too much.*

"I've never had anything so good!" said Shiro.

"My first truuue happiness."

Come to think of it, both Shiro and Kuro had been enslaved at a young age. They'd probably never had a proper meal. The thought alone made me tear up.

"Thor?" said Shiro, "Are you crying?"

"What's wrooong?"

"Nothing!" I said. "Nothing at all! My eyes are just leaking a little! I-I'll make sure you get plenty of good food from now on!"

"Yay!"

"Woo-hoo."

Go ahead and eat until your stomachs are bursting every time! I'll make sure you're always stuffed full!

I definitely needed to get my hands on more magical beast meat in the dungeon. I'd also heard that wild plants grew down there and that there was even a chance of finding ingredients and other materials in treasure chests.

"Oh, the treasure chests!" I exclaimed. I'd forgotten about the clothes we'd obtained. I pulled the maid outfit out of storage. It wasn't the classic, prim-and-proper kind but a frilly, shoulderless, miniskirted, fantasy-style maid dress—yet it still had an air of innocence and modesty. *What is this outfit that hits all of my weak spots?! Outrageous!*

Still, if they could wear it, it'd be a huge help.

"Shiro, Kuro," I called out to them, "mind trying this on to see if it fits?"

"Clothes?"

"Frilly."

"They look hard to move in."

"Then Kuro will wear it," said Kuro.

Apparently, Shiro wasn't too fond of skirts. Kuro, on the other hand, had stars in her eyes. It looked like the girliness contest went to Kuro.

"Here, try this on," I said. "Start with the skirt."

"Got it," Kuro said, slipping the white skirt on under her blouse. It immediately shrank to fit her perfectly. It looked like it had been custom-made for her slim waist. "Wow, it got smaller!"

"That's so cool!" said Shiro.

When Kuro took the skirt off, it returned to its original size. The size-adjustment feature was working flawlessly, meaning it was a magical item. I hadn't expected to find something so nice right next to the dungeon's entrance. Then again, it might've just been ordinary clothing with size adjustment. Still, that was more than enough for us since we didn't exactly have any proper clothes.

I wished I could get a better read on its features, but I didn't have anything as convenient as an appraisal skill. The only reason I could identify ingredients or materials at all was thanks to my cooking magic and the knowledge that had been implanted in my head.

Then Kuro equipped the blouse, apron, knee-high socks, pumps, and gloves, each piece adjusting itself flawlessly to her size. The whole outfit came together in a black-and-white two-tone, resulting in an adorable maid look.

"Whoa, Kuro, you look so cute!" I said.

"Woof," said Kuro with a smug little look. She spun around and struck a pose, her fluffy tail swaying back and forth behind her—*perfection.*

While I kept fawning over how cute Kuro looked, I noticed Shiro watching from the side, her finger in her mouth and her eyes full of envy.

"Lucky you," she mumbled. She might've hated skirts, but it was clear that Kuro's cuteness had sparked some jealousy in her. It probably didn't help that I'd been showering Kuro with compliments.

Hmm...maybe I should have Shiro try on the other outfit. I could

probably wear it since it has pants, but I should be fair in how I treat them.

"All right then, Shiro," I said. "Want to try this outfit?"

"Meow! Yeah!"

She fumbled a bit with the belt but eventually managed to get dressed. Once again, the outfit adjusted itself to fit her. Black shorts, white shirt, white gloves, black crossover tie, suspenders, and leather shoes—it all came together into something that looked like a butler-in-training uniform. The asymmetrical pair of gray knee-high socks, one shorter than the other, was definitely women's fashion though. A woman's butler uniform, maybe? Whatever the case, Shiro looked good as well.

"You're looking cute too, Shiro," I said.

"Meow!"

"Can you move okay in it?"

"It's easy to move in!"





"Nooo problem," said Kuro. Her outfit was apparently fit for battle as well. I was still wearing the same plain black clothes, but I'd acquired a staff, so I couldn't complain. I tried casting a bit of magic and it felt a bit easier to handle—it was better than nothing. This was probably par for the course for the treasures you find early in the dungeon.

"Shiro, Kuro, I'm planning on exploring the dungeon some more. What about you two?"

The whole ordeal must've shaken them. If they wanted to stay behind, I wouldn't have minded. I'd learned the hard way that the dungeon was a fight for survival. Having Shiro and Kuro's magic would be huge, but it was more important to me that I didn't push them beyond their limits.

Still, they both shook their heads firmly.

"We're coming with you!" said Shiro.

"We're coming!"

"Next time, we're gonna win!" said Shiro.

"Get them with ooone shot," followed Kuro.

There wasn't a hint of fear on their faces. They actually seemed full of determination. Evidently, while they regretted nearly losing due to their momentary lapse, that frustration hadn't spiraled into fear.

They both amazed me. If I'd been their age, I'd have been the first to say I wasn't going to the dungeon again. Was it because they were natives of this world? Or because they were beastfolk? Whatever the reason, if they were set on going, I had no objections. Honestly, I was more worried they'd get *too* fired up and end up tripping themselves up.

"We're doing this!" said Shiro.

"Yeaaah!"

Man, I gotta keep a close eye on them to make sure they don't do anything reckless...

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Side Story: Carolina

"Is this the way to the general store?" I asked a passerby.

The day after the mysterious boy had healed my eyes, I made my way back to my old workplace and somehow convinced them to take me back. My vision was still blurry, but as long as I could move my hands and hold a pen, I could copy manuscripts. Under normal circumstances, they likely would've turned me away without a second thought—maybe even berating me as they did—but the circumstances were anything *but* normal. The heaven dragon fire had destroyed a great number of books, and they were desperate for scribes. The restoration of temple texts was a particularly urgent matter. I imagined the head scribe was under no small amount of pressure to speed up production.

Perhaps that was why they agreed to take me back. I still needed a cane to get around, but if that boy healed me just once more, I might be able to walk on my own again. *Who is he, really?— No, it's better that I don't know. There's no way he's just an ordinary person.* Even the high priest, who'd happened to be in town at the time, had tried healing me with holy magic, but in the end, he had said there was nothing he could do. The flames that had burned my eyes were imbued with mana. He had mentioned that stronger magic might do the trick, but the cost was so high that I wouldn't have come close to being able to afford it even if I had sold myself into slavery.

And yet after a single treatment from that boy, my vision had improved—even if only a little. It was incredible. He looked like a child, but from the way he spoke and the strength of his holy magic, it was clear he was no ordinary person.

At first, I thought he might be an angel or a spirit. Then I wondered if he was an elf in disguise. The truth was it didn't matter. I wouldn't care if he turned out to be a demon. To me, he was my

savior.

As far as I was concerned, he really could've been an angel. He had healed me with extraordinary magic, yet all he asked for in return was a bit of food and some supplies. It was too good to be true. Granted, he didn't exactly speak like an angel—he was a bit curt—but still. Either way, I had no intention of telling anyone about him—not even if they tortured me. If he wanted something done, I would do anything.

First things first, I needed to earn enough to buy the salt and other items he'd asked for. That's what I'd been thinking as I made my way down the road, until I spotted a group of soldiers walking toward me from the other direction. The memory of being shoved to the ground came flooding back, and my body tensed instinctively. This time, however, they didn't lay a hand on me, simply stopping a few paces away.

They stood in front of a shop that sold herbs, which were now scarce and quite expensive due to the shortage. That was why I hadn't been able to afford any myself.

As one might expect, the soldiers started bargaining with the elderly woman keeping the shop. I slipped closer to eavesdrop on their conversation. The angel had said he wanted to live quietly, and while I didn't know where he was staying, it seemed likely he couldn't just wander around freely. It might please him if I gathered information about the town.

"These are premium antidotes," snapped the shopkeeper. "You should be paying at least three times that."

"We really need these antidotes," a soldier replied.

"Did you get sick eating raw meat or something?"

"No! If that was it, I wouldn't be asking for the premium stuff, now would I?"

What could they possibly need such expensive antidotes for? Those were supposed to be reserved for the poison of powerful magical beasts. Cheap medicine would have sufficed for the poison rats scurrying around the slums.

"A mutated poison beast has appeared," the soldier explained. "That single creature took down three knights and six soldiers. On

top of that, ten more have become paralyzed because of its poison. Regular antidotes are only making the symptoms a bit more bearable."

"What? It's just one beast you're talking about." The shopkeeper seemed incredulous.

I shared the same skepticism, but the soldier's desperation was clear as he tried to explain the situation.

"It takes about ten knights to kill a mutated beast, and even then, some won't make it. If you want to face it without any casualties, you need at least twenty men armed with shields and arrows."

"Why were they fighting a beast like that in the first place?" said the shopkeeper. "Did that greedy lord send them into the dungeon?" The old woman's words were bordering on criminal disrespect toward the lord, but if they had angered the soldier at all, he didn't show it. He just answered softly, clearly worn out.

"It came out of the dungeon..."

"A magical beast came out of the dungeon?" she said in disbelief.

"Yeah. Ever since that dragon went on its rampage, monsters have been spilling out now and then. Ones we'd never seen, from the deeper layers! They're only supposed to exist in places so dangerous that even mercenaries can't reach."

"Th-That sounds bad. Are we even safe?" the shopkeeper said, her voice quavering.

I'd never heard of anything like that before either, but apparently, strange occurrences start to unfold as a dungeon grows. Monsters start emerging outside, and the invasion from the otherworld into the human realm begins, opening up new entrances.

"After that, four people got killed by an upper-tier slime called an 'acid,'" said the soldier, his voice faltering. "If we don't have antidotes on hand, we're going to run out of able bodies fast!"

"We don't even have enough for ten people," said the shopkeeper.

"We'll take whatever you have!"

Monsters that can wipe out knights and soldiers with ease...the dungeon really was as deadly as they said. I couldn't help but

wonder what was going to happen to this town from here on out.

"But I heard there's some strong knight around," said the shopkeeper. "He fought that dragon, didn't he? If he's as strong as they're saying, can't he handle it?"

"Not gonna happen. The guy barely does anything."

"What does that mean? He's a knight, isn't he?"

"It means what I said. Most of the time he's just lounging around in his quarters or standing around on patrol. We only just found out he was that strong."

Apparently, a once-famous knight had become a retainer under the local lord. These days, though, he barely lifted a finger, and his reputation had soured because of it. Still, they said he'd stood alongside mercenaries and fought the dragon, severing its claw. I had no idea someone like that was living in this town.

"I heard he hates kids," the old woman said. "Is that true?"

"Yeah, about that," the soldier said, hesitating. "He went down to the slums after hearing that they found the runaway beastfolk brats. Turns out it was a false report. Normally, you'd just forget about it and leave, but..." He trailed off. The story was that the do-nothing knight had been seen laughing and roughing up slum children.

A chill ran through me. I only hoped the angel was safe. *Maybe the next time I see him, I should warn him.*

***

The very next day after our near-death struggle with the poison beast, we found ourselves once again stepping into the dungeon. I opened a hole in the same spot as before, the same dense mana in the air brushing against our skin as we moved deeper inside.

We'd almost died yesterday, but I felt refreshed—amazing even. My movements were sharp. Did I owe this to absorbing the poison beast's mana? Shiro and Kuro looked just as energized, walking with an easy bounce in their steps. Shiro hummed happily, and Kuro let out a cute little bark.

Is it really okay that they seem so carefree? Hopefully, all that energy doesn't backfire. Should I give them a stern talking-to? Or

would that end up killing their motivation? In the end, I settled on a light reminder.

"We're almost in the room from yesterday. You two all right?"

"Myah!"

"Wuffu!" Shiro and Kuro nodded, their faces set with focus.

"Any magical beasts?" I said cautiously. In dungeons, monsters would appear out of nowhere. The ones you killed could respawn in just a few hours, and sometimes, something entirely different would show up.

I remembered a story my parents once told me, about a mercenary who nearly lost their life after a delay in returning from the dungeon—the monster they'd defeated had respawned. There weren't that many mercenaries delving into the dungeon to begin with, so it wasn't like you could count on someone else clearing the path for you.

The dungeon beneath this town was sprawling and intricately laid out, with countless branching paths, so most mercenaries stuck to the routes they'd personally cleared instead of tracing the routes of others. That worked in our favor, at least, as the chances of running into anyone else down here was pretty low.

"Are you both ready with your spells?" I asked the girls.

"A-okay!"

"Arf!"

Shiro and Kuro couldn't quite hide their anxiety—there was unease in their eyes. That cheerful humming from moments ago might have been a bluff to keep the fear at bay. But I didn't have it in me to offer them the option of retreat. I was probably wearing the same look myself. The memory of nearly dying had left a deeper scar than I'd expected. My fingers were trembling.

Still, I couldn't afford to be afraid here.

I pressed my trembling fingers against my face and forced a smile. It might have looked strained, but right now, having at least a facade was crucial. If I showed any sign of fear, it would only make them more uneasy.

"All right, let's move out."

"Got it!"

"Okieee."

Cautiously, we stepped into the room where we'd barely survived the battle with the poison beast. Determined not to repeat yesterday's mistake, we thoroughly surveyed the area.

"There!" I exclaimed, eyeing another magical beast crouched in the dim corner where the poison beast had been.

"Meow!"

"Hiyah!"

Shiro had innate night vision and Kuro had mastered a spell that allowed her to see in the dark. They spotted the enemy almost at the exact same moment I detected its mana.

Without hesitation, the three of us launched a coordinated assault. For at least a full twelve seconds, spell after spell tore through the air.

The creature huddled in the corner stopped breathing, not once moving from its place.

"We did it!" said Shiro as I stood there panting.

"Victooory."

I moved forward with the utmost caution, and my cooking magic immediately identified the beast as an ingredient, confirming that it was dead. It was another poison beast, with dull gray fur, but it was only about half the size of the one we'd fought yesterday. Once I stored it, its remains were sorted into meat and bones. This one appeared to be a normal specimen, without any mutations. *Telling it apart from a mutated poison beast is gonna be tricky.*

Just then, a shift appeared in the mental inventory of the stored materials. To my surprise, the poison beast parts from yesterday were now marked with the label "mutated": mutated poison beast meat, mutated poison beast bones, mutated poison beast toxic blood, mutated poison beast... Technically, I could've categorized the meat even further, but that just would've confused me. Besides, I couldn't cook anything fancy enough to need different cuts, so rough sorting was fine for now.

Actually, something else caught my attention more. I'd always assumed the storage assigned names automatically, but apparently, I could rename things however I liked. Now that I thought about it, I

had already been giving names to wild plants with no official classification, like water dropwort look-alike and mustard green look-alike. This system offered more freedom than I'd realized.

"No treasure chests," said Shiro.

"Bummer."

While I'd been caught up in checking the inventory, Shiro and Kuro were near the center of the room, heads drooping in disappointment. As they'd pointed out, there were no treasure chests this time. Was yesterday's haul only a first-time thing? Thinking back, the monster *had* been a mutated specimen, so maybe it came with a special perk. It was a bit of a letdown, sure, but also a relief. If we had to face mutated beasts every time, we'd be in serious trouble. At least now we could move on from this room.

"You two good to keep going?" I asked.

"Not tired at all!" Shiro chirped.

"Nooo problem."

The fight had ended in seconds and we'd only spent a little mana—that was it. Our nerves had definitely taken a toll, but not enough to make us turn back.

We pressed on toward the next passage, heading deeper into the dungeon. Carefully, I tapped the ground ahead of us with a rod of stone conjured through magic. There was always the chance of traps in a place like this, and using this method, we soon managed to detect one: a wire stretched just above the floor that triggered a pit beneath our feet. It was another reminder of how unforgiving the dungeon could be.

After that close call, we advanced with even more caution. It couldn't have been more than a hundred meters, but it took us ten full minutes to get through. Clearly, exploring this place was going to take longer than I'd hoped. There was no reason to take unnecessary risks though, since we'd already secured a good haul of poison beast meat.

"Now, which way should we go?" I wondered out loud.

"There's something over there," said Shiro.

"I smell it."

A living creature had caught their attention as I hesitated at a fork in the path. They were alert, their eyes fixed on the right-hand corridor.

I paused for a moment.

"Then let's check the left path first," I said, finally. *I'm not chickening out, all right? I just want to scout a potential escape route while the coast is clear.*

The left passage stretched on, dimly lit by that same mysterious, sourceless glow. The light wasn't bright enough for us to see very far ahead, but it was enough to keep us aware of our surroundings. *No signs of any traps or magical beasts—*

"Arf!"

"Huh? Kuro?" I said.

Without warning, Kuro shoved me from behind, sending me stumbling forward. *What the hell?* Before I could steady myself, a vivid green shape plummeted down right where I had just been standing, making a squelching noise as it did.

"Blubbberrr!"

"I-It's a monster!" Shiro said.

"Awoooo," whimpered Kuro.

The strange creature was bad enough, but worse, a thick, ominous green liquid had coated Kuro's arm. She grimaced in pain, letting out a low groan. I faltered, weighing my options between attacking the monster or tending to Kuro.

In that instant, Shiro kicked into high gear, instinctively firing off a spell.

"Myah! Wind Blade!" she chanted, unleashing a sharp gust from her outstretched hand.

It was a mistake. The liquid covering the beast's body scattered with the wind, splashing all over us and clinging to our skin.

"Agghh!" I shrieked.

"Myah," whimpered Shiro.

"Ooow."

A burning pain surged through us. I used a detox spell, but the pain wouldn't let up. Our clothes began to melt away, and our skin blistered and burned. The fact that the spell didn't work must have

meant this was acid. It wasn't strong enough to dissolve our skin instantly, but the fierce stinging robbed me of all concentration. I couldn't shape my mana with any precision.

"Blub-blubberrr!"

"It's still alive," I said.

Though it had weakened, the beast continued to writhe and struggle. Abandoning precise mana control, I released a powerful burst of water magic. I had no choice but to pour out more than twice my usual mana—the pain made delicate manipulation impossible anyway.

The spell I cast wasn't meant to strike the beast. Direct attacks would only repeat our previous mistake, so my plan was to wash the slime away with a flood of water, which I formed into a massive sphere.

The beast struggled, and I only managed to put just three meters of distance between us, but that was enough. I fired three sharp Water Needles at it. I'd considered using fire magic, but the thought of vaporizing the acid into toxic fumes stopped me. The needles pierced the green ball of liquid, but it still writhed on. *That's not enough to kill this thing?*

"Shiro, Kuro," I called out, "let's get farther back!"

"O-Okay!"

"Arf," Kuro said, her eyes welling up. Her arm must have been burning fiercely.

We bolted back the way we came, to the room where we'd fought the poison beast. There, I summoned buckets worth of water, and we washed ourselves thoroughly. After several rounds of healing spells, I detoxed, purified, and sterilized our bodies. It cost me nearly eighty percent of my mana, but finally, the pain started to fade.

"Kuro, how are you feeling?" I asked.

Her scorched flesh, blistered and bleeding just moments ago, had completely healed. She swung her arms back and forth a few times to make sure everything was in order, then gave a firm nod. "I'm okay now."

"Good," I sighed.

“That’s great!” said Shiro, letting out a relieved breath before locking eyes with the monster crawling toward us.

It was already closing in on us. We could outrun it, but its speed was still impressive. I studied the creature again, muttering its name aloud to myself: “Acid slime.” Unlike the weak slimes you’d find in games, the ones from this world were deadly creatures, incredibly stealthy, able to survive anywhere, and capable of dissolving almost anything. This one wasn’t just any slime either. It belonged to a variant that had developed acid-type abilities.

Its stealth was on another level as well. It could suppress its own mana and blend seamlessly into the ambient mana of the dungeon. When it stayed still, it was practically silent—no wonder Shiro and I hadn’t sensed it. Its acid, however, emitted a faint stench, which was what had caught Kuro’s attention.

Strangely enough, acid slimes were edible. That was how I’d been able to gather all this knowledge in the first place. The highly acidic liquid part was only good for hide tanning, but the beast did have a body of sorts. Deep inside, around its mana stone, was a solid core—soft and chewy, with a taste like vermicelli noodles. There wasn’t much of it, granted, but it would be a nice change from endless cuts of meat.

“S-So, how do we kill it?” Shiro asked.

“Kuro, this is a job for you,” I said. “Hit it with a few Darkness Blades.”

“Okie,” Kuro said as she stepped back, launching a flurry of blades. One after another, they drove into the green gooey mass, each strike resounding with a dull thud.

The creature suddenly lost all momentum, melting away on the spot. Since it used mana to maintain its acidic body fluid, when it died, it must have lost its ability to hold itself together. That’s why Kuro’s magic worked so well on it: Dark magic has the ability to deplete mana. Between her sharp nose and affinity for dark magic, Kuro was essentially a slime’s natural enemy.

“There’s the core,” I said, pointing at the blue gelatinous lump in the middle of the green liquid staining the floor. “I wonder if our mana reserves grew too. It’s hard to say.”

The thing had put up a fight, but unlike with the mutated beast, it didn't seem to yield much in the way of mana absorption. Still, it was better than the sewer-dwelling bottom-feeders.

"That was all you, Kuro," I said.

"Kuro, that was amazing!"

"Wuffu!" Kuro flashed a proud grin.

If she hadn't shoved me out of the way, that acid slime would've landed right on my head, acid searing into my skin and eyes and choking me—I wasn't sure I'd have been able to keep calm. It would've been just as bad for Shiro and Kuro since attacking the monster could've harmed me as well. Would they have been able to react in time, or would they have lost those precious seconds hesitating out of sheer panic? The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that we'd come within inches of disaster.

"From here on, we need to be careful about what's above us too."

"A-okay!"

"Arf."

It's impressive that neither of you have lost your spirit after everything we've been through, but let's call it a day and head back. My mana's nearly spent. I'm exhausted.

"I'm curious about what slime tastes like anyway," I said.

"Oh! Me too!"

"Fooor sure." Shiro and Kuro quickly agreed to turn back, clearly intrigued by the idea of cooking slime.

Thankfully, no monsters or traps had respawned in the short time we had spent exploring, and we slipped out of the dungeon without trouble. I sealed the entrance behind us with magic. I couldn't say for sure if that would be enough, but we had to do everything we could to keep the monsters from getting out. If the sewers flooded with dangerous magical beasts, then mercenaries and soldiers would inevitably come sniffing around—and that would put our hideout at serious risk of being discovered.

Upon returning safely to our dwelling, Shiro and Kuro immediately began clamoring for the acid slime. They were still brimming with energy—perhaps proof of the greater stamina that came with being beastfolk. I'd been curious about the taste myself, so after a brief

rest, I set about preparing the slime.

There wasn't much of it, so I decided to chop it finely and serve it in a noodle-like form. Using a cleansing spell, I neutralized the acid before giving it a thorough rinse. To my surprise, the magical beast turned into a clean, semitransparent lump, its texture oddly similar to that of a deflated rubber ball.

It wouldn't be nearly enough to satisfy even just three kids like us, but since the main dish was going to be meat, that wouldn't be a problem. I sliced the slime into thin strands resembling glass noodles and boiled them for a few minutes. Then, I added detoxed poison rat meat boiled in salt water, a handful of wild plants, vinegar made from vinegar mushrooms, and a dash of chili pepper look-alike. And to finish off the dish, I added a final touch of salt.

"Hot and sour soup with poisonous rat and sticky beast noodles, cave style." Magical effects: slight life recovery, slight stamina recovery, slight mana recovery, slight mana boost, complete.

Though it was little more than a hearty soup with large cuts of meat, with just a token serving of noodles, my cooking magic had judged it a noodle dish. I'd held back on the spiciness quite a bit for Shiro and Kuro's sake, but even so, it was reminiscent of the hot and sour noodles from my previous life.

"This is so good!" said Shiro.

"Sour, sour, sooour!"

"The slight tingle is super!"

"Suuuper."

They were clearly enjoying themselves, even though they were struggling with slurping the noodles. They eventually started to get the hang of it, after I asked them about it. It turned out this was their first experience with noodles, so they didn't know how to eat them. I planned on telling them to twirl the noodles with a fork if necessary, but as a former Japanese man, I naturally preferred slurping. *I guess it all depends on the etiquette in this world. I can look into it once we're able to go out and about.*

"More of the 'slight' magic effects, huh?" I mused. *This is no different from the low-level magical beasts lurking in the sewers—and we went through hell taking this thing down... Setting aside the*

mutated specimen, which was in a class of its own, does this mean the acid slime ranks about the same as a poison rat or gabul root? If that's the case, I can't even begin to imagine what the higher-ranking beasts are like.

A flicker of fear settled inside me at the idea of entering the dungeon again, but we had no choice. We had to go back to gather ingredients and to grow stronger.

"What's wrong?" asked Shiro.

"Something the matter?"

"Huh?" I said. "No, everything's fine. I was just thinking that the dungeon's a scary place, but we'll just have to do what we can."

"Shiro will do what she can too!"

"Kuro toooo."

They both smiled brightly, raising their hands in the air to show their determination. Not a shred of fear about the dungeon showed on their faces. They truly seemed resolved to give it their all. Perhaps it was simple naivety, but right now, that carefree spirit was exactly what I needed. The lingering fear I'd held toward the dungeon quietly slipped away. I couldn't help but wonder what I was doing, being comforted by the same girls I'd vowed to protect.

"Well then," I said, "let's get training! Whatever kind of enemies are waiting for us, we're gonna find them before they find us and handle them accordingly!"

"Meow!"

"Arf."

With their spirits still high, it was time for some magic training. I'd been toying with the idea that, with their abilities, the two of them might be able to replicate a form of magical detection. Shiro's wind magic, in particular, might've been well suited for broad-range scouting—no, it *definitely* was. The catch was that I couldn't use that kind of magic, myself, so I wouldn't be able to teach it to them. Still, I explained the concept of using wind to probe one's surroundings and instructed Shiro to begin practicing.

From what I understood, the common method for learning new magic in this world was to continuously channel mana into the spirits while envisioning the magic you wished to wield. Even if the spell

didn’t activate right away, the image transmitted through mana would eventually prompt the spirit to grant a similar magical ability. Of course, without sufficient skill, this was all out of the question. A novice couldn’t just beg for a super spell capable of leveling mountains—and besides, they wouldn’t have enough mana for the spirits to even *consider* such a request in the first place.

“Use wind...to find enemies?” Shiro said, making odd cat noises to herself.

It sounded challenging, but if she could pull it off, it would be a formidable asset. I wished her the best of luck.

“Thor,” said Kuro, “what about Kuuuro?”

“Maybe use dark magic to detect what’s hiding in the shadows?”

“Oooh, I seeee.”

“And you might be able to sense heat with fire magic,” I added.

Since there was a spell for measuring temperature, detecting heat sources might have indeed been possible. When I explained this, Kuro immediately set to experimenting without hesitation. I hated to admit it, but compared to Shiro, Kuro showed far more promise. She was naturally gifted with magic and could sustain her focus for longer stretches.

Anyway, I decided to begin training in a particular spell myself. Chances were, I could only wield magic already etched into my brain. I had no sense of the spirits, nor had I ever learned any new spells from them, but having over a hundred spells from the start was more than enough. Still, that meant I needed to find useful spells within the arsenal I already possessed.

The one that caught my attention was a spell called “Water Source Detection.” True to its name, it allowed the caster to sense nearby bodies of water. It was probably designed for situations where one needed to locate water outdoors—*just how many things fall under a magical chef’s job, anyway?*—but at the moment, it was exactly the sort of magic I needed.

When I narrowed the spell’s range, I was able to clearly sense the moisture inside Shiro’s and Kuro’s bodies. It was pretty imprecise, and I could only discern the vague direction of the water source, but with more practice and clearer visualization, I might eventually

become able to detect the moisture of magical beasts in hiding. Of course, if a beast had no moisture at all, they'd remain undetectable—but that was a problem for another day.

"Myah!" Shiro suddenly let out a frustrated cry, overwhelmed by confusion. I decided it was time to lend her a hand.

Oh, I should mention that the problem with our equipment hadn't been solved either, since the dungeon gear we'd acquired had already been ruined. I'd hoped some mysterious magic would mend it, but the acid from the acid slime had left the girls' clothes in tatters.

And then, right before my eyes, Shiro's equipment began to glow. In an instant, the holes had mended, and the fabric was restored to pristine condition like it was brand new.

"What?" I said. "Wait, what just happened?"

Almost simultaneously, Kuro's maid outfit shimmered with the same strange light and repaired itself. What I learned after talking with them fascinated me: apparently, when the wearer channeled their mana into the gear with the intent to repair it, the gear would restore itself automatically.

At first, Shiro had felt a chill on her back, and had manipulated her mana to try using wind magic to warm herself. Then, seeing that the phenomenon of Shiro's clothes was clearly of magical origin, Kuro had thought if she focused her mana, her outfit might repair itself as well. By pure chance, we'd uncovered an incredible feature. It came at a steep cost, though, as the repairs demanded a considerable amount of mana.

"Meow..."

"Awooo..." Nearly drained of mana, Shiro and Kuro let out heavy, sleepy yawns.

***

"All right, then," I said, "how do you read this, Shiro?"

"Umm...umm..."

"Kuro knows!"

"No! Kuro, don't say it! Shiro's still thinking!"

“I knooow.”

Since going on dungeon expeditions every day would wear us out, today we were taking a break from exploring. Well, it wasn’t a full rest; it was a study day, and I was teaching Shiro and Kuro how to read. We were holding our study session using a flat section of the wall as a makeshift blackboard. As for chalk, I’d managed to create some by magically hardening a limestone-like material I’d found in town. It crumbled easily and snapped without much pressure, but it worked well enough for our needs.

“Umm...” Shiro thought for a moment before answering enthusiastically. “Oh, I know! It says ‘hello.’”

“Wrong,” I said.

“What?”

“Okay, Kuro. Your turn.”

“Yeah. It says ‘good morning.’”

“Correct.”

“Meow!”

The blessing I’d received from the god for language ability wasn’t some kind of automatic translation feature. Rather, it was as if the knowledge of the language had been directly implanted into my brain. The words simply came naturally when I needed them. Because of that, teaching Shiro and Kuro how to read and write wasn’t particularly difficult.

Once they had a decent grasp of literacy, my plan was to move on to basic arithmetic. I wasn’t sure how far mathematics had developed in this world, so I’d decided to stick to the fundamentals: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.

Why go to all this effort? Because I had to consider the worst-case scenarios. What if I died during a hunt? What if an accident separated us? What if, gods forbid, they were captured by slave traders?

Knowing how to read and write would come in handy one day for sure. Even if they were enslaved, literacy combined with combat ability might be enough to keep them from being forced to work in some mineral mine.

“Thor, I got it riiight,” said Kuro.

"Yeah, you did."

"What happens if you get it right?"

"What happens?"

Kuro gazed at me intently, a sleepy look in her eyes.

"Umm," I said.

"I got the answer right," Kuro said, tilting her head—*she's so seriously cute.*

"Nice job, I guess?" I said.

"That's it?"

"How's this?" I gave her a pat or two as Kuro nudged her head toward me, asking for it.

"Wuffu."

Kuro's eyes were half closed in bliss, her tail wagging so hard it looked like it might fly off. She was clearly delighted. She was a bit more clingy than usual, today, in an adorable, puppylike way.

"Mmm," she hummed.

"Aw, lucky Kuro! Shiro's gonna get the next one right!"

"I'm taking the next one too," Kuro said, brimming with confidence.

"Thor, hurry! Next question!"

"All right, all right," I said, "stop pulling on me!"

We may have been around the same age, but Shiro was bigger than me. The way she shook me back and forth, I might've ended up with whiplash.

"O-Okay, here's the next question."

Kuro glanced at the word I wrote and seemed to grasp it immediately. "Kuro got it."

"No fair, Kuro!"

"You gotta be faaast."

"Myaaah!" Shiro buried her head in her hands and screamed, clearly stumped.

"Go ahead, Kuro," I said.

"I think it's 'sorry.'"

"Correct!"

"Wuffu!"

"Meooow!"

Kuro wore a smug little grin, clearly pleased with herself. Next to her, Shiro looked genuinely put out.

Kuro had always been better at magic, but it seemed she had a knack for studying too. Maybe it came down to species—cat versus dog. Kuro had the patience to follow instructions and didn't mind studying either, whereas Shiro was the opposite—the athletic type with sharp bursts of focus and raw physical talent. She hated studying. When it came to reading and writing in particular, Kuro was miles ahead.

"Reward pleeease," said Kuro.

"Sure, here."

"Wuffu."

"Meow!" Shiro gnawed at the hem of her shirt, eyes fixed enviously on Kuro, who was reveling in the head pat. *Maybe I should say something.*

"I'll get the next one!" Shiro blurted out.

She was competitive by nature and wasn't the type to give up so easily. She clenched her fists, her expression tightening with resolve. It seemed the setback had only stoked her determination, so I decided to let her be for the time being.

"Meow, meow, meow, meooow!"

"Shiro, it's good that you're writing it over and over again, but that's not even correct," I said.

"Myaaah!" she screamed, burying her head into her hands again.

"Here," I said, "have some wild plant tea."

"Myah! I like this stuff."

"Kuro wants some toooo."

It was a drink I would make by drying and brewing a plant I'd named "perilla look-alike." Surprisingly, it wasn't all that bad. Drying it had stripped away the astringency and grassy notes, leaving only a faint, agreeable bitterness—something like a weak green tea. It was supposed to be good for the body too, making it perfect for when you wanted to wind down. Still, too much might have caused Shiro to wet the bed, so one cup was all I allowed.

Chapter 3: Dungeon Discovery

Several days had passed since we'd discovered the labyrinth.

Today, we once again set exploration aside while I spent the day cooking at our shelter. Shiro and Kuro were "training"—which, in reality, was just a game of tag. Kuro would conjure phantom spheres with the illusion spell she'd just learned while Shiro dodged them. What the two were doing was similar to training, sure, but mostly, it just looked like good old-fashioned fun. Then again, if they could grow stronger while enjoying themselves, all the better.

Food wasn't a problem as we had a good stock of it. We'd only stepped into the first chamber of the dungeon and the room next to it, but even so, we'd managed to bring down another standard, nonmutated poison beast.

We'd also found a patch of moss tucked away in a corner: a blackish species called "fragellia," which proved useful as a cooking ingredient. The moss carried a faint trace of mana, which was supposedly enough to be used in making magical elixirs. I didn't have any knowledge in that field, though, most likely because other ingredients were necessary for making elixirs and because the moss didn't have a strong enough flavor that it could double as a seasoning. Still, it was edible if you put it over heat, and it had some nutrition too. Apparently, the little taste it did have was grassy, but because it lacked any strong bitterness or bite, it might actually work with the right recipe.

I set the detoxed poison beast bones into a pot to simmer and then turned to the meat, taking my time as I pounded it out. It was lean and sinewy, with barely any fat. The flesh had a faint purple sheen to it, even though I'd already drawn out the toxins. Once I finished grinding the meat, I added salt, chili pepper look-alike, watercress look-alike that I'd dried and turned into a powder, and finely chopped fragellia.

"All right, the base is ready," I said.

Next, I transferred a small amount of fat from the poison beast into a hot frying pan and heated it well. Then, I dropped in fist-sized mounds of the meat—I was making Hamburg steaks. I hadn't added any binders, but the poison beast's red meat was naturally sticky enough that, with careful heat control, it held together in the pan. That said, managing the fire was nerve-racking! Without cooking magic, I might have thrown in the towel.

While the Hamburg steaks sizzled, I set about preparing another dish. I pulled out some detoxed poison beast intestine. It was surprisingly long and thin, perfect for crafting sausages. The taste and texture didn't hold a candle to beef or pork intestine, but for our purposes, we couldn't have asked for more. Normally, parasites and bacteria would be a real hazard, but a heavy dose of holy magic kept it safe. *Hooray for cheat abilities!*

Without any proper sausage-making equipment, I simply stuffed the minced meat into the casings by hand and shaped them myself. After boiling and searing them, the poison beast sausages—cave style—were ready.

Hamburg steaks and sausages side by side on the plate—what a killer combo! I might as well go all out now. I'm gonna finish each plate off with a fried egg!

"Poisonous beast Hamburg steak with poisonous beast sausage, cave style." Magical effects: very small life recovery, very small stamina recovery, very small mana recovery, very small life boost, very small mana boost, complete.

The food carried a variety of magical effects, albeit "very small." Regardless, the real priority right now was how they tasted. My cooking magic called it "Hamburg steak" too. I'd assumed my magic assigned names automatically, but maybe, like with storage, my own perception was shaping the name.

"Thor," mumbled Kuro.

"I'm hungry," said Shiro.

"Whoa! Where'd you two come from?" Before I'd realized it, Shiro and Kuro were standing behind me with a look in their eyes like they were on the hunt. *Don't cloak your presence and sneak up on me*

like that!—or was I just too absorbed in cooking? They'd probably worked up an appetite after all that running around.

"Let's eat!" we all said. Without waiting for anything else, the two girls plunged their forks straight into the Hamburg steaks.

"Woooowww!"

"So juuuuuicy!"

They gasped at the juiciness of the meat. Before long, the food had completely vanished into their stomachs, the whole ordeal taking not even three minutes.





"All gone," whimpered Shiro while Kuro licked her plate.

You're both licking your plates and looking all heartbroken, but that's all there is for dinner tonight, okay? As a matter of fact, that was the biggest meal we've had since we met.

Later, I settled the two into bed. *That means it's adult time now—actually, that just means slipping away under the cover of darkness to Carolina's house.*

I'd already gone to check on her once. She'd managed to return to work, and although they'd taken advantage of her and slashed her pay, it was better than starving on the streets. The dragon's fire had turned many books to ash, and scribes were now in high demand, so work was plentiful.

I approached her door and rapped my knuckles on it lightly—three sets of two quick knocks. That was my signal that I had arrived. The door creaked open, and Carolina appeared, her expression softening with relief. She hadn't earned enough to stay at an inn yet, but the time had to be coming soon. Living alone in a place like this wasn't exactly safe, although so far, there hadn't been any signs of trouble. It might have been cruel to say, but the truth was, in her current state—covered in bandages and barely scraping by—Carolina likely wasn't seen as being worth the effort. There was nothing on her worth stealing, and no way to sell her off for profit.

"How's work?" I asked.

"It's going well, thank you. Oh, here's the salt you asked for."

"Oh! Thanks!"

The small chunk of rock salt would probably last a good ten days. I really did appreciate it.

"All right," I said, "let's begin today's treatment. The sooner you can get back to earning properly, the better."

"Yes. I'll work hard so I can afford more salt next time."

Her vision was still a bit hazy, but her eye that had once been blind was beginning to recover. She could make out small text if she brought it close. Probably around 20/200 in visual acuity, if I had to guess.

The burns on her hands had healed significantly as well. Most of her skin was still tight, and more of her body remained injured than

not, but she was able to copy text just fine. My holy magic couldn't erase the scars entirely, but I could probably bring her close to a normal life.

"Please start the treatment," she said. There was something oddly respectful about the way Carolina acted around me. It didn't seem like fear, nor that she felt indebted to me. Was it worship? Maybe I was just imagining things. She was probably just afraid of this mysterious child, and honestly, I didn't mind. Having her be a little wary was better than her underestimating me; it made it far less likely that she'd stab me in the back.

As I treated her wounds, she offered me bits of information. Since most people assumed she was blind, she could linger around town and eavesdrop without drawing much attention. Even if she stood still for a while, people just assumed she was resting. To them, she was just part of the background, forgettable.

"And so..."

"I see."

"And, uh..."

"Okay."

The intel she'd picked up on the soldiers and a top-tier knight was incredibly useful, and the news that magical beasts had started coming out of dungeons caught me off guard. I wished she could've given specifics on what types, but Carolina didn't know the first thing about monsters, so she didn't recall any names. She did remember that they were poisonous, but that wasn't exactly much to go on.

The story about the knight who hated children was especially valuable as I could keep an eye out for him when I ventured outside.

"That's it for today," I said. "I'll come back later."

"Yes, thank you very much," Carolina said. She then knelt and pressed her hands together in a prayerlike gesture as she sent me off.

Yeah, I'm pretty sure she worships me.

***

"*Dun-jun* adventure time," said Shiro.

“Adventuuure,” Kuro followed.

Another day, another adventure in the dungeon. We’d only discovered two rooms so far; it was high time we found a new one.

“Not a monster in sight today,” I said.

We’d made our way through the first room, and the corridor, and into the second room, but so far, we hadn’t encountered a single magical beast. After several trips into the dungeon, I’d come to realize that they didn’t spawn all the time—sometimes they appeared, sometimes they didn’t. That might be convenient for simple explorations, but it was a serious problem for us since we were here for meat. And since we’d only encountered a handful of monsters so far, we hadn’t found any patterns or rules in regard to their appearances. For now, all we could do was keep wandering the dungeon and hope they showed up.

“No fragellia today, huh?” I said.

“There’s no moss,” said Shiro.

“Nowhere to be seeeen.”

We checked the corner of the corridor where we’d discovered the fragellia the other day, but the spot was bare. If the moss had been something produced by the dungeon, like the magical beasts, it might’ve respawned, but if it had been growing there by chance, it probably wouldn’t come back once harvested. We would just have to keep an eye on things and see what happened over time.

Shiro and Kuro stared longingly at the empty patch where the moss had been. It hadn’t even tasted good, but it seemed like just the fact that it was edible made it precious to them.

“Oh, a fork in the road,” I said.

“Which way?” asked Kuro.

“Hmmm,” said Shiro. “This way! Let’s go this way!”

The corridor branching off from the second room had split again, and we ended up taking the right path—because that was the way Shiro happened to point.

“Any reason you chose this direction?” I asked her.

“Hmm? Just a feeling?”

“Oh, okay.”

She didn’t even have a reason, and it didn’t seem like she’d

unknowingly picked up on a monster's presence either. Not that it mattered—we'd be combing both paths eventually.

"From here on, it's uncharted territory," I told them. "Stay on your toes."

"Got it," said Shiro with a sharp nod.

"Aye aye," said Kuro, nodding with her usual half-asleep look.

At a glance, Shiro might've seemed like the more serious one, but that wasn't quite right. With a spotty memory and short attention span, she tended to forget to stay alert and would drift off into playtime mode before long. Kuro, meanwhile, might've looked like she was daydreaming, but she stayed focused from start to finish. *I guess you can sum it up as the classic cat/dog dynamic.*

We couldn't see past the next bend in the corridor. Being one of the larger dungeons, its hallways stretched on endlessly. It was hard to gauge the actual distance given how uniform the stonework was, but I figured the walk from the first chamber to the second had to be at least seven or eight hundred meters. We were covering all that ground on little legs, inching forward with caution for traps or a sudden ambush. Naturally, it was slow going. Just reaching this point had probably taken almost two hours. Fortunately, I had a time spell—basically a magical kitchen timer—so I could keep track of the time with reasonable accuracy.

"The last thing I want is to stumble into something above our weight class," I said to myself.

Every corridor in this dungeon curved, so you could never see far ahead. There was no way to tell how much farther the path stretched or what might be lurking around the next corner. I was probing for signs of danger, of course, but that wasn't foolproof—monsters like the acid slime we took down were experts at hiding themselves.

Then there were the traps. The ceiling, walls, floor—they could be anywhere. The only way was to advance cautiously, one step at a time. After about twenty minutes, Shiro started to get bored of this glacial pace.

"Me-Meow," she murmured, swaying gently from side to side. Then, she walked around in circles before stopping to stretch.

I couldn’t blame her. Since the last turn we made, we’d barely covered three hundred meters. Still, that was no excuse to let our guard—

“Meow! A magical beast!” said Shiro.

Perfect timing. I couldn’t make out what it was, but Shiro’s ears had clearly picked up some sound.

Kuro nodded in agreement. “I smell poooison.”

There was no mistaking that we had an enemy on our hands, but more poison? This dungeon seemed saturated with it. Then, just as the thought was crossing my mind—

“I’m gonna beat this beast!” exclaimed Shiro.

“Whoa!” I said. “Shiro! Wait!”

Before I could even finish my warning, she’d already pounced. *I should’ve seen this coming considering how bored she looked!*

“Meow-meow-meow-meow-meow!”

“Kuro,” I called out, “we’re going after her!”

Advancing about fifteen meters down the curved corridor, the magical beast that Shiro and Kuro had sensed finally came into view. *What on earth is that?* A green mass, no larger than a baseball, hovered in midair. It resembled a slime at first glance, though much smaller than the acid slime. *Wait a sec, can slimes float?*

Before I could fully process my thoughts, Shiro was already darting straight toward the creature. *Incredible speed—she’s beastfolk, all right! Wait, no, she’s gotta be using some sort of physical enhancement magic.* I’d been teaching her some spells for that, but her incantations had been shaky and took some time. Yet now, she’d enhanced herself silently. Was it the rush of battle allowing this unconscious power? Normally, excitement or anxiety scatters one’s focus, but for Shiro, that rule didn’t seem to apply. *She’s a natural when it comes to combat!*

She moved like the wind—*okay, I’m exaggerating a bit*—and leaped into the air, her right hand drawn back, ready to strike.

“Meow!”

I saw that her hand was cloaked in a veil of wind. *No incantation again!* Her wind-enhanced claws were aimed straight at the creature—but they never connected.

Thunk!

"Meow?"

"Shiro!" I yelled.

"Shirooo!"

Out of nowhere, an arrow whistled through the air and struck Shiro's arm. She let out a sharp cry, her balance slipping mid-leap. She crashed to the floor, hitting the ground hard, but the tragedy was far from over.

"Aaaaggghhhh!" roared the magical beast, firing off a green projectile that matched the color of its body. It struck Shiro in the back, and she tumbled across the floor with a pained mewl. I could see smoke rising as the fabric on her back dissolved. The green liquid must have been acid—just like the acid slime.

"I'm gonna save Shiro," I said.

"Kuro will cover you."

"Perfect, but don't get too close. That arrow was probably a trap."

"Okay, got it."

"Let's do this," I said before purposely letting loose a battle cry as I charged, trying to draw the monster's attention.

Whatever kind of trap Shiro had triggered earlier, I still hadn't figured it out. It had gone off mid-jump, so the trigger probably wasn't on the floor. Either way, I had to keep my attention split between the beast and the trap.

Even as I got close to the creature, I couldn't discern anything about it, meaning it must have been inedible.

"Dammit!"

I fired off three Water Needles as a distraction. The target was small, but miraculously, one of the needles struck true—or so it seemed. The beast showed no sign of damage. I thought the needle had penetrated it, but it must have gone right through. You probably had to hit its core directly like with a slime. Judging from the color and its nature, maybe it was a mutated acid slime.

This was, however, no loss on our part. Whatever the thing was, I'd already accomplished my mission: stopping the beast from further attacks against Shiro.

Then, a black, arrow-like projectile zipped past my flank—Kuro's

Darkness Blade. She was too far back to hit the creature, but the close call was unsettling enough that it turned its attention toward us. It didn't have any eyes, but it was obvious from its stance that it was wary of Kuro and me. And just then—

Thunk!

"Ugh!" Just when I tried to close in on the enemy, another arrow came flying. I managed to dodge it, having expected it the whole time—*but what is going on here? I still can't figure out what's triggering it!*

The beast bellowed, and I instinctively shouted, "Dammit! Wind Wall!" It was a flimsy wall since I'd shortened the incantation, but it was enough to block the acid attack as it didn't have much penetration or force.

"Shiro, you all right?!" I said.

"Myah! I'm all...owww!"

Whew, what a relief! She'd only lost consciousness for a moment, and she's not looking too bad either. Still, it's giving me chills just thinking what would've happened if that acid shot had more penetrative power! I gotta pull the arrow out of Shiro if I really want to heal her properly, but maybe I should focus on taking down the monster first?

After going over the situation in my head, I unleashed a blast of conjured fire, which danced around the monster like a blazing curtain. It was a variation of a fire-starting spell, but the effect was immediate. Black smoke billowed from the beast, and with its strength spent, it fell to the floor with a splash, its body bursting apart, leaving behind a puddle of green liquid.

Huh? That's it? That was way too easy. The magical beast left nothing behind but a small mana stone. *Wait, is that green liquid some sort of material? But why would it just leave behind some acid? Either way, it's definitely not food.*

I had a more pressing matter at hand: saving Shiro. Gently, I lifted her still-limp body and let her rest her head on my knee.

"Myah... Thank you, Thor," she murmured.

"Hold on, Shiro," I said. "I'm going to fix you up, so bear with the pain for a bit."

"Wh-What are you gonna do?"

I hesitated.

"Before I can heal your wound," I said, "I have to pull out the arrow. It's gonna hurt."

I knew the pain would be intense, even though I'd never experienced anything like it myself—after all, we'd be messing with a fresh wound.

"It's gonna hurt?" asked Shiro.

"Yeah, like hell."

"Meooooow!"

I understood her fear, but there was no anesthesia here. I did have a paralysis spell that could keep prey still, but it released a toxic paralysis—not something I could apply precisely to just the wound. I was also too terrified to use a spell akin to full anesthesia on little Shiro.

"Shirooo, are you aaall right?" Kuro asked.

"Kurooo! I don't want it to hurt!"

"Eeeasy does it," Kuro said. "This is all because you jumped out on your own."

"Meow!" Shiro's face fell in shock at Kuro's unexpectedly harsh words. She must have been hoping for some gentle, comforting words, but Kuro was angry—angry that Shiro had worried her to death. *I completely understand!*

"Bite down on this," I said, handing her a piece of cloth. "After that, you just have to take the pain."

"Myah!" Shiro bit down, her eyes full of tears. *I'm sorry, but this is the best I can do.*

"Kuro, when I give the signal, pull the arrow out."

"Okay."

"No matter how much Shiro cries, don't hesitate. That's only going to end up making it worse for her."

"Understooood."

I weaved my mana with care to prepare a holy spell, and then gave Kuro the sign.

"Now!"

"Arf!" In one swift motion, Kuro tore the arrow free from Shiro's

arm.

"Meeeeeewwwww!" Even with the cloth clenched between her teeth, the scream tore through, and her back arched violently.

I immediately cast a flurry of holy magic: purification and sterilization to clean the wound, followed by one healing spell after another. After about ten casts, the wound sealed shut, leaving behind no trace of the injury. Then, I ran more purification and sterilization spells on her back and finished with more holy magic. Her scorched, bubbling flesh had once again regained life.

We're good—for now, I thought, letting out a deep sigh.

"Thor, that was greeeat."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Shiro's sleeping," said Kuro.

Shiro must have passed out again from the pain. Her face was twisted in a grimace.

"Let's rest a little," I said. "We'll let Shiro sleep."

"Okieee."

"That sure was close," I sighed.

"Yeah." Kuro and I exchanged a glance and silently nodded to each other.

I needed to have a serious talk with Shiro later—she couldn't keep diving into danger headfirst like that. The truth was, she'd come within a hair's breadth of dying. What if that arrow had been laced with a toxin beyond my ability to cure? What if the green creature's attack had packed more of a punch? Or what if the arrow had struck somewhere worse?

It was sheer luck that Shiro was still breathing.

"I still have no clue what triggered that arrow trap," I said.

"Arf! Kuro knooows."

"Wait, seriously?"

"Seeeriously!" she said, pointing her finger in the air.

At first, I saw nothing, but as I concentrated, I felt that something was slightly amiss.

"Is that mana?" I murmured. "Yeah, it's really thin, like a thread."

A filament of mana stretched taut across the width of the corridor, about half a meter off the floor. It was so fine, Shiro and I

hadn’t noticed a thing. *Kuro noticed that? Unbelievable.*

“You touched that,” said Kuro, “and the arrow came *zwing*!”

“Y-Yeah, I get it.” *Her powers of observation are uncanny!*

I decided to run a quick test. To prepare for any surprises, I conjured a wall with earth magic and crouched behind it for cover. Then, going into storage, I retrieved the tattered remnant of a shirt I’d once worn and lobbed it. The cloth brushed against the magical filament, and in an instant, an arrow shot down and skewered it clean through. I tested a few other spots, and each time the trap triggered with deadly precision.

It seemed to be some kind of mechanism, like an infrared sensor. It accurately tracked a target’s position and released the arrow accordingly.

This trap was genuinely lethal.

What’s more, it seemed like that green magical beast had been exploiting it. Being a denizen of the dungeon, maybe it knew the trap’s exact location. This place was far more perilous than I’d ever imagined. I thought I’d been careful, but clearly, I still had a long way to go.

“What nooow?” asked Kuro.

“Let’s call it a day. I burned too much mana healing Shiro.”

“Okaaay.”

No tangible results this time...or was simply understanding the deadliness of traps a reward itself? I realized that simply keeping an eye out wasn’t enough to find these traps. For the time being, I decided I’d focus on training my magic sight.

“Shirooo, wake up,” said Kuro.

“Meow... I can’t eat any more.”

What?! Th-That’s the legendary line that so many fictional characters say in their sleep! Shiro, you never cease to amaze me! Will she say it again? It’s not every day you get to hear it.

But as I was caught up in my excitement, Kuro began rocking Shiro back and forth, clearly irritated by the sleep-talking. She gazed down at Shiro, not with her usual drowsy eyes, but with an unamused stare.

“Shirooo, wake up,” Kuro said again.

"Uhhhhh..."

"Shiro, Shirooo."

"Myaaaaaaw."

Excuse me, Miss Kuro? Shiro's gonna get whiplash if you rock her that hard! And how is Shiro not awake by now? How does anyone sleep through that?

Perhaps realizing that simply shaking Shiro wouldn't cut it, Kuro finally stopped. Then, without a word, she leaned in, bringing her face close to Shiro's ear.

"Shiro," she said, "Kuro's gonna eat all your food."

"Meow! Food!"

And she's awake. You never get bored with these two.

"Sh-Shiro, you all right?" I asked. "You went through a lot."

"Thor! Shiro's food! Where is it?!"

"Uh, well, I haven't cooked yet."

"Huh? Why not?"

Beats me.

"Shiro," Kuro chimed in, "you were half asleep. Maybe you had a dreeeam."

"Oh, so it was a dream." Shiro hung her head at Kuro's words. At least she was in better shape than I'd expected.

"Shiro, can you stand up?" I asked.

She hesitated for a moment, then answered quickly. "I can!"

"Then let's get going right away. We're retreating for today."

"What?! How come? Shiro's all good to go! I can keep fighting! See? See?!" Shiro sprang to her feet and began shadowboxing, almost like that life-threatening injury hadn't really had an effect on her. "So let's keep exploring!"

The last thing I'd expected was for her to say she wanted to stay in the dungeon. I mean, the pain had knocked her unconscious.

"No, we're going back," I said. "Do you even realize whose fault all this is?"

She looked oblivious.

A full-on deer-in-headlights stare! She doesn't have the slightest clue! But I needed to be tough and have a stern talk with her. I'd be a failure as a guardian if I let her off the hook too easily.

"Shiro."

"Yes?"

Ugh! Such innocent eyes! She has no idea she's about to get a scolding! Do I really have to reprimand this sweet little kitten of a girl? I must. Thor, don't you dare chicken out!

"Shiro, you got caught in a trap because you didn't listen to me and jumped out on your own."

"Meow..."

Don't give me that sad look!

"Umm, so yeah," I said.

"Yeah..." said Shiro.

Now her ears are drooping! How cute is that?! No, snap out of it! Look at that disgruntled look in Kuro's eyes! I gotta talk to Shiro!

"If you get hurt, that makes me sad. And you don't want to get hurt, now, do you?"

"No."

"This time, you were the only one that got hurt, but if it was a different trap, Kuro might've been injured too."

Shiro's face went pale with shock. She turned her eyes to Kuro, her body trembling. Then, her big eyes welled up with tears.

"I don't want Kuro to get huuurt! I'm sooo sorry!"

"A-As long as you understand," I said. "It's good that you're apologizing."

"Meooooooow!" Shiro started bawling her eyes out, and I couldn't help but pat her on the head—*what else am I supposed to do?!* As I stood there flustered and unsure, Kuro wrapped Shiro in a gentle embrace, softly patting her back.

"Kuro doesn't want you to get hurt either."

"Myawwww!"

"So let's listen to Thor from now on, okaaay?"

"Meow! Okaaay!"

I-I guess Shiro learned her lesson?

"M-Meow!"

"Wuffu."

A heartwarming display of friendship between two beast-eared girls. How precious.

Wait. A monster might hear us if we keep talking this loudly. We gotta get out of here.

***

Two days had passed since Shiro's big slipup.

With our meat supply running low, having taken a day to rest, we once again found ourselves back in the dungeon.

I'm determined to slay a magical beast and get some meat. If that fails, I'll settle for anything that can fill our stomachs.

It seemed as though my wish had reached the heavens—at least in a very misunderstood way. In the second chamber, we encountered a magical beast unlike any we had seen before.

"A red ball?" said Kuro.

"Is it a bug?" said Shiro.

"Soooo many legs."

In the corner of the room was a red ball, the size of a basketball, with about ten thin, insect-like legs growing out of it. From where we stood, the spherical body gave no hint of life, but those twitching limbs were unmistakably those of a many-legged insect. I was overwhelmed with disgust.

"That's a red spicy golem!" I said.

Unlike with the magical beast we'd faced the other day, I had solid information in my brain about this one. The creature before us was a golem, its form constructed from red powder surrounding its core. It was no living creature. Inanimate beings like that were called magical beasts too, and seemed to be relatively common in the dungeon.

True to its name, the red spicy golem fired off the red spice-like powder covering its body as a means of attack. Though it had the form of a golem, its body was remarkably fragile. A single strike would likely be enough to bring it down.

"It'll probably use long-range attacks," I said to the two girls. "Stand behind me."

"Meow!"

"Arf!"

Good, Shiro isn't jumping the gun now. She must have learned her lesson.

"I'm going to make a wall, so you two use that as a shield and attack with magic," I said.

"I got it!"

"Got it."

We'd been getting injured every time we encountered a magical beast in this dungeon, so today, my plan was to focus more on defense.

"Wall!" I chanted, and the ground shifted, forming a magical wall. It drained a fair amount of mana, but it was thick and sturdy. The plan was to have Shiro and Kuro attack the monster from behind this wall. It wasn't a problem that we couldn't see it since we'd already detected its location using mana.

The red spicy golem remained motionless. Did it not notice us since we were so close to the entrance?

"Here I go," said Shiro. "Wind! Take form as a blade and cut through the foe! Wind Blade!"

"Arf! Darkness Blade."

With great caution, Shiro and Kuro made their moves, just peeking out their faces and hands to cast their magic. Although their posture was unstable, their spells flew directly at the beast with precision. Just when I thought they'd get a clean hit—

Crack!

A sharp, high-pitched crack echoed, and Shiro's Wind Blade disappeared without a trace.

Crack!

There was another echoing crack. Kuro's Darkness Blade burst in midair just before hitting the target.

What just happened? Did the monster counter the magic? Or was it some sort of magical barrier?

That was when I noticed it. The size of the magical beast I'd detected with my mana was ever so slightly larger than what I could see. It must have been cloaked in an invisible shroud of mana—*so it really is using some barrier to block magic. I have basic information about it as an ingredient, but it's not like I know what kind of*

magical powers it has! This thing's gonna be tougher than I thought!

I figured a direct attack would be ineffective and immediately canceled the spell I'd been preparing to cast after Shiro and Kuro. The blade spells they'd used were simple, unmodified beginner-level ones. With their current inability to use intermediate magic, all they could do was pour more mana into the spells for the next attack. If that didn't work, we'd either have to retreat or close in for physical attacks. But before I could prepare another spell, the golem moved with a loud rumble.

It launched a long-range attack that shook the wall violently, though not enough to break the stone. Now, it was my turn—

"Ugh!" A sudden pain shot through my eyes and the back of my nose, like I'd swallowed a bunch of extra-spicy wasabi. Tears streamed from my eyes, and my nose began to run.

"Myaaaaaggghhh!"

"Aaaaarrrggff!"

Shiro and Kuro too?! Actually, they seemed worse off than I was. While I was just coughing and sniffling with tears in my eyes, Shiro and Kuro had collapsed on the spot, clutching their noses. They weren't exactly writhing in pain, but the agony had left them unable to move. Their keen beastfolk senses must have backfired.

I took a closer look around us and noticed a red powder drifting through the air. That was likely what was causing the tear gas-like effects. I cast a healing spell on them. Their symptoms got better but returned in an instant. Since they'd inhaled so much of the red powder, the stuff must have been lingering inside their bodies, triggering the symptoms all over again. I tried using Light Wind, but all it did was scatter the red powder around.

Shiro and Kuro began coughing and panting—*they can't breathe!*

On top of that, the golem's attacks kept coming, shaking the stone wall with each hit. If this kept up, the wall might actually break. To make matters worse, the red powder in the air was getting thicker. At this point, I finally realized that the red powder was the golem's doing.

To be precise, it must've been launching solidified forms of the powder that broke apart when they hit the earthen wall, releasing

the dust into the air.

It's attacking us with spice?!

I held my breath and leaped out from behind the wall. With the golem in my sights, I poured more mana than usual into a Water Blade spell and fired it off.

A blade bigger than my body sped toward the monstrous golem. If this didn't work, close combat was our only choice. *I hope a knife will work on him...*

My concerns vanished when the Water Blade blew away the golem's body. My guess was that its barrier could only block spells below a certain level of mana. While it had softened the blade's blow, sparing the golem from being sliced apart, the sheer force still did its work.

The red spicy golem burst into pieces, eventually settling into a red, motionless pile of dust. I could barely feel any mana, so I was fairly sure I'd defeated it. *Enough about the golem. I need to save Shiro and Kuro!*

Shiro couldn't stop coughing, and Kuro was crying and sniffling—she must've been hit harder, being a canine. Her breathing was getting faster, until she was on the verge of hyperventilating.

But what was I supposed to do? I already saw that healing alone didn't fix the problem. I quickly cast both a purification and detox spell on myself and realized that the former was far more effective, although detox did help a little.

I cast a Wind Barrier around us so we wouldn't inhale any more dust, then started casting purification spells one after another on Shiro and Kuro. After about ten rounds, their breathing started to steady and the tears stopped. I must have gotten rid of most of the red powder.

With one last healing spell, the symptoms faded completely.

"Shiro, Kuro, how do you feel?"

"Meow... My throat hurt so bad," said Shiro.

"My eyes were stiiinging. My throat closed up toooo."

Throat and eyes, huh? So the golem had been using a potent spice like tear gas. This was all my fault. Having information about the monster didn't matter if I messed up handling it. Plus, I'd totally

underestimated the thing after I looked into the data in my brain. It had said the monster was *fragile*, not *weak*. This was a key difference that I'd failed to understand.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I messed up our initial response."

If we had gone full force from the start, it would've been a piece of cake. I bowed my head to apologize, but for some reason, Shiro and Kuro gently patted it. "Huh? What are you two doing?"

Shiro laughed. "You're always so reliable, but now you're apologizing!"

"A rare sight," said Kuro.

They both laughed, tousling my hair.

"Hey, that hurts! You're gonna rub my hair off!"

"A bald Thor! That sounds great!"

"Baaaldy."

Are they laughing it off to make me feel better? No, they're just having fun.

"I said cut it out!"

Still, I had to admit that I felt a little better with them not complaining at all. What was done was done. I promised myself that, next time, I'd make sure not to mess up.

"Oh right," I said, "we defeated the red spicy golem. Gotta get the spice!"

"*Spysse?*" said Kuro.

"Is that food?" said Shiro.

"Oh, I guess you two have never had any." Well, I'd never had any either since I'd been reincarnated.

In this world, spices were a rare commodity. Of course, the plants here were different from Earth's, so some spices were common, like the chili pepper look-alike I'd discovered in town, which people called "spicy seasoning." But the chili pepper look-alike wasn't exactly popular. It was valuable to us, but to most people it had a bitter, unpleasant taste. It could also be that people in this area just weren't big fans of spiciness.

On the other hand, there was a similar spice—red chili powder—which was packed with more flavor and considered a superior specimen. This was the very spice dropped by the red spicy golem

we had just defeated.

Apparently, there was a place where the golems spawned left and right, and the spice was produced in large amounts. There, the golems were likely hunted in a well-organized way with specialized equipment. While not as cheap as salt, the spice was still priced low enough for ordinary people to afford.

"Oh, you two shouldn't go near it," I warned Shiro and Kuro. "It's dead, but it still has the red powder."

"I don't like that red stuff," said Shiro.

"I'll stay here," said Kuro.

They seemed to have a steely resolve to not go near the red powder. I could only hope that they wouldn't end up hating all spices in general.

"I'll be quick," I said.

I approached the remains of the red spicy golem. The red powder had gathered in a mound on the dungeon floor, but this wasn't the spice. While it definitely had a kick to it, it also contained toxins and other substances unfit for consumption.

As I dug through the red powder, I uncovered a mana stone and what looked like a red stone—this was what you shaved to get the spice. According to the information I had, the stones were supposed to be about the size of a pinky tip, but this one was closer to the size of a thumb tip. Maybe there was some variation between golems. Which must have meant this was one of the biggest red spicy golems. *Is that why it was so strong? I guess I'll store the red powder too, since it might come in handy one day.*

"Spices alone won't fill us up though," I said to myself. *Should we press on or turn back?*

The battle had drained both our magic and stamina. It could be disastrous if we encountered another unknown enemy.

"Guess we'll head back for today."

"Huh? But we haven't even gotten any meat yet!" said Shiro.

"Meat, meeeat."

"No," I said. "Safety first."

We only had a little meat left, but we still had gabul root and some wild plants. I also had five "green potatoes" that Carolina had

given me when I'd visited her for treatment yesterday.

These potatoes had a muted yellow-green skin and looked and tasted much like taro. It wasn't as intensely green on the inside, but was instead a greenish yellow. They could simply be boiled and eaten, but they could also be mashed, or made into dumplings and boiled. Their natural stickiness made them easy to shape into dumplings without the need to add flour. Cheaper than wheat, they were often eaten as a staple food in the slums. You could say that it lacked any off-putting flavors...or that it was just plain bland. And although most farmers didn't mass-produce them due to their low price, it seemed that every farmer grew a small patch of them in case of famine.

"Aww... I want some meat," said Shiro.

"No meat is tragic."

"There's a bit of meat in the soup, so you'll have to settle for that," I told them.

"Okay," the girls muttered in unison.

I'd hoped to run into a poison rat in the sewers, but of course, things never go exactly how you want them. *I guess today's main dish is gonna be mashed green potato dumplings.*

Back at our shelter, I began preparing a meal while trying to console the two girls, who were still down from the meat shortage. They were acting like it was the end of the world, but I found myself looking forward to what I was about to make. The red chili powder was the first proper seasoning I'd gotten my hands on in this world—not some substitute, but a genuine, widely used seasoning. This meant that I could finally use the right ingredients to perfectly cook the recipes of this world that were in my head. I set out to mix the green potatoes with the other ingredients to make dumplings.

I steamed and mashed the potatoes, then slowly worked in a bone broth with chopped mushrooms as I kneaded the mixture. When it began to take on a good, sticky texture, I seasoned it with salt and red chili powder, completing the dough. For one final step, I shaped the mixture into bite-sized balls and set them to boil.

"Red spice and green potato dumplings, cave style." Magical effects: slight life recovery, slight life boost, complete.

I wonder if the slight magical effects are thanks to the red chili powder. Although, the real concern is the taste. I followed the recipe nearly to the letter. I hope it's good.

Once I served the poisonous rat soup with the dumplings, dinner for the day was complete.

"Here, it's ready!" I said.

"It smells great!"

"Looks taaasty!"

Shiro and Kuro, who had been sniffing at the aroma of the potato dumplings, were now beaming in stark contrast to their low spirits just moments ago. It really did smell that enticing.

Together, the three of us dug in.

"Ohh! It's so good!" said Shiro.

"The chewiness is super!"

The dumplings were nice and chewy, with the broth and mushrooms adding good flavor. Honestly, they turned out pretty delicious. The lack of any strong taste made it easy to enjoy the texture too.

"The spicy kick's not bad either," said Shiro.

"Kuro likes the chewiness of the mushrooms."

Recreating Earth's dishes was fun, but it was just as important to really understand the recipes of this world. After today's meal, I had a much better feel for how much red chili powder to use.

"I hope that red monster shows up agaaain," said Kuro.

"Shiro's gonna beat it next time!"

After everything that had happened, they were actually hoping to encounter it again... *I gotta say, their upbeat attitude is something I should adopt.*

"No, Kuro's gonna take it down."

"What? Shiro's gonna go *bam*!"

They're bordering on foolhardy, but let's just call it "uber positive."

***

"Okay, close your eyes," I said.

"Meow..."

"It'll be over soon, just hang in there," I said, with Shiro crying as I did.

Right in front of me was a naked Shiro, her head soaking wet. Every time her body shook, her ears and tail wiggled too—it was kinda cute. *Oh, it's not that she's cold. It's warm water I'm pouring over her head.*

"You hate it so much it's making you cry?" I asked.

"I hate water."

"But you'll be too dirty if you don't bathe once in a while."

"Meow! I'll be spick-and-span if you clean me with your magic!"

"My purification? We can't rely on that forever..."

Sure, using purification and sterilization spells would keep us clean, but as a former bath-loving Japanese person, I'd felt that wasn't enough. A soak in an actual bath was in order. It had already been over a month since I'd saved Shiro and Kuro, and the thought had been on my mind for a while. So, I got ready to give them both a bath, but the moment I started filling the bathtub I'd made with earth magic, they started making a fuss. When I explained what a bath was, Shiro immediately started saying she didn't want to go in—that she just hated the idea of getting wet. *She's a cat through and through, but surely she'll come to appreciate it if she gives it a shot!*

With that in mind, I decided to start with Shiro, but she was already freaking out when I tried to rinse her off before the actual bath. She started trembling when I filled the bucket with warm water and stood behind her.

Damn, I'm starting to feel like I'm bullying her! But this is all for the sake of a clean living environment! Please, to all my furry brethren out there, I beg for your forgiveness!

"Okay, I'm gonna start with your head."

Shiro let out a shriek, and I started to panic.

"Whoa! Stop. Stay still!" I said.

I got her head just the slightest bit wet, and she started screaming and thrashing wildly! The water started bouncing off her too. Shiro had set up a Wind Barrier, the crafty little thing. *She could*

never cast this spell without an incantation, even after all that training, but she manages to pull it off here?!

Just like when she activated body enhancement against the green magical beast, it seemed Shiro's abilities and techniques were deeply tied to her mental state. Most likely, she exerted strength beyond her usual limits when she was fired up or cornered.

Even so, I somehow managed to dispel the Wind Barrier with dark magic and washed Shiro's head. It was just water, though, since I had no soap. Then, once she was wet enough, Shiro suddenly grew quiet.

"Shiro?" I asked.

No response. *The sparkle in her eyes is completely gone! You hate this* that *much? O-Oh well, I guess I should just get her into the bath while she's quiet.*

I carefully lifted Shiro with Mana Arm and eased her into the bathtub. Her body, frozen solid, slowly sank into the warm water.

The next moment, a subtle change appeared on Shiro's face. A satisfied sigh escaped her, and her expression melted into a look of utter contentment.





"How is it?" I asked.

"Meow."

She says it feels good!—I think. I figured she'd understand what made baths so nice once she'd been wrapped up in the warmth of the water. Maybe she just couldn't stand her head getting wet. That was the challenge to work on going forward.

"Okay, you're up next, Kuro."

"Arf!"

In contrast to Shiro, Kuro was in a good mood. It seemed like water wasn't something she despised.

"I'm gonna pour water on you."

"Okaaay."

"Are you itchy anywhere?"

"Hm? Nooo."

Kuro was much easier. As a matter of fact, when I stopped washing her head, she looked up at me with eyes begging for more.

"More?" I asked.

"Mooore."

"Done now?"

"Nooope."

She ended up making me scrub her for a good five minutes. *Is it okay to scrub her fur so much without any shampoo? Maybe a healing spell would take care of the damage, if there is any.*

"Shiro, you should get out now," I said.

"Meooow."

I used Mana Arm to lift up Shiro, who was practically melting away in the tub.

"Kuro, can you get in by yourself?" I asked.

"Yooou betcha," she said, jumping with a quick shout.

"Hey! No! Don't jump!"

"Wuffu. This feels greeeat."

Kuro might've looked calm, but she was surprisingly mischievous. She'd jumped right in. Still, that was way better than having her resist.

While that was happening, I used a dehydration spell and Light Wind to dry off Shiro instantly. Throughout it all, Shiro didn't make a

move. She just looked completely dazed.

Her mind had probably been shaken up too much, leaving her in a state of mental shutdown. I gently pulled her hand to guide her to the table, and she followed without hesitation. I poured a glass of water and set it in front of her, and she drank it right away. *She'll probably return to normal soon.*

"Kuro, how's the bath?" I asked.

"Feels greeeat."

"You'll get lightheaded if you stay in there too long. You should come out now."

"Okaaay."

She agreed but didn't budge. It must've felt so good that she'd been pulled into an endless loop of "Just a little longer, just a little longer." It was probably the same feeling as not being able to get out of a heated kotatsu table on a winter day. Still, with some determination, Kuro finally managed to pull herself out of the bath.

She started shaking herself off with a soft murmur, splashing water everywhere.

"Whoa! Stop it!" I said. *I'm drenched!*

"I can't help iiit," Kuro said.

Is it dog beastfolk instincts? I mean, I could just dry myself off with magic... Anyway, I'll have to be careful from now on.

As I dried Kuro off in the same way I did Shiro, I gave her some water.

"Ahhh, that's good."

"Hey, Shiro wants more!"

Shiro suddenly asked for more water, most likely tempted by how Kuro was enjoying hers. *I guess she snapped out of her daze.* Shiro took some water from the bottle I'd filled up, and chugged it.

"You're gonna wet your bed if you drink too much," I said.

"Shiro's no baby. I won't wet my bed!" she said, drinking even more water. *Impressive, but worrying.*

"Kuro, are you all done?" I asked.

"Yep."

Kuro seems to know her limits—she's surprisingly calm for her age.

Oh, and what happened that night, you ask? Let's just say that Shiro ended up bawling her eyes out again.

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Side Story: The Young Man with Dark Eyes and Black Hair

"Hey, Ares," a man called out to me, "no dungeon diving today?"

"No, Mr. Gailland," I replied.

We were in a sturdy building called the "Dungeon Management Office," which was next to the dungeon. It was a place where the names of those who ventured into the dungeon were logged, so if they didn't return, a search party could be sent out. Although, with Erunst's dungeon being so desolate and mercenaries being in short supply, gathering a proper search party would probably have been near impossible. No subsidies were available for search operations either, since the dungeon's entrance fee had been waived. Any mercenary who got rescued would be left to cover the entire cost themselves, but that was pretty much out of the question. At this point, most of the office's services were barely being carried out at all, and the only thing that remained was the formality of recording names when entering.

The large hall next to the entrance—where a bustling tavern and a sizable shop once stood—was now abandoned, with just a few chairs and tables here and there. The shop had been scaled down drastically, reduced to something like a small corner store.

The inn on the second floor had survived, but whether it even qualified as an actual inn was highly debatable. The rooms were stuffy and windowless, and the dusty, foul-smelling bedding was little more than a breeding ground for fleas. There was no food, candles, or even a drop of water to wash oneself with. If the filthy room bothered you, it was on you to clean it. If you wanted some light, you'd have to go downstairs and buy a candle.

That was the kind of place the Dungeon Management Office was. The lodging fees were fairly cheap because of the conditions, but

even then, one had to wonder if they were worth it. In reality, few stayed long. Most, it seemed, gave up on Erunst's dungeon and moved on.

It was on the first floor of this desolate building that the man, Gailland, called out to me.

He was a fiercely intimidating man, nearly two meters tall, his broad frame sheathed in muscle. A sword was slung across his back, and his armor was spattered with old bloodstains. His thick beard and bald head made it hard to tell, but he was apparently still in his thirties. Among mercenaries, though, that already made him a veteran. In a world where the weak, the careless, and the unlucky were quickly weeded out, it was rare to see anyone in their thirties still standing.

Unlike most mercenaries, who made their living on the battlefield or hunting magical beasts, this man focused solely on dungeon diving. He and his crew roamed from one dungeon to the next, and right now, they were currently working their way through the poison dungeon of Erunst. Although he looked like some bandit boss, he was actually the big-brother type who would look after people, and he'd helped me—and my party—on more than one occasion.

"You're still not back in top form, huh?" he said. "Don't go pushing yourself too hard out there on your own."

"I'm fine, really," I said. "You worry too much, Gailland."

"I know you're strong, sure. But the way you look... I mean, come on, you're all skin and bones."

I smiled awkwardly. He was right. I was a bit short, on the thin side, and had a slight hunch I couldn't deny. Plus, I was an introvert through and through. No one seeing me for the first time would've ever thought I was a warrior.

"And besides," he added, "it can't be easy suddenly having to fight on your own."

"Well...true." I was on my own, now, and the wounds from the fight with the dragon still hadn't fully healed. If this had been any other time, I would've stayed put and focused on recovering, but the circumstances didn't allow for that kind of leisure—rest was not an option.

“I don’t have time,” I said.

Gailland paused for a second. “You’re serious about reviving the girls?”

“Yes.”

“It’s true that goddess statues grant the wish of those who conquer a dungeon. I once had it heal a buddy of mine who had a real serious wound.”

That had been my last hope: the goddess statue that stood in the deepest chamber of every dungeon.

“Then you know exactly how I feel,” I said.

“Yeah, but bringing someone back to life? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that happening. Dungeons have ranks, you know, and it’s said that the kind of wish they can grant depends on how high that rank is.”

“So you’re trying to say this dungeon might not be able to handle my wish?”

“I’m not saying it’s impossible. But still...”

I’d heard that plenty of times. Even so, this dungeon was still unconquered. No one knew what kind of wish it could grant. Maybe —just maybe—it had the power to do what I wished.

“If there’s even the slightest chance...no, even if I was told it was impossible, that still wouldn’t be reason enough to stand still. I *will* bring Marika and Ximena back. I have to believe that...”

“Gosh, no way I can stop you if you’re going to look at me like that.”

I thought for a moment. “Sorry.”

Gailland was only looking out for me. I knew that. But this was something I couldn’t give up.

“How’s your supply of antidotes? Erunst’s dungeon is swarming with poisonous monsters.”

“I’m ready. And if it comes down to it, I’ve got magic.”

“Right, you’ve got holy magic. That’s our hero.”

“Please don’t. I’m just a man who can use light and holy magic. I couldn’t even protect my girlfriends. I’m anything but a hero.”

Gailland paused for a second, chewing on my words. “My bad.”

“No. It’s all right. I’d better get going.”

"Yeah. Just know when to turn back."

As I parted ways with Gailland and headed back to the inn, I started thinking about how this dungeon was teeming with poisonous beasts—as a matter of fact, nearly every creature in the dungeon was poisonous. It was this, more than anything, that made the difficulty level of Erunst's dungeon so high and brought countless attempts at conquest to a halt. At the same time, it was precisely the reason that I'd been able to hang on to a thread of hope. Even if it lacked the scale of what one might call a great dungeon, the sheer abundance of poison and traps made it a formidable trial. Perhaps the reward upon conquering it would be greater than what people had imagined—*if* one could conquer it, that is.

But I had a hidden ace. A true cheat ability bestowed upon me by a god, one I hadn't told a soul, not even Gailland: the power of the hero. In this world, a black-haired human capable of wielding both light and holy magic was sometimes called by that title. Long ago, the hero who felled the Demon King of Calamity was said to possess those very traits. Most likely, he'd been reincarnated just like us.

Well, when Gailland and the others called me the hero, it was little more than a nickname borrowed from a legendary figure. If another man appeared bearing the same traits, he too would surely earn that title. But I was a genuine hero—*not some cringey, self-proclaimed hero, okay?* My powers had been granted to me by a god. Beyond my skill with the sword, I commanded light magic and holy magic, I had knowledge of space-time magic and enhancement magic, and on top of all that, I had the cheat ability "Demon King Slayer." My powers swelled when facing a Demon King, and by claiming their mana stone and core, I could draw a portion of their might into myself.

I'd faced a Demon King twice in battle already—and yes, there were multiple Demon Kings. The title of Demon King was likely a catchall term for special magical beasts that threatened the world itself. What exactly qualified one as a Demon King was probably something only the gods knew. Still, I could sense them without fail. It was a strange sensation, being able to tell instantly, without a word from anyone, if something was a Demon King.

My first encounter with one was during my training in the demonic realm known as the Lycaethus Jungle. There, I encountered a bipedal beast, fierce and tigerlike; perhaps one might call it a weretiger. I'd never seen such a creature before, but I immediately recognized it as a Demon King.

The battle was brutal, and though my party emerged victorious, a single misstep could've meant utter annihilation. I suffered grave wounds, and without Ximena's holy magic, I might not have survived—and I probably wouldn't have even made it that far if it weren't for Marika's tree magic backing me up.

By absorbing the mana stone and core of that weretiger, I gained formidable regenerative powers and enhanced strength on par with the creature itself.

The challenge of defeating a Demon King was immense, but the power gained from victory was nothing short of a cheat. After conquering the first one, I allowed myself to grow overconfident. Without realizing it, I began to crave the arrival of the next. I was determined to slay it, to absorb its powers. The thought of defeat never even crossed my mind.

Then came the second Demon King: the colossal dragon. A beast so vast it could never pass through the dungeon's entrance, but that was just part of the dungeon's mystique; the monsters that emerged did not simply walk out the front door.

The mana seeping from the dungeon's entrance served as a conduit, allowing monsters to suddenly teleport to the outside world. One might wonder, then, how you could be sure these creatures truly came from the dungeon, but more often than not, it was the same monsters that spawned in that dungeon that appeared. Therefore, it was said that they came from within the dungeon.

In the case of that dragon, a large magic circle appeared in the sky above the entrance, and from it, the beast descended. The connection between a dungeon and a Demon King remained a mystery, but there was no doubt that creature was one of them.

We fought with everything we had to protect the town... Yet in the end, I lost my lovers, and I was devastated by some heartless words the lord threw at me. I might've killed him if it weren't for the

presence of that knight—the terribly strong knight who'd fought alongside us against the dragon. He had exceptional sword skills and battle instincts, and might very well have been stronger than my current self. I couldn't do anything to the lord as long as this knight was around, but I also couldn't help but wonder why a man of his caliber would submit to that scum.

If I could call upon his strength, clearing the dungeon would be within reach, yet I knew that was unlikely. Getting help from any other mercenaries was out of the question too. Even Gailland, the strongest in this town, was more of a hindrance than a help to me. He understood this well enough not to offer his aid.

"If only the dragon's core still remained," I muttered to myself.

The effects of my cheat ability to draw power from a Demon King differed between a mana stone and a core. Absorbing the mana stone amplified my mana, while the core granted me the magical beast's abilities. After slaying the dragon, I was able to secure its mana stone, but the core had slipped away. In the brief moment before I reached the fallen beast, someone had stolen it. How they managed to target the core with such precision, I had no clue, but there was no mistaking it—I'd sensed the presence of someone retreating into the distance. At the time, I didn't realize they were a thief, so I let them slip away. *If only I'd absorbed that dragon's core, my chances of conquering this dungeon on my own might've skyrocketed!*

"If I ever find them, I'll show them hell... I swear it!"

If our paths ever cross again, I'll make you regret ever being born...

***

"Meow!" yelled Shiro. "There's something on the ceiling!"

"It smells sweet. I bet it's taaasty. Shirooo?"

We were in the dungeon hunting for ingredients, as usual, when Shiro and Kuro suddenly froze mid-step. Shiro pointed at the ceiling while Kuro sniffed the air, staring at the same spot.

"I got it! Hiyah! Wind Blade!"

“Ooooh, nice one.”

When I looked up at the spot where her blade had hit, I saw a small hole. Then, something came flooding out of it. It looked like there were wild grapes, withered ones, growing from the dungeon ceiling. Long, ropelike tendrils draped with green leaves and dotted with clusters of small, reddish-purple fruit—they didn’t *resemble* wild grapes; they *were* wild grapes.

Of course, these were no ordinary grapes. It was a plant-type magical beast known as a “mad grape.” Much like acid slimes, they hid in ceiling crevices throughout this dungeon. The moment something passed beneath them, they’d jump out, coiling around their prey in an instant.

Apparently, its eyesight wasn’t the best. If you hit it with magic—like Shiro had just done—it mistook the shock for prey and slithered out of hiding. That said, under normal circumstances, it was a nasty enemy. It was sturdy, strong as hell, and had thorns on its leaves and vines that were laced with poison. Close combat with this thing was something you needed to avoid. And even if you managed to take it down, there was still the poison. Even the enticing grapes were toxic—in fact, they were probably the real weapon all along. Out in the wild, mad grapes had small animals eat their fruit, only to kill them and drain their nutrients.

The sweet smell that Kuro had picked up on was most likely released deliberately. It wasn’t just the smell either. The grapes were sweet and refreshing with not even a hint of tartness—and eating even a single one would send you straight to heaven.

The first time we’d run into one had been a close call. Kuro had been snagged by the vines and nearly poisoned. At this point, however, it had become just another tasty ingredient to us. Shiro and Kuro weren’t even treating it like a battle anymore. They considered it a harvest.

The mad grape thrashed about, trying to intimidate us, but the two girls just doubled over with laughter.

“Look at it wiggle!” Shiro said.

“Gross-cuuute?”

“What? It’s not cute.”

"It's kinda cuuute."

"Kuro, you're weird."

"So are you, Shirooo."

That's kind of a laid-back conversation to be having in front of a magical beast, don't you think?! Well, the monster didn't have any long-range attacks, so there was no danger where we were standing. Plus, we'd already established a method for defeating it, so it really was a harvest at this point.

"Shiro, don't hit the grapes, okaaay?"

"I got this! Yaaa!"

Shiro fired off several Wind Blades from a distance, slicing through the mad grape's vines. Finally, a Wind Blade aimed at the base severed the stem, and the beast fell to the ground with a wet splat. It was still writhing, but its movements were sluggish.

"Let's get it!" said Shiro.

"Don't let your guard down, all right?"

"Okieee."

We approached the fallen mad grape slowly and began to strike its vines once more—but not to kill. Using a sword and a knife, we began carefully cutting off bunches of grapes one by one. There hadn't been many to begin with, and the impact from the fall had already crushed a few, so we couldn't afford to waste a single grape.

In the end, we gathered four bunches, not even thirty grapes in total. Unlike the cultivated varieties back on Earth, these had the look of a wild strain, and each bunch bore only a handful of grapes.

Shiro and Kuro looked focused. It was understandable, because for us, something sweet was a precious commodity—not to mention that these grapes were seriously good.

"Thor, please," said Shiro, "we wanna taste it!"

"Please."

"All right, all right," I said. "I know."

I cast a detox spell on the grapes that Shiro and Kuro were holding. With that, the delicious killer fruit transformed into just plain delicious fruit. Unable to hold back any longer, Shiro and Kuro each popped a grape into their mouths.

"Meoooow! It's so sweet!"

“Sweet, sweeeet.”

The two held their cheeks and squirmed with delight. The look on their faces was that of pure bliss.

“Another one,” said Shiro.

“Amazing.”

Didn’t they say they wanted “a taste”? The grapes are disappearing fast. Well, there isn’t a whole lot to save for later anyway, so I guess I could just let them finish it here. Seeing them so happy, with their mouths and hands stained burgundy, it felt almost cruel to stop them.

“Thor!” called out Shiro. “Here, say ahhh.”

“Okay.” I opened my mouth and she popped a grape in. “Yeah, it’s nice and sweet.”

“Oh, Kuro wants to do that too. Say ahhh.”

“Ahh,” I said, opening wide. “Yeah, yours is good too.”

“Arf!”

I nearly let myself get swept up in the moment, but I still had to deal with the mad grape that was lying there twitching. Flames were its weakness, so a burst of fire magic reduced it to ash in seconds. Of course, I could have attacked them like this from a distance, but the grapes would’ve been burned up along with the rest of it. That was why we needed to cut them free first. Then, to finish things off, I fired some magic into its burrowing hole to burn off its roots. A few seconds later, a mana stone came rolling out.

The hunt was over.

“All right,” I said, “time for me to—”

“Myah, myah! I love these!”

“Arf, arf! Aren’t they gooood?”

I stared at them for a moment. “Hey, where’s mine? I only ate two grapes.”

After a pause, the reality struck Shiro, while Kuro simply said, “Huhhhh?”

They got so carried away, they ate my share! Sweet foods are rare for me too! And thanks to the two grapes I did *get, I can still taste it. This is traumatizing!*

I took a moment to process what had happened. “No dessert for

you two tonight.”

“Meooow! We’re sooorry!”

“Awooo... I feel teeerrible.”

Shiro, quit clinging to me! And Kuro, that apology bow? That’s the kind of thing I’d see performing monkeys do in my previous life! I swear, it’s uncanny! But you don’t look sorry at all!

“Meeeooowww!”

“Awwwooooo.”

Stop! Don’t pull on me from both sides like that! This is starting to make me siiiiick!

***

“How are your eyes?” I said with a heavy sigh.

“I think they’re a bit better?” replied Carolina.

I had to pause before I could reply. “I see.”

Heavily fatigued by the drain of magic, I leaned in and looked into Carolina’s eyes. More than two months had passed since we’d first met. Back then, her body had been covered in burns, her vision nearly gone. I’d been treating her from time to time, but signs of recovery had started to stall.

She wasn’t fully healed. A faint cloud still lingered in her eyes, and she had red patches of skin like keloid scars. Lately, even holy magic barely had any effect at all. Just now, I’d spent about half my mana, yet Carolina only *thought* her eyes had improved. It seemed my holy magic could only go so far. I’d hoped that with time she would recover, but there must have been limits to my powers.

Still, Carolina wasn’t disheartened. Rather, she welcomed the improvement with genuine joy. I felt a pang of frustration, but there was nothing I could do now that my magic had reached its bounds. There was a chance she could heal if I cut away the damaged tissue and healed further, but the thought of causing her that much pain held me back—and harming her eyes was a risk I wasn’t willing to take.

For Carolina, though, she said she was more than satisfied as only small burn marks on her back remained.

"But your arms still aren't quite right, are they?" I asked.

"No, but it's gotten to the point where I can work."

She told me that she felt discomfort whenever she moved her arms. She must've also had internal damage that still hadn't healed.

I thought for a second. "I'll come again."

"Of course. Thank you," she said, smiling gently as she handed me a bag the size of a large tote. She must've decided to change the topic after sensing that my spirits had dropped. "There's salt, potatoes, and the flour you'd asked for."

"Oh, great!"

To not let Carolina's kindness go to waste, I forced a sunny expression as I accepted the bag—of course, I was genuinely happy too.

Inside the bag, I found two small pouches and a generous heap of green potatoes. One pouch held the usual rock salt, probably the kind most commonly traded in this town. The other contained a green powder reminiscent of matcha. It was made from "shoyle," a crop unique to this world that resembled short ears of corn that were green down to the kernels.

Like corn, there was a tough variety of shoyle used for livestock feed, which there was a surplus of in some years, probably due to bumper harvests or better growth of other plants. When that happened, shoyle was processed into flour and made its way into the slums and poorer districts. It tasted terrible, but the low price made it a staple for many struggling to get by.

It may have been unique to this world, but I had plenty of knowledge about the uses and recipes for this ingredient. It was worth experimenting with since it was cheap. Something like pita bread or firm, crumbly pancakes would serve as a staple food—with a distinct green color, of course.

"Is that all the shoyle flour you need?" asked Carolina. "It's cheap, so I can buy more."

"Nah, I just wanna try it out first, so this should be fine."

I was glad to see that she'd reached the point where she had no problem affording something like this.

In fact, she no longer lived in the slums. She'd moved into a

rental house in town. Even from my perspective, it was old and worn, but it was miles better than that dilapidated shack held up by just a few boards that had been nailed together. The previous tenant of her new home had died amid the chaos of the dragon attack, so the rent was quite cheap. It was rumored that the house was the scene of a murder—a stigmatized property, as they called it—and that its previous owner had been killed by a looter. It was a bit of a surprise that, in a world where life had little value, people considered a house that someone had died in to be a bad omen. Carolina, however, was levelheaded when it came to things like that. Besides, stigmatized or not, it was better than the slums.

I'd purified the room just in case, so unless the previous tenant's soul was particularly stubborn, Carolina shouldn't have to worry about a ghost coming back to haunt her. Well, even if there was no "haunting," per se, people apparently could come back as undead. However, it was said that ordinary people with little mana were hardly at risk of such a fate, and the mindset surrounding it was far more practical than on Earth.

"Are you certain that's enough?" she asked, referring to my bag of goods. "I could buy more for you."

"No need. You're earning money now, but I know it's still not easy for you."

"I mean, what about things like wheat and sugar?"

"Sure, that'd be nice someday, but for now, quantity's more important. Besides, this is more than enough as far as covering your medical expenses goes."

"That's not true at all! Do you realize how much it would've cost me if I'd asked the church to perform the treatments you've given me?"

She said they would've charged her a fee that she couldn't have paid after a hundred years of labor. The church seemed to be ripping people off and doing as they pleased with their holy magic.

From my point of view, however, the bond I shared with Carolina was something far beyond what money could ever buy. I could trust her, she never pried into my affairs, and she always bought exactly what I requested. To someone in my position, she was nothing short

of a miracle. The salt and potatoes had been invaluable too. All things considered, coming out here to cast holy magic was no big deal.

"Well, I'm satisfied, so no worries."

"I suppose, but...just don't hesitate to ask for anything you need!"

"R-Right, I know."

***

"All right!" I said. "The new bedding is finished!"

"Meow!"

"Wuffu."

We all dove at once onto the pristine white fur laid out on the floor, the plush softness dulling the impact of our fall. It was unbelievably soft and overwhelmingly comfortable.

What's going on? I feel like I don't have a care in the world...

"Whoa..."

"Meow..."

"Fluffy..."

It wasn't just me—both Shiro and Kuro wore dreamy expressions. It was at that moment that I realized such comfort could mark a person's downfall. Fur of this quality was the last thing I'd expected to find in a dungeon.

It had all started with poison beast fur. After using my storage's butchering function, I'd been making full use of the meat and bones, but the fur I'd left untouched. I didn't know how to tan hides, but I at least understood that you couldn't just use it as is. Without proper preservation, they'd start to rot immediately.

Still, I figured anything was better than sleeping on the bare floor, so on a whim, I used the storage's features to strip the pelt of dirt, moisture, and fat, then laid it out across the floor. I told myself I'd toss it once it started to rot—but it never did. After two weeks, there was no rotting smell, and even after a month, the only change I saw was that the fur had become tattered—still no rotten smell.

I guess the simplest explanation was that this was a different

world, but the phenomenon of rotting did exist here, and so did microorganisms. Most likely, it had helped that I regularly cast sterilization spells.

I also suspected that mana—which didn't exist back on Earth—might've played a role. I knew from the knowledge implanted in my head that ingredients rich in mana didn't rot or decay easily, and that probably applied to more than food. If the pelt came from a magical beast, just like the ingredients, then it probably followed the same rules. I concluded that if the fur came from a powerful creature and was capable of holding large amounts of mana, then perhaps it could be processed into rugs or bedding without the need for tanning. Ever since that thought occurred to me, I'd been on the lookout for magical beasts that might yield just the right kind of pelt...but I'd had no such luck.

Then, just the other day, I finally encountered a magical beast that fit the bill: the sleep sheep. In contrast to its harmless, sheeplike appearance, it was quite a brutal creature. It released a gas that lulled its target into a deep sleep before goring them to death with its horns.

The meat was supposedly not suitable for consumption as it had an unshakable, sulfuric stench that was impossible to remove. The organs, on the other hand, were said to be quite tasty with the right prep work, so I figured they'd work for offal dishes.

It didn't matter too much though—it wasn't the sleep sheep's meat I was after anyway.

"Listen up," I said during our hunt. "Don't damage its fur. Aim for its head! Shiro, Wind Barrier."

"Got it!"

"Wuffu, Darkness Blade."

While Shiro used wind magic to disperse the sleep sheep's gas, Kuro and I launched our attacks. The massive beast must've had low combat power, since Kuro's Darkness Blade and my Water Needle brought it down in no time—*well, it was massive compared to us, but probably no bigger than a regular sheep?*

It wasn't exactly a high-tier magical beast, but it was definitely a step above the poison beast. Its fur was already soft and fluffy

before I even got to cleaning it, so my hopes were running high. I dismantled the sleep sheep in storage and separated its hide from the rest of it. Actually, since the skin was still attached, it was probably closer to what you'd call mouton. After getting rid of any dirt and grime, I used purification and sterilization spells to clean it further. Finally, I filled the bath with warm water, tossed the mouton in, and the three of us got to stomping.

"Stomp on it!" I told them. "Stomp like there's no tomorrow!"

"Meow! I'm stomping!"

"Stomp, stooomp."

Shiro hated baths, but she seemed perfectly okay with this. She and Kuro laughed away as they stomped and splashed.

"Meow, ha ha ha!"

"Wuffu, wuffu, wuffu."

It probably felt more like playing in a pool for them. They danced on the sleep sheep hide, splashing water everywhere.

We weren't doing this just to wash it though. We were doing it to loosen the fur still clumped together, to separate the fibers one by one. The white strands swaying softly in the warm water was an almost dreamy sight.

Maybe it's about ready.

I halted our stomping and tucked both the water and the pelt back into storage. All that remained was to separate the moisture and grime once more, and we'd have ourselves white, fluffy, long-haired mouton. We only had one piece, but it was large enough that the three of us could lie down on it.

We dove into the fur, cradled by a feeling of bliss. Not even in my previous life had I ever laid eyes on such luxurious fur. It was pure comfort. My entire body was wrapped in fluffiness and gentle warmth.

If I sleep in this thing, it's a guarantee that I'll oversleep. Well, who cares? Not like I need to do anything at a specific time. As I lost myself in this typical slacker mentality, I heard the soft, melting moans of Shiro and Kuro.

"Ohhhh, this is so comfy," said Shiro. She kept rubbing her cheek against the mouton, utterly captivated by its silky softness.

It was so soft, you wouldn't believe it was sheep fur. I guess you could've called it the perfect match between mouton and velvet.

"Fluffy is amaaazing." Kuro lay on her back and kept bouncing. She must've been using every bit of strength to rock her body up and down, reveling in the springiness of the fur.

This fur is way better than what I'd imagined. Thanks to Carolina, our meals have improved, and with bedding like this, life in the dungeon is becoming pretty comfortable. I wanna keep hunting magical beasts so I can ensure a stable life for Shiro and Kuro. I'll need one or two more mouton blankets for that. I'm definitely gonna hunt down more sleep sheep.

As I lay there on the soft fur, fantasizing about hunting, I heard the peaceful breathing of the two girls.

"Shiro? Kuro?"

The only response I got was some gentle snores. *They're asleep! Already? That was quick! I can't blame them, though, this does feel amazing.*

"Ummm, myah..."

Shiro's drooling! She's gonna ruin the brand-new bedding!

"Grrr, grrr..."

Kuro's biting on it! Is she at the age where she wants to gnaw on everything in sight? Can't she bite something else? Here, how's this leftover scrap of leather?

"Meow..."

"Wuffu..."

Oh, but seeing these two so utterly content is filling me with happiness. I need to grow stronger to protect these serene faces—but my eyelids are getting heavy. You can't resist urges like this when you have the body of a child. I wanna keep looking at their faces, but...

Good night...

Chapter 4: Dungeon of Malice

"Yaah! Water Needle barrage!" I shouted.

"Thor! We did it!" said Shiro. "We're gonna have a feast tonight!"

"Arf! Been sooo long since we had turtle."

It had been a full year since I'd rescued Shiro and Kuro.

As for our growth, hmm, I wonder. Physically, we've probably grown in line with our ages. Maybe like ten centimeters taller? Mentally, though, let's just say it felt like things hadn't changed much.

We'd definitely gotten stronger. We'd kept defeating magical beasts, which had allowed us to boost our mana reserves, and we were now able to cast a slew of new spells. The three of us were able to instantly cast beginner-level magic, and we'd gotten better at intermediate magic too.

Our physical abilities had also improved a lot. I wasn't exactly sure how, but I had a hunch it was linked to our mana. We were doing moves that no five-year-olds should be capable of. Well, it wasn't entirely impossible for Shiro and Kuro since they were beastfolk, but for a human like me to have this kind of physical ability was completely unrealistic.

We could easily jump three meters and lift heavy objects with little effort. On top of that, our senses had sharpened. It was bizarre that this was all possible without any body enhancement magic. It was precisely these abilities, though, that had been allowing us to fight with ease in the dungeon. A small scratch was about the worst thing we'd suffered in recent days.

But when it came to dungeon exploration, we hadn't made much progress. This was the extent of our current territory: five small rooms, including the first one we'd found; a large chamber deep at the far end; and the complex web of corridors that connected them all. We'd completed mapping this area within the first three months

and had been sticking to it ever since. It was more than enough to gather ingredients, and we'd also discovered spots where mushrooms and medicinal herbs grew.

"I found a mellum!" exclaimed Shiro.

"Got a mushroooom," said Kuro.

"Meow! Found some potatoes too!"

"Potatoooes."

We were in the room we'd dubbed the "big room." In the center was an area where several fruit trees grew. Even after being harvested, they would replenish in about five to ten days, and new plants would sprout from their roots.

What Shiro had just picked was a fruit called "mellum," which resembled an apple in both shape and texture, although its taste was closer to that of a faintly sweet banana. For us, it was a rare and valuable source of sweetness.

While the fruit trees were always the same, the wild plants grew randomly. Mushrooms, yams, weeds—it was different every time. This little spot had become our personal farm.

"Well, should we head back and cook something with this?" I said.

"Soup! I want soup!" said Shiro.

"The one we had befooore."

"Oh, that one."

Our catch of the day was a paralysis tortoise, a magical beast known for its powerful paralytic poison. Its size and shape were basically that of a large giant tortoise, though there was very little edible meat—the thing was mostly scales and bones. Still, the creature was rich in collagen and made a pretty good soup. It was rare to encounter one, so it'd become a delicacy for us.

As we retraced our steps back home, Shiro glanced over her shoulder. "We still can't beat that thing?"

"No way," I said.

"Really?"

"If Thor says so, then we deeefinitely can't," said Kuro.

"Okay."

"That's riiight."

Shiro was talking about the magical beast that lurked behind us. It was the same enemy that had forced us to abandon serious dungeon diving, and instead, focus on maintaining the status quo: our archnemesis, the hell chimera.

The first time we'd encountered it, we hadn't stood a chance, and we'd come dangerously close to dying. From the moment we stepped into its room, its intimidating presence was enough to hinder our movements. The spells we fired off couldn't even scratch it, and when the hell chimera released a burst of flames, we made ourselves scarce. Thankfully, fear had kept us from getting too close, but if the fire had even brushed us, we would've been toast for sure —that's how hot it was.

It was a boss monster that occupied the center of a mid-sized room and blocked our path, but what it truly was had remained a mystery. My inborn knowledge told me that you needed a group of high-ranking mercenaries to even have a chance at defeating it. Sure, we'd grown and made progress, but there was no way the three of us could take it down.

Shiro and Kuro were eager to get revenge for the bitter defeat, but honestly, I was against it. It just wasn't something three kids could take on. My plan was to keep building our strength in the dungeon, leave town, and start fresh somewhere else.

In fact, I'd managed to earn a bit of money, so I didn't think the town's entrance fees would pose much of a problem. *I'll admit, it wasn't earned in the most honest way—and no, I didn't beg Carolina for it.*

The long vertical shaft that stretched upward in one of the rooms we'd discovered a year ago turned out to be a pitfall trap, as I'd guessed. Every now and then, a mercenary came tumbling down. The bodies were dissolved by the dungeon after a few days, but they did remain intact until then. That's right, the money was taken from those very corpses. I was fully aware that my actions were less than moral, but I told myself that it was for our survival. Since then, we'd been making good use of what we'd found. The majority of mercenaries carried food and salt with them, most likely as part of their standard preparation for entering a dungeon, and I'd just swipe

their coins together with the food.

"Myah? There's something there!"

"Arf? Over there, in the shadows."

"It's an acid slime," I said. "It's rare to see one on the floor like that."

Acid slimes would pop up every so often. Now that a year had passed since our first encounter, we had plenty of experience with them under our belt.

"Shiro's got this! Light Blade!"

Shiro's blade pierced through the acid slime, and that was that. No more worrying about choosing the wrong spell and sending acid splattering every which way. Now, we were able to spot the danger in advance and handle it before it even got close.

"We got noodles!" said Shiro.

"Niiice."

The two of them high-fived each other in celebration. They'd become full-fledged noodle lovers. Not that I could blame them—noodles were a rare treat for us, after all.

"Come on, let's head back," I said. "I'm starving. Let's throw the noodles into some soup and have ourselves a little feast."

"A-okay!"

"Okaaay!"

A few days later, we found ourselves with a better haul than usual—although, it was actually kind of a disappointment.

"Well, that treasure chest was a dud," I said.

"I don't need fabric."

"Duuud."

After taking down a mutated venom rat—not to be confused with a poison rat—in a small room, we'd come across our first treasure chest in a while.

This was the first room—the place where we'd fought the mutated poison beast back when we'd just discovered the dungeon. Ever since we found that treasure chest that day, others had appeared from time to time, always alongside a mutated specimen. The timing seemed completely random. Sometimes, a new one would appear after just a month. Other times, we'd go on a dry spell

for nearly four months.

And it wasn't always three chests either. Sometimes there was only one. In fact, the first haul had been the best. Everything since then had been a clear step or two down in quality, at least to us. Today, we got only one treasure chest again. Inside was a clean, white cloth that had been neatly folded. It was probably a decent size if you spread it out, and was no doubt a fine fabric, except none of us knew how to sew. The most we could do was cut it up and wrap ourselves up in it or use it as bedsheets.

Honestly, I would've been much happier with one of those little black pepper packets we'd found before. At this point, even the materials we got from the mutated creatures guarding the treasure chests were more useful. For example, I knew that the meat of the mutated venom rat we'd just taken down was surprisingly good once you removed the poison.

"How about steaks today?" I asked Shiro and Kuro. "We haven't had a nice, thick cut in a while."

"Meow! Big meat!"

"But do we still have saaalt?"

"Yeah, there's still some left from what I got off that mercenary the other day."

"Greeeat."

"Steak's a *rare* treat!"

We still had a bit of salt left, courtesy of a mercenary. Not that we'd bartered for it or anything. Just like with money, we'd swiped it off a pitfall victim.

Strangely enough, if you retrieved something before the dungeon absorbed the corpse, it didn't vanish. Maybe it was because the item's ownership shifted to you, but whatever the reason, it was one of the dungeon's many mysteries.

Then again, the dungeon itself was a mystery, and I'd learned to accept things as they were.

Shiro and Kuro didn't seem to mind that our salt and preserved foods came from a mangled corpse. The leather pouch they were stored in had kept them clean and free from bloodstains, but still, some people would probably be grossed out by the idea. I'd

hesitated too, the first time.

"Salt, salt!" said Shiro.

"Steak with saaalt."

Neither Shiro nor Kuro gave a second thought to the salt's origin. Their spirits were high, their minds already fixed on the thought of a big steak.

Occasionally, mercenary corpses yielded equipment, but it wasn't something you'd get your hopes up for. The mercenaries that did fall for the traps were probably inexperienced, so their gear wasn't top-notch. Besides, most of their equipment shattered from the impact of the fall, and even the clothing that looked salvageable was usually stained with blood and other bodily fluids.

Shiro and Kuro were still wearing the servant's uniforms we'd discovered a year ago. They weren't the strongest in terms of defense, but they were remarkably practical, with features like size adjustment, automatic repair, and self-purification.

I'd been wearing my usual black outfit, layered with a shoulder cape we'd found in a treasure chest. It shared the same features of size adjustment and automatic repair, but what it lacked in purification, it made up for with stronger defense. It could even repel slime acid, and it had saved my life once during a sudden slime attack.

We'd brought a few pieces of armor from fallen mercenaries back to our shelter, but most of it had been left to gather dust. Every now and then, we found a weapon in usable condition and added it to our stockpile, but mercenaries tended to favor brute force, often wielding oversized blunt weapons that none of us could handle properly. I could barely lift a heavy iron mace, let alone swing it around. Anyway, this was what we'd managed to pull from treasure chests so far:

First: short staff, maid's outfit, butler-in-training uniform.

Second: metal dagger, pair of leather shoes.

Third: small packet of sugar, three sets of tableware, shoulder cape.

Fourth: pouch of pepper, bottle of fine wine.

Fifth: tome of dark magic.

Sixth: large cloth.

The first and second hauls had been surprisingly good, but everything after that felt a bit lackluster. We were grateful to get anything, of course, but something along the lines of proper magical equipment would've been far more useful. By the way, the dagger from the second chest could cut much better when infused with mana, and the leather shoes appeared to have size-adjusting and deodorizing functions.

Shiro took the dagger, I kept the shoes, and we gave the tome of dark magic to Kuro—she was the only one who could make use of it anyway. It was the kind of item that deepened your affinity with spirits the more you read it, eventually unlocking specific spells. The one we'd found allowed the user to learn Darkness Eyes and Dark Shield.

Darkness Eyes granted full night vision along with the ability to see ghosts and similar entities. The other spell conjured a shield of darkness capable of deflecting magic. Both spells were low-tier but solid nonetheless.

"Shiro's gonna get the next magical beast we find!"

"Not fair! Kuro wants to toooo!"

"Then it's a race!"

"Wuffu."

I had no say in this decision. Whatever, as long as it's not a mutated specimen, it won't be that dangerous.

Shiro started singing. "It's steak day! ♪"

"Meat, meeeat."

"This is so good, I'm in heaven! ♪"

"Noooo, don't go to heaven already."

Their spontaneous song echoed through the corridor as we moved forward.

Keeping pace with their rhythm, we continued down the hall until three gray beasts came into view, lined up and glaring straight at us. Roughly the size of medium dogs, their lean, muscular bodies and long limbs bespoke their speed.

This dungeon was riddled with poisonous creatures, but none appeared more frequently than these poison beasts. They

sometimes showed up in groups like this but usually appeared solo. They weren't particularly dangerous in a fight, but their poison was exceptionally potent.

For us, though, they were little more than a convenient source of ingredients.

"Myah!"

"Arf!"

In a flash, Shiro launched herself forward, while Kuro shot out her right hand.

Over the past year, Shiro had refined her physical enhancement and wind magic, gaining overwhelming mobility. She kicked off walls and even the air itself, moving every which way to approach the poison beasts. By sending out wind from the soles of her feet, she could accelerate or pivot midair.

I'd tried to imitate the technique with wind spells of my own, but I couldn't pull it off nearly as well. A single midair jump was manageable, but doing it in succession? No chance. After crashing to the ground five times, I gave up trying to master it.

Even considering that Shiro was using techniques tuned for aerial maneuvers, her balance was extraordinary.

While Shiro darted through the air with intense speed, Kuro was completely still—at least, her body was. Within her, mana churned like a storm. The dark energy that overflowed from her imbued her skin with an eerie hue. As her silver-gray hair billowed around her, a dark blade shot forth from Kuro's outstretched hand. The spell was nothing like when she'd first learned it—this was faster, sharper, and more precise.

The range had grown too. Even from nearly twenty meters away, it opened a small, clean hole through one of the poison beast's heads, and the creature dropped like a stone.

Just seconds later, Shiro struck with her twin daggers—one taken from a treasure chest, and the other, a steel blade taken from a fallen adventurer—and sliced through all four of the beast's limbs. Enchanted with wind, the blades cut through fur and bone as effortlessly as slicing tofu. And thanks to the Wind Barrier she'd set up, the poison that burst from the beast's wounds never touched

her.

It was an absolute victory for them.

And with that, I quietly claimed the last one for myself—one of them taking down two beasts might've started an argument. The Water Needle I'd fired off in secret had already pierced straight through the poison beast's heart.

Noticing what had happened, Shiro and Kuro turned their eyes toward me.

"One for each of us," I said. "That's fair, isn't it?"

"Myah! When did you even—?!"

"Thor, that was amazing."

My accuracy and range had improved, sure, but what had really leveled up was my stealth. A lot of magical beasts could sense the flow of mana and dodge accordingly. To hit those enemies that had sharp instincts, I'd trained myself to cast while suppressing my mana. These days, unless an enemy had an exceptionally keen sense for mana, most wouldn't even notice my attack.

Still, I couldn't even imagine how we could win against the hell chimera. Lately, even defeating the monsters around here hadn't done much to raise our mana. We hadn't hit a complete wall, but the growth had definitely started to slow.

It might be easier to leave the sewers behind and venture out into the open than to risk facing that creature—just escape this town and head to another. Of course, we'd need some information about the world outside, but I was hopeful that Carolina could solve that problem for us.

We didn't encounter any more magical beasts, and eventually, we returned to our shelter. The appearance of creatures was unpredictable—sometimes five or more would show up, other times there wouldn't be a single one. I still couldn't make sense of it. There was no clear pattern. In all likelihood, it was completely random.

"Thor! Steak time!"

"Awooo, steak."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

When we returned to our shelter, Shiro and Kuro pressed in

around me, their eyes gleaming with anticipation. They were both taller than me, so it was actually pretty intimidating.

It was clear these two had spent the entire day's dungeon dive with nothing but steak on their minds, and I couldn't blame them. They'd even been singing their steak song the whole way.

Usually, I'd make soup to fill us up, so steak must've felt like a special occasion. And the meat from mutated beasts was exquisite too—as good as the highest-grade beef from my past life.

"Steak..." Shiro said, slurping up a bit of drool that was dangling from her mouth.

"Steak's a *rare* treat."

It's kind of hard to cook with you two staring at me like that. Oh well, I should just get to cooking. Might as well go all out too.

I sprinkled a generous amount of the black pepper I'd acquired, which I'd been using sparingly, and chose the finest rock salt for seasoning. There wasn't much meat since each rat was only the size of a small dog. Even so, I managed to cut out about six small chunks, mainly from the thighs and bellies.

The sorting feature of my storage ability was a blessing since it broke everything down perfectly and let no meat go to waste. I purposely stored the ribs with some meat left on them, pondering the idea of making spare ribs sometime.

While grilling the chunks of meat on a rack and letting the excess fat drip off, I lightly sprinkled on some parsley look-alike, which I had gathered in the big room. And with that, it was done! It was medium rare, but that wasn't a problem since I'd already purified it.

Normally, a mutated venom rat would contain a deadly poison, making it inedible. Most people probably wouldn't have even dreamed about eating it medium rare. It's only natural to want to cook a poisonous ingredient all the way through. So, in a way, this was the creation of an ultra-rare dish.

"Mutated highly poisonous rat steak, cave style." Magical effects: slight life recovery, small mana recovery, small life boost, small mana boost, complete.

"All right, then—"

"Is it done?" Shiro's voice came out of nowhere.

"Steak?"

"Whoa!" *Since when did they get behind me? Gosh, always cloaking their presence like that! Hey, stop gaping at the steak, you're gonna drool on it! Stop sniffing it too!*

"I'm gonna peel the mellum we got today, so set the table," I told them.

"I'll get forks!"

"Kuro will get placemaaats."

***

Today, I'd ventured out of the sewers alone. I had two reasons: to see how things were in the outside world, and to look for ingredients not available in the dungeon. At the top of the list were vinegar mushrooms and casse nuts—two things I'd never seen in the garden area of the big room. If I wanted to find them, I had to forage aboveground.

I was determined to get vinegar mushrooms as they were a rare source of sourness. I had considered asking Carolina—whom I was still on good terms with—to buy vinegar for me, but it was outrageously expensive. There was supposedly a group that kept the production method to themselves, and they'd driven the price through the roof.

In the end, my holy magic hadn't been enough to fully heal Carolina's injuries. She had no problems with daily life, but it seemed her work hadn't returned to the pace it had once been at. Because of that, she was scraping by just to cover her living expenses. I couldn't ask her to buy me pricey vinegar or spices. Still, it was a huge help just having her share things like salt, beast fat, cheap liquor, potatoes, and even underwear for Shiro and Kuro.

"All right, will this be enough to mask both my presence and my appearance?" I cloaked myself using the magic I'd honed in the dungeon. It wasn't flawless, but I was confident that unless my opponent pricked up their ears and actively looked for the faintest sense of a presence, they wouldn't detect me. Of course, if I came across an enemy way stronger than me, I couldn't say for sure how

it would play out.

Presence, put simply, came down to the slightest of sounds—the sound of footsteps or a heartbeat, of muscles and bones, or even of the flow of air. These were sounds no ordinary person could ever perceive, but magical beasts could sense them.

To shield myself from their razor-sharp senses, I'd drastically improved my skill in stealth. Even then, I couldn't always fool magical beasts, probably because they were attuned to even the faintest anomaly. That level of perception was beyond my own ability, but it was possible that a guru-level human in this world could accomplish something similar. That meant I couldn't let my guard down even when I was outside the dungeon.

Another thing I needed to hide was my mana—that, too, could be concealed using dark magic. There was a spell for cloaking oneself in darkness that prevented even traces of mana from leaking out. In my case, I didn't typically use it for stealth, but rather to prevent excess mana from leaking out of ingredients while cooking. That said, I could still use it for its original purpose.

With both my presence and mana hidden, I moved forward cautiously, avoiding any humans. If I still got discovered somehow—which was, of course, entirely possible—fleeing was my only option. Sure, I had my cheat abilities, but those were meant for my role as a magical chef. In essence, I was someone who created things. Even if I wielded my powers in battle, my true calling was still in the kitchen.

Moreover, the presence of Shiro and Kuro kept me from becoming too confident. They had been hunting magical beasts with me for a year now, but they were still only five. That being said, they were developing at an unbelievable speed, and their physical prowess had improved by leaps and bounds. They could run along walls, do triangle jumps, and leap over five meters. They were displaying leg strength that surpassed even that of Olympians. Kuro wasn't as fast as Shiro, but she was still remarkable.

It was clear that beastfolk possessed super physical abilities that far exceeded anything earthlings could imagine. I couldn't even begin to imagine the abilities of a seasoned beastfolk mercenary

who had over a decade's experience of dungeon diving. And then there were other races like elves and dwarves, who I was sure had surprising abilities of their own.

Sure, I'd gotten pretty good with magic, but I was probably still in the lower tiers. I couldn't afford to get cocky here.

I sneaked around quietly to begin the harvest.

"Nice, there's definitely good stuff outside," I said to myself.

I could use my magic to cook even the random weeds that were growing everywhere. I gathered every edible material that caught my eye and stored it. To top it all off, I'd already found some of the vinegar mushrooms I'd been after. *Things are looking good. I just need a few more—*

"God! How long do we have to keep searching for those damn beastfolk kids?"

"How should I know!"

I froze, hearing voices. I ducked behind a thicket, and two thugs sauntered past. I thought about just waiting it out, but their conversation was not something I could ignore.

"I get that beastfolk are rare, but it's been a year now. No way they're still alive!"

"What do you want me to do about it? We got orders to find them, so we got no choice!"

They're definitely talking about Shiro and Kuro! They've been searching for a year? If I stay hidden, they'll walk off, but I want to hear what they have to say. I need intel.

It was risky, no doubt about that, but I made the decision to follow them.

It wasn't an elaborate operation or anything. My plan was to just walk with confidence, and pretend to be heading in the same direction while staying within earshot. It helped that my black clothes made me look like any other street kid in town.

"They keep ordering us to search, but there's nowhere left to look."

"Didn't some guys even search the sewers?"

"Yeah. They went all the way to the end, but all they found were magical beasts."

Wait, seriously? Some of their guys came down to the sewers? I hadn't noticed... They must've shown up while we were in the dungeon, then left before we got back. What a close call. We'll need to be a lot more careful when coming and going from our hideout and the dungeon. No more leaving anything behind, not even footprints.

"But the bosses seem pretty sure they're still alive."

"Oh yeah? You think they're using some kind of magic? Still, no matter how rare they are, we're just talking about two beastfolk brats, right? I don't get why they're going all out looking for 'em."

There was a pause.

"Listen," one man said, "anything we weren't told, we don't need to know."

"Right, right. Some things you're better off not knowing," said the other, shrugging nervously.

After that, the two walked in silence. It didn't seem like I was going to learn anything else, so I quietly slipped away.

I couldn't believe that they were still looking for Shiro and Kuro. Were those girls some kind of special slaves? With as little intel as I'd gathered, there was no way to even start guessing.

Either way, this meant I couldn't risk taking them outside anymore, even if they needed sunlight for their health. There was no telling who might be watching or from where. Thinking back, even those few times I'd taken them out near the sewers to harvest had been reckless.

On the other hand, we couldn't just keep hiding year after year. For Shiro and Kuro to grow up healthy, they had to get out sooner or later. They say that home is where you make it, but the sewer hideout just wasn't a place fit for raising kids.

"I need to think of a plan," I said to myself.

If we were going to leave the sewers and try to live aboveground, we were going to have to get out of this town entirely. The level of crime here was pretty bad, and the girls were still being hunted. But escape alone wouldn't be the end. Even if we managed to slip out at night, we'd need intel about the entrances to towns—Carolina could probably help with that if I asked. But before that, I still needed intel

about the outside world if I wanted even a chance at making it to another town. I didn't even know if three kids could just stroll into a new town. And without any kind of identification, what chance did we have of landing real work?

Mercenaries existed in this world, but it didn't seem like there were any mercenary guilds like you'd typically see in fantasy stories. Well, there were; they just weren't convenient, global organizations that vouched for the identity of anyone who signed up. From my understanding, they were more like mutual aid networks formed by large mercenary groups to cooperate on things like gathering intel and fighting battles.

There was also something called a Dungeon Guild, which managed the mercenaries who went dungeon diving, but that wasn't an organization that issued identification either. It was more of a Dungeon Management Office, keeping records of those who entered and exited, and selling tools and supplies. Apparently, when the dungeon was first discovered, they even collected entrance fees. These days, though, people could dive for free.

As you could probably guess from the involvement of taxes, the whole thing was firmly under noble control. If I'd shown up with Shiro and Kuro, we would've been arrested on the spot.

So then, should I try slipping out of town and lying low in some remote village where ID's probably aren't required? I can't imagine things would go so smoothly, but it's gotta be better than living in the sewers, right? Whatever the case, strength is crucial. We could rest easy if we could just get a whole lot stronger. But our growth in the dungeon has already started to taper, and we'll probably hit a limit before long. If we could dive deeper into the dungeon, we might still have a shot at fighting stronger beasts and growing some more, but that's out of the question with the hell chimera blocking our way.

As I stood there lost in thought, I suddenly remembered something.

Wait, if I could pull this off, maybe we can *get stronger. Why didn't I think of this before?!*

I couldn't stand still at the idea, and I bolted straight back to our

hideout.

Once inside, I made a beeline for the kitchen and started sifting through the possibilities in my head.

"Hmm..."

"Thor, what are you doing?" asked Kuro.

"Are you gonna make something tasty?"

As I mulled over my thoughts in the kitchen, Shiro and Kuro stared at me with hopeful eyes. They probably thought I was about to cook up another new dish, but that wasn't the case this time. Well, I *was* planning to cook something, but I didn't even have a clear vision of what that would be yet.

"Sorry to disappoint you," I told them, "but I don't even know what I'm making."

"What do you meeean?"

"You don't know what you're making?"

"I don't, but I was thinking maybe I could cook the heaven dragon meat I have."

The heaven dragon materials had been sitting in storage, untouched, for over a year now. I hadn't been able to cook it since I didn't have enough mana, but the thought came to me that maybe things were different now.

Among intermediate spells, I'd focused hard on fire and water magic, and I was now able to maintain their effects for a short while. If I was right, that should be enough to cook dragon meat.

"Draaagon?"

"Oh, I think I remember you talking about it?"

I was pretty sure I'd explained it to them at some point, but it looked like they'd forgotten all about it. Well, why *would* they remember anything about meat they couldn't eat? They didn't even fully understand what a dragon was anyway.

"Nice," I said, taking out a chunk I'd carved from the heaven dragon's claw. Thanks to my storage, it was still as fresh as the day I got it a year ago. "Such a beautiful cut of meat."

I was now capable enough to see that the meat carried powerful mana. This was likely how it repelled ordinary magic. You could cook it if you stripped it of its mana, but you'd also be losing its flavors

and special effects.

Heaven dragon meat was said to grant strength to those who ate it—even my cooking magic's appraisal confirmed it. The rumors also said that, depending on the cut and method of preparation, it had healing properties that could regenerate lost limbs.

Draining the mana out of such an exceptional ingredient would've simply been a waste. The whole reason I'd become curious about the heaven dragon meat in the first place was in the hopes of gaining its powers and becoming even stronger. Getting rid of its mana would serve absolutely no purpose. To cook dragon meat without alteration, I'd need to use intermediate-level magic at the very least.

"Let me try cutting it first," I said.

I'd only realized it recently, but the butchering feature in my storage wasn't all that precise. It could break things down by major parts, but it couldn't handle finer cuts. With the dragon's claw, I'd been able to separate out the sinews and fat, and divide it into rough sections like the fingers, the palm, and the back, but that was as far as it could go. Even a single finger from such a colossal creature was far too big. It was up to me to make it more manageable.

I tried slicing through a springy cut of red meat but gave up almost immediately. The blade just wouldn't go through. It seemed the dragon's tough defenses were still very much intact.

"You can't cut it?" asked Shiro.

"Dragon's impreeessive."

"Hold on. Let me cloak it with wind..."

I coated the knife with a blade of wind and tried to slice through the meat, but it didn't go as smoothly as I'd hoped. I ended up practically shaving the meat.

I took the three misshapen slices I'd managed to cut and pierced them with metal skewers enhanced with wind magic. Then, after reinforcing the skewers with a fire-resistance spell, I grilled the meat over a flame I'd conjured.

This hardly counted as "cooking." Even food you cooked out in the wild for the mere purpose of survival was better than this. Still,

after I'd sprinkled on a bit of salt and let the heat work its way through, my cooking magic signaled that the dish was done.

"Seared deteriorated heaven dragon meat, cave style." Magical effects: slight life recovery, slight mana recovery, slight life boost, slight mana boost, complete.

I had to say, it was kind of a letdown. This was one of the finest ingredients out there, and the end result had the same effects as something from a low-tier monster. The name even came with a "deteriorated" tag.

"Well then, let's see how it tastes. Here."

"Myah."

"Wuffu."

I handed the meat skewers to Shiro and Kuro, but their reactions were hesitant. The stuff didn't exactly look delicious.

We all took a bite at the same time, eating in silence.

I chewed for a bit. "Not good."

"Nope."

"Toooo tough."

It was hard to put into words—it was sort of like a thin, flat piece of rubber. It had a weird charcoal smell and barely any flavor to speak of. If I hadn't salted it, it would've been hard to swallow.

I'd grown up eating crummy meals, but this had to be the worst thing I'd ever tasted in my life. I didn't spit it out though, perhaps due to my instincts to not waste any food. I forced myself to chew and swallow.

I thought for a moment. "I'll think of a better way to cook this. You two go play over there."

"Got it."

"Arf."

Their tails and ears drooped, their energy sinking fast. I felt terrible, a wave of guilt washing over me as I watched their small, sad figures walk away.

The quality must've deteriorated because I couldn't keep the flame steady. I probably had to cook it more carefully, and maybe cooking over a direct flame wasn't the way to go either. I took the chunk of meat out of storage and inspected it.

Magical beasts had abnormally thick and tough skin, scales, and bones, which meant there was little meat to be found. This rang especially true for dragons, which had surprisingly few edible portions, despite their size.

That being said, the dragon's claw was bigger than my entire body. Even after stripping away the scales, bones, and other unusable bits, the chunks were still massive. A single finger yielded two or three kilograms of meat.

I picked out the palm section, where the meat looked especially tender, and did my best with intermediate wind magic to cut the pieces into equal sizes.

My efforts yielded six chunks, each about the size of my fist, which I then dropped into a large pot filled with seasonings and magically conjured water. I braced myself for a long, careful simmer. With fire-resistance spells woven over the pot and stove, I just had to steadily maintain intermediate fire magic—I said "just," but this was the hardest part.

I sat cross-legged before the stove, narrowing my focus. My mana had grown considerably over the past year, but I could still feel it draining away at an alarming pace. It had been some time since I'd depleted my mana, but I could sense it coming on.

Five minutes later, utterly drained, I packed the pot away into storage. Time didn't pass in there, so I'd just let it sit until my mana recovered, then pull it out and start simmering again. If I repeated that enough times, it'd be the same as cooking it for hours straight.

"The real question is how many times I'll have to go through this." *Who knows how many days this is gonna take... Just thinking about it is making my head spin.*

***

Five days had passed since I'd begun simmering the dragon meat.

I'd kept at it, day and night, pouring as much mana as I could into cooking. I had Shiro and Kuro handle the entrance to our hideout, as well as all the fighting. The two of them could take on

hunting in the area no problem, and as long as no mutated beasts showed up, the danger was minimal.

We'd ventured into the dungeon together too, but I'd only needed to use magic a handful of times.

"Shiro, Kuro," I said, "thanks to all your hard work, it's finally done!"

"Oh! Fiiinally!"

"It's finished?"

"You bet!"

They both tilted their heads in confusion. Even though I'd declared it ready, there was no aroma drifting from the pot atop the stove. I'd imagined the smell would get pretty strong, so I'd been blocking it with wind magic this whole time.

"I'm about to serve it up."

The moment I lifted the wind magic, their ears and tails shot up. I understood exactly how they felt. My expression slackened the moment I got a whiff too.

"Heaven dragon meat stew, cave style." Magical effects: medium life recovery, medium stamina recovery, great mana recovery, medium life boost, medium stamina boost, medium mana boost, slight dragon mana, complete.

Wow. I bet this stuff has every magical effect there is. And they're mostly medium or higher. I've never seen anything like it.

The fact that an ingredient of the highest quality, like heaven dragon meat, had only produced a single great-level effect was probably due to my lack of magic skills. My guess was that it was because my intermediate fire magic hadn't stayed completely stable throughout and that I had to keep putting it in storage.

It still looked amazing, so I decided to just be happy that it was complete.

The one effect that really piqued my interest was dragon mana. Apparently, the dragon's mana had materialized and been imbued in the dish. Those who ate it would be able to take in some of the dragon's powers, though only a bit. The effect was labeled as slight, so I wasn't exactly sure how much power it would be.

"Thor," said Shiro, "come on, let's eat!"

"Let's eeeeat."

Oops, I can't be standing around like this. "My bad. Here, Shiro. This is for you."

"Meow!"

"And for you, Kuro."

"Arf!"

I poured the meat stew into their favorite bowls. Both were handmade, crafted with earth magic using clay I'd scavenged outside the sewers and fired with magic. They weren't flawless, but they'd held up well enough. I'd even carved a little cat emblem into Shiro's and a dog emblem into Kuro's.

The stew was mouthwatering just to look at. The vegetables had completely melted into the broth, leaving behind a white soup with chunks of dragon meat. The silky, creamy soup alone was dangerously tempting. Paired with the plump dragon meat, it was almost criminal.

Shiro and Kuro hovered over their bowls in "wait" mode, sniffing nonstop at the soup. The way they inhaled the fumes, their faces dead-serious, was a little unsettling.

Are they about to get high off this stuff? Well, either way, it'd be cruel to make them wait any longer.

"All right, let's eat."

"Let's eat!" The moment they blurted out the words in unison, they started wolfing down the soup at lightning-fast speed. Normally, I'd scold them for such poor manners, but today, I decided I'd let it slide—I knew exactly how they were feeling.

"Sooo good!" exclaimed Shiro.

"Deeelicious."

"*Unbeweevable!* Thor, thish ish *unbeweevable!*"

"Is Kuro in heaven?"

They raved about the soup after each bite. Kuro held her cheeks, her face the very picture of bliss. Shiro kept standing and sitting, unable to contain herself.





The over-the-top reaction was completely understandable. As soon as I took a bite, I froze. “This is incredible!”

It was ridiculously good, like an electric shock of flavor shooting straight to my brain. The moment I took a sip, the explosive flavors burst through my mouth, enveloping my tongue with silky fat. It was sweet and deep without a trace of heaviness. It was a phenomenal flavor through and through.

Even back on Earth, I’d rarely come across a soup this good. It was on par with a consommé you’d get at a high-end restaurant. Granted, this hadn’t required as much effort, but the fact that it could hold its own against a fine consommé spoke volumes about the heaven dragon meat’s potential. No doubt once my magic improved, the flavor would only become even more extraordinary.

Wait a minute, better than this? I can’t wait to taste it. As those thoughts went through my mind, I realized my bowl was already empty.

“Huh?” *What the...? I just did a double take. I shot a glance at Shiro and Kuro too, but you can’t blame me; the stuff was that good. I must’ve devoured it on autopilot.*

“Myah.”

“All gooone.”

Shiro and Kuro sat there, licking their empty bowls with sad little faces. They kept glancing my way, clearly hoping for seconds. *No, I can’t do that! It’s so good we’d eat this stuff nonstop! Inhaling the one serving that’s left would be such a waste. Do you realize how long it took me to make it?!*

After pausing to think, I decided, “You’ll have to settle for some mellum.”

“Meow...”

“Wuffu...”

They actually look disappointed at the sight of mellum—how spoiled can they get? Then again, I feel a little underwhelmed myself, so I’ll let it slide.

Fortunately, they seemed to get pretty satisfied with the sweetness after a few bites. They started crunching away with bright smiles.

But then, all three of us stopped moving, almost simultaneously.

I gasped.

"Myah..."

Kuro groaned as well.

I felt a tightness in my chest. My entire body had been taken over by a feeling of blood surging through my veins and my temperature rising. My heart was pounding so hard it hurt.

What is going on?

Shiro and Kuro must've been feeling the same thing. They were both slumped in their chairs, clutching their chests and groaning in pain.

And then, I felt a sudden surge of mana rushing through my body. There was no mistaking it; my mana reserve had spiked.

Is this the dragon mana?

Little by little, the pounding in my chest began to settle. Once we were feeling normal again, all three of us had an undeniable boost in our mana reserves. By my estimate, I'd just gained a full twenty percent more.

We'd spent an entire year slowly building our mana, but a twenty percent boost from a single meal? This was incomparable to anything else I'd cooked.

We must have succeeded in absorbing the heaven dragon's powers. If a regular cut of meat could do this, I could only wonder what eating something richer in mana, like an eyeball, could do.

"Shiro, Kuro," I said, "are you in any pain?"

"Nope!" said Shiro.

"I feel great."

They were sweating a little, but neither of them seemed to be in pain. If anything, they were buzzing with energy. The spike in mana must've put them in a state of euphoric excitement. Our mana had mostly recovered, and we probably could've gone straight for another hunt.

"I didn't think it'd be this powerful," I said. *Heaven dragon meat is insane!*

Maybe next time I see Carolina, I'll let her try some. She might even get better from its healing effects. That's how powerful the

dragon mana was.

"I wanna eat it again!" said Shiro.

"Dragon aaawesome."

They want more because they got stronger—actually, it looks like they just can't forget how good it tasted. But I wonder if it's okay to load up on food this potent. It might be the same as with strong medicine: Taking too much might end up hurting more than helping.

"We'll have more after we get used to our boosted mana," I told them.

"Then just a little bite!"

"A biiite."

I'm not gonna give you any even if you look at me like that!

"Myah..."

"Arf..."

No means no!

"Then we'll train more!"

"We'll traaain and get used to it."

Their current routine's already intense, and now they want to ramp it up some more? Their appetites are outta this world!

***

Five days had passed since we'd first eaten the heaven dragon meat. We'd devoured the remaining stew since then, and our mana had swelled even further.

Determined to grow stronger, I'd been working on crafting a new heaven dragon dish. It was another stew but with a very different ingredient: a colossal eyeball, as big as myself. To be precise, it was the eyeball itself plus the surrounding organs. In addition to the parts inside the eyeball, like the vitreous body and the lens, there were the optic nerves, blood vessels, and a portion of a mysterious organ that had been torn off from the dragon.

I knew it was best to remove this stuff to get rid of any unwanted flavors, but I didn't want to waste anything. Every drop of blood from the heaven dragon brimmed with potent mana. After researching countless recipes, I'd made the choice to include even

those parts that would've given off a foul taste. Among them was a part called the heaven dragon core, which was reputed to contain extraordinary power. It had come from inside the dragon's head, and had been nestled in my storage alongside the eyeball. Legend had it that a dish with heaven dragon core produced effects on par with an elixir.

I doubt I'm skilled enough to use it to its full potential. The core's mana is simply too much for me to handle. Honestly, it feels like a waste to use it now—but I'm gonna use it anyway! Better to boost our strength now than have the core be part of an extraordinary dish years from now. Even if I can't fully unlock its power, just including it in the stew should amplify its magical effects.

I took a pot filled with dragon bone broth I'd taken five days to make and added everything I had: the eyeball and its surrounding organs, the core, blood, and all the fat and sinews I'd trimmed from the dragon's claw. Then I tossed in a generous helping of salt, sugar, and chili pepper look-alike. From here on out, it was just a matter of simmering it until the unwanted bitterness transformed into savory richness. It was the same principle as stewing offal. I didn't do anything to remove the odors, but the ingredients were fresh, so that should've been enough—*I think.*

Still, this dish would take even longer than the last heaven dragon stew. My increased mana now let me maintain intermediate fire magic for about ten minutes, but even then, this was going to take weeks at the very least. My instincts whispered it would take much longer. The thought alone was enough to make me dizzy, but I was committed.

After these past five days, I could say with certainty that the surge in mana from the heaven dragon stew wasn't temporary since my mana hadn't gone down at all. That meant one thing: The power drawn from consuming dragon flesh became a lasting part of you.

I was now convinced that cooking an even greater heaven dragon dish would grace us with far superior power—power that could finally break the standstill that had been holding us back, power that could carve out a real future for Shiro and Kuro. To make that happen, I had to make sure this dish came out right. No shortcuts.

No rushing.

I continued hunting and foraging in the dungeon, while at home, I endlessly simmered the stew. I hung out with Shiro and Kuro, and went foraging outside too, but not for even a day did I stop stewing, even when my mana had become depleted.

Ten days passed, then twenty, then a full month—just an endless repetition of maintaining fire magic and stirring the pot. My motivation was starting to crack. I could feel that it was nearly done, but I was starting to get slightly—actually, *very*—bored.

So today, I made the decision to do some full-on hunting. I'd left the duties to Shiro and Kuro for too long anyway.

"Look!" I said. "Haven't seen big crabs like that in a while!"

"Crabs! We're definitely taking them down!"

"Yummy yummy craaabs."

Huddled together at one end of the corridor were three round crabs the size of horsehair crabs. They had a poisonous-looking purple color but were almost cute. Their behavior, though, was anything but.

They were called "toxic crabs," murderous creatures that spit poisonous foam from their mouths. The poison wouldn't kill you instantly, but it contained a paralytic agent that rendered prey immobile, allowing the crab to devour it alive. They were terrifying creatures.

Naturally, the crab's body was laced with poison too, but it was an entirely different compound from the foam it spewed. Just a single bite of its flesh and you'd be foaming at the mouth, before meeting your doom. Thanks to my detox magic, though, these things were nothing more than a lavish feast.

This dungeon was flooded with poisonous beasts, that was for sure; it was the monsters without poison that were a rarity. This must've been one of the reasons the place was so unpopular. After all, if you couldn't eat what you killed, you couldn't dungeon dive for long—not to mention that taking home poisonous ingredients wasn't gonna net you a whole lot of cash.

Sure, some poisons could be repurposed into medicine, but only in skilled hands. And even if you had the know-how, who knew if

you could sell them in large quantities? They were probably useful while hunting, but then you were still left without any meat. In the end, there wasn't much to gain from poisonous monsters beyond their mana stones.

Of course, I wasn't complaining, since that was the reason we never saw other adventurers and were able to keep dungeon diving.

"How about we take this opportunity and beat them together, as a team?" I asked Shiro and Kuro.

"How do we do it?"

"Attack togeeether?"

Attacking together was fine, sure, but that wouldn't really be a combo per se. We'd never tried it, but I wanted something that was more of a combination of our magic.

"Shiro," I said, "can you stop them from moving and gather them into one spot?"

"You bet!" said Shiro, conjuring a spiraling gust that instantly caught the crabs. They whirled into the air, forming a single cluster of crabs. Right on cue, I smothered them with a wave of water, and the three crabs became lodged in a column of water.

"Kuro, can you heat the water with your fire magic? I'll back you up."

"Okaaay, got it."

Fire magic could raise temperatures and even boil water. It could heat up enemies too, but scorching a living creature to death was tricky. My guess was that it wasn't just about a difference in thermal conductivity, but that living beings had higher resistance due to their mana. To take something down with heat, throwing a flame at it consumed way less mana. Since this was water that I had conjured, though, it shouldn't be a problem this time.

"Make the water haaawt."

"All right! It's starting to boil!"

Though these crabs had more stamina than normal creatures, they were still low-tier magical beasts. Trap them in boiling water for nearly three minutes and they were toast.

"That smells gooood."

"Looks super tasty!"

"Can't argue with that," I said.

The crabs, boiled to a bright crimson, filled the air with a mouthwatering scent. Of course, they hadn't been detoxified yet, so even a taste would've meant death.

I had to soothe the two girls, who were in full meal mode, before I stored the crabs and pressed onward. Maybe I'd gone a bit overboard, but the combo attack had worked perfectly. With the right combination, we were sure to be able to pull off a lot more.

Lost in thought, I stepped into the small room—

The three of us froze in fear.

Goose bumps surged across my skin. *So this is what it feels like when they say your skin crawls.* The pressure in the air was suffocating. My legs refused to move.

Shiro and Kuro were no different. They stood there locked in place, staring at the center of the room and letting out soft, choked noises.

What is that? Its sheer presence is monstrous. Never in my life have I seen anything so eerie, so sinister.

"It's black..." My voice faltered. "What is that?"

The dark presence before me seemed as if a shadow cast had come to life.

A black shadow—that was the only way of describing this mass of pure darkness. Its size was perhaps that of an average adult male, but its oppressive aura made it seem much, much larger.

The three of us had been rendered immobile. Fear had taken hold—a kind of fear I hadn't experienced in a long time, the kind that shakes you to your very core. It had us in a vice and robbed us of our ability to move.

I couldn't even lift a finger.

I'm scared. I don't even know why. I'm just scared. The fear has consumed me, consumed my soul. I can't even think.

A ragged breath escaped from my lips. My heart was pounding so fast that I could feel its thrum against my chest.

There was no way the shadow heard my heartbeat, but its movement grew more erratic. Then, its formless outline became clear.

It was a person. The shadow had morphed into the shape of a human with no eyes and no mouth, yet I could tell that it was watching us. *What is this repulsive sensation slithering across my body?*

"Myah..."

"Wuffu..."

Faint, shaky breaths escaped Shiro and Kuro like cries for help.

The moment I heard it, the numbness in my brain was suddenly shattered. My foggy mind started to clear up, if just a little.

What am I doing? I swore to protect Shiro and Kuro. So why am I standing here terrified like they are? How could I be so stupid?! What kind of guardian am I?!

The rage I felt toward myself smothered my fear. The brief return of my calm mind pushed my body into action.

I forced my mind and my magic into overdrive, trying to discern what this shadow was. But I had nothing. It must've been inedible. All I could feel was its malicious mana.

A moment passed, tense, silent.

Did the shadow react? Had it sensed that I'd used my cooking magic to get a read on it? The faceless shadow somehow seemed to grin. The pressure was so intense it almost made me gag.

Was it hostility? No. It didn't see us as enemies.

Malice? That wasn't it either. Whatever it was about to do, it didn't think of it as wrong.

Harmful intent? Yes. That felt the closest. It was trying to harm us. There was no doubt in that.

The moment I realized that, I spun toward Shiro and Kuro and shoved them, screaming.

"Run!"

The two snapped out of their daze. I'd always drilled into them that whenever I told them to run, they had to flee without question. As a result, their bodies must've learned to react instinctively. With fear plastered across their faces, Shiro and Kuro began to turn and—

They shrieked.

In the blink of an eye, the shadow had already circled behind us. I couldn't even tell when it moved. Was it that fast? Did it teleport?

It didn’t matter. I realized we couldn’t escape.

That left one option: fight. Fight to save Shiro and Kuro!

“Burn, burn! Blaze with fury! Infernal Dance!” I blasted the strongest fire magic I could summon, hoping to scorch the shadow while blocking its vision with flames.

However, the intermediate fire magic I launched was effortlessly scattered with a single flick of the shadow’s arm, which then stretched out to lash at me.

A low gasp escaped me as I tried to summon an earthen wall, but I was too slow. The shadow’s arm whipped around, sending me flying. Stomach acid spilled from my mouth, sparking a burning sensation in my throat. The rough impact of the floor against my body left me writhing in pain. Every inch of me hurt.

I felt my consciousness slipping away, but I shook my head violently, forcing myself to stay awake. I clung to the last thread of awareness and stared up at the shadow.

Then, I saw Kuro and Shiro leap toward the enemy.

“Darkness Blade!”

“Myah!”

I caught a glimpse of their faces, twisted in pure rage, teeth bared in a display of raw emotion.

But in an instant, their figures disappeared. Two dull thuds echoed from the wall behind me.

“Gruff...”

“Myaghhh...”

Like it had for me, a swipe of the shadow’s arm had sent them flying. Neither Shiro nor Kuro could rise again after crashing into the wall.

“Damn it...”

This isn’t fair... We can’t die here, not like this... We’ve only just begun our lives...

This is how it...?

My body was still numb from the impact, but I forced myself to rise.

I won’t give up! I can’t!

I mustered every drop of mana within me and readied myself to

cast a spell. In that split second, the shadow's form suddenly swelled. Then, it burst. From it poured countless black entities that morphed into tentacles and rained down on us.

I couldn't react at all.

"Ugh..."

The tentacles pierced through my throat and body.

***

Side Story: Ares

"Phew."

I let out a heavy sigh, finally allowing myself to breathe after wiping out a swarm of venom shooters—small, hornet-like monsters with a poison strong enough to kill a human adult.

None of the beasts that appeared in this dungeon were particularly strong in terms of combat power, but their toxins and acids were another story entirely. Some left behind lingering venom after being slain, while others carried poisons with effects that couldn't be healed through ordinary means.

There were also vicious traps. Not just the usual wire traps or pressure-sensitive floor tiles—the traps that had truly caught me off guard were basically sensors that ran on mana. No one would have a chance at surviving this place without a solid grasp of holy magic and exceptional scouting skills.

This was not a dungeon for ordinary adventurers. And it was that very fact that gave me hope—the harder the trial, the greater the blessing.

I'd spent months working my way through the dungeon, but the deepest level was still out of reach. I was running low on both food and medicine. Maybe it was time to head back and restock.

"Plus, I want to take a bath—!"

Suddenly, the dungeon trembled.

No, it didn't *literally* tremble. But in that moment, an overwhelming surge of mana zipped through, and it *felt* like the entire dungeon had shuddered.

What was that? Did another Demon King appear?

That's how malicious the mana was. The source was probably a fair distance away, but it had given me goose bumps all over.

Wherever the source is, it must be a nightmare over there. Was there some kind of disaster in the dungeon? Or has a Demon King

really been born?

Whatever the case, something had gone terribly wrong.

"I should hurry back." *Before I'm swallowed by dungeon malice.*

People liked to call the dungeon a divine trial, a blessing even. Those who'd been hurt by it had negative opinions, but most chose to see it in a favorable light. But as a dungeon diver myself, I had to disagree. It was certainly no benevolent presence; malice festered beneath everything. That much I was sure of. People were lured in with promises of blessings, only to be devoured by the jaws of malice.

Beginner's luck was a tangible force in the dungeon. There was a very good chance that the first treasure chest you opened contained something decent, something that would bait you and draw you deeper in. Any mercenary knew this instinctively.

That's the kind of place the dungeon is. I never did figure out why there was a goddess statue in its depths, though...

My hope was that the latest disturbance had simply been the dungeon revealing another layer of its malice. Because that would've meant that the dungeon would grow even more, and the blessing would become all the greater.

I was determined to bring my lovers back—the stronger the dungeon malice, the better.

"Grow," I said. "Grow even more, dungeon."

Let your malice swell for me, so I can hunt you down.

***

Side Story: Carolina 2

"Oh..."

As I stepped out of the general store, I bumped into someone and nearly lost my balance. The small jar I'd just bought slipped from my fingers, shattering on the ground—a pitiful end for the unglazed clay vessel.

I was planning on putting seasonings in it for the angel...

I looked up at the person who'd walked into me.

Walking so fast, right along the edge of the road—have they no manners? I ought to give them a piece of my—

"I'm terribly sorry!" I apologized immediately, dropping down to my hands and knees.

Before me stood two knights, though I couldn't tell from their appearances whether they were noble-born or combat knights.

Noble knights were born into families of knights and inherited their titles. Combat knights, on the other hand, were self-made individuals who were ennobled through their own strength. Not that it mattered—the townsfolk shared an unspoken understanding that no knight in this town was decent.

It hadn't always been this way, but the better knights had all perished in the battle against the dragon. The ones that remained were either cowards who had avoided the battle or weaklings who had never meant to step onto a battlefield in the first place. Noble knights likely didn't even see commoners as human, while combat knights were crude and violent. Either way, they were the worst kinds of people.

I kept pressing my head down on the ground. Maybe if fortune favored me, the beating would be swift.

"Umm, miss?" said a man's voice. It was one of the knights.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

I kept apologizing over and over to the knight who had spoken to

me. Whatever I said would only displease him anyway.

Oh, dear Angel. All that trouble you went through to save me—I just might let it all go to waste right here.

"Didn't I tell you to walk closer to the middle of the road?" said the other knight.

"The shop caught my eye."

"Candy again? You know you're going to get fat, don't you?"

"Ughh..."

I'd been trembling, prepared to get a beating at any moment. But no matter how long I waited, the first blow never came.

Instead, the knights began arguing among themselves. One of them—surprisingly—was a woman, her gray hair cut into a short bob. I knew it would have been a bit rude to say so, but she looked cute. She may have been shorter than me, and without the armor, no one would've guessed she was a knight. The expensive-looking glasses she wore suggested she may have been a noble knight.

When she looked at me, I felt a hint of sympathy. I know it's not possible, but could she actually be a nice person?

The man I had collided with talked back to the woman knight in a sluggish tone. With the way he shrugged as he scratched his carelessly patted-down brown hair, he hardly seemed like a knight from this town.

Maybe I won't get in any trouble? Oh, wait! If they realize I've been watching them, they might get upset!

I quickly bowed my head once more, and the two started talking again.

"The townspeople fear us," said the woman knight, "so do be careful, won't you?"

"I *am* careful."

"No, you aren't, or I wouldn't have to remind you! I thought you'd regained some of your spirit after the dragon attack... Anyway, we're late for our appointment. Let's hurry!"

"What a pain," he said with a sigh.

"The lord instructed us to include the dungeon in our search. We can't refuse—it's part of the contract!"

"I know..."

"Believe me, I don't want to capture children either."

"What can we do? A dog can't disobey its master's orders. Anyway, I don't want the knight commander bawling us out for being late, so let's get going."

"Wait! Are you really just going to leave this lady like this?!" The woman turned to me. "It's all right. You can stand. Oh, and we'll pay for the jar."

Huh? Pay for the jar? Is she really a knight of this town? Could it be that she's just pretending to offer compensation so that when I name a price, she can claim it's unreasonable and do something horrible to me? I remember hearing about someone being cut down for something similar.

But if I refuse, she might be angry...

"I-It's fine!" I said. "It was just some cheap thing! W-Well then, I'll be on my way!"

"Oh, wait—"

She's still speaking, but it's best I get away!

And besides, I saw it.

As we passed, I caught a glimpse of the darkness in the man's eyes—eyes tormented by despair. I knew that look. It was the same look I saw in the countless people burned on the day of the dragon attack—the same look I must have had when I had wished for my own death.

This man had those same eyes.

Perhaps the woman was kind. For a knight of this town, she seemed miraculously normal.

But the man...

No, he was dangerous. Those eyes belonged to someone who had nothing left to hope for, neither from themselves nor from the world. Eyes that no longer cherished anything. Someone like that would do anything. After all, they didn't even care about their own lives—they couldn't care less about someone else's.

I need to run as fast as I can from someone with eyes like that. My burn scars are still throbbing, but I don't have time to waste thinking about the pain!

I felt as though the man's gaze was still fixed on me. I kept

running, gasping for breath, even after I turned the corner.

I was running from something ominous.

The woman—did she say something about capturing children? How would you catch a child in the dungeon? Children couldn't go inside; they'd die almost instantly. What sort of child could survive—

"My angel..."

***

It burns. A searing heat gripped my throat and torso where they'd been pierced through.

Then, a moment later, I was overwhelmed with pain.

What the hell is this?! It hurts so much!

I can't take it! Aaaaggghh!

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!

The heat, the pain! I'm gonna lose my mind!

Instinctively, I cast holy magic.

The pain in my throat eased just a hair, and a hoarse scream burst out of me. *I thought I'd been screaming already, but I guess I was just barely making a sound.*

This was all I could do with my holy magic. It felt like the pain subsided a bit, but that was all. Blood, hot enough to burn, ran down my hands and face as my consciousness started to cloud over. *If I pass out, will I be freed from the pain?*

But then a pair of screams reached my ears and pulled me back from the brink of unconsciousness.

"Myaaahhh!"

"Awwwoooo!"

No! Run! I wanted to shout, but the words wouldn't come out. All I could do was raise my head and watch.

Furious, Shiro and Kuro unleashed their strongest spells yet, but neither Shiro's Wind Blade nor Kuro's Darkness Blade had any effect. The spells simply flew right through the shadow.

Then, the shadow's form began to shift again. Its left arm swelled, rapidly transforming into what looked like the head of a massive dragon. Its pitch-black jaws gaped, as if savoring the sight

of its next meal.

The dragon's wavering head shot toward Kuro with terrifying speed. She twisted her body to dodge it, but there was no escaping the shadowy beast closing in.

"Argfh!"

The next moment, the dragon head bit into Kuro's right arm. Blood splattered everywhere. She was flung across the room, screaming in pain. She tumbled across the ground, her arm now severed. The blood that gushed out stained the area crimson.

At the same time as the shadow's arm had morphed into a dragon, the shadow's head had swelled unnaturally, shooting out countless needlelike tendrils reminiscent of the hair of a ghost woman from an old Japanese painting. The black tentacles writhed as if they had a mind of their own, and all at once, they shot toward Shiro, binding her limbs and rushing toward her face.

"Myaaahhhh!"

Shiro screamed, blood spewing out from where her left eye had once been.





Seemingly uninterested in Shiro now, the tendrils tossed her limp body aside.

"Ugh... Kuro! Shiro!"

The two of them lay still on the ground, unmoving, like time itself had stopped. Except the bloodstain around them continued to grow.

Blood is life. Their life is being drained from their bodies. Their time is ticking.

Gosh, it's so red... Why? They were finally freed from their lives as slaves! Their lives were just starting!

The black shadow trembled once more, its surface shifting.

It's gonna finish us off—

"Heh heh heh..." the shadow cackled eerily. "What extraordinary willpower. What remarkable talent. You are truly worthy of becoming a sacrifice."

The shadow's talking—that thing can talk?!

It was a woman's voice, calm, refreshing. In any other situation, I might've found myself captivated by this bewitching, inhuman voice.

"I shall engrave you with a mark," the shadow said.

A mark? Before I could question it any further, a stabbing pain shot through my chest, like something sharp had been driven into me. I arched my back, only able to groan in pain.

But the agony made me fully alert. With stiff, awkward movements, I turned my head and looked up at the shadow.

It still had no eyes, no mouth, no nose, but I would've sworn that it looked at me and grinned.

"If you survive, let us meet again in the depths of the dungeon." I heard it loud and clear, like the words had been whispered right into my ear.

Then, as if it had never existed at all, the shadow vanished without a trace.

Except the red blood flowing from our wounds was certainly no illusion. The three of us were still clinging to life by a thread.

Before relief could even settle in, I sensed death creeping ever closer. Gathering every ounce of my strength, I forced myself to my feet and moved toward Kuro.

What is that? There's a black mark on Kuro's chest.

Forget it, I need to heal her first.

"Heal...!"

The holy magic slowed the bleeding, but just barely. Still, if I stopped, Kuro would die. I grabbed a potion and poured it over her, praying she'd recover.

"Heal...heal...heal..." As I kept chanting, I lifted Kuro's body with water magic, moving her as gently and quietly as I could.

I have to get her to Shiro. There's no way I'm saving just one of them. I'm gonna save them both if it kills me!

After setting Kuro down beside Shiro, I began casting magic on both of them.

Then a thought struck me—the food I'd made before. I pulled out some mutated poison beast soup, which had life recovery as a magical effect.

What if they drink this?

I decided to try it myself first. As soon as I did, I felt the blood that had been pouring from my throat and chest start to slow down. The life recovery effect must have worked.

If I can just get them to drink this!

"Shiro, Kuro, please... Drink...this."

My body swayed and my mind was fading from blood loss. I pushed myself to bring the soup to their mouths, but neither of them could handle it. Their bodies didn't have the strength. When I tried to trickle the liquid into the small gap between their lips, they'd spit it out. But I told myself that even just the tiniest sip could make a difference. So, I kept trying, feeding them the soup while using holy magic. I forced myself to drink more as well, trying to keep my mind from slipping into unconsciousness.

Though much of it spilled out and soaked the ground, the soup seemed to be having some effect. It looked as though Shiro's and Kuro's conditions had stabilized somewhat. The blood that had been pouring from their bodies had finally stopped, and their contorted expressions began to soften. The soup seemed to be going down more easily as well.

The pain in my own body had eased considerably too.

But they weren't fully healed. The wounds were still there, and a

thin piece of skin was all that kept the blood from spilling out of them. If anything went wrong, it would start flowing again in an instant. They likely had severe internal damage, as well, from all the blood loss, and they still hadn't woken up.

We had merely escaped instant death; we were still barely hanging on by a thread. I wanted to keep healing them on the spot, but I didn't think my mind could hold on. Even as I continued to channel holy magic, I was constantly on the lookout for magical beasts. The mental strain was becoming overwhelming.

In this dungeon, there were two types of magical beasts that appeared—well, at least according to the classification I'd come up with myself.

The first type was the guardians: beasts that appeared in small rooms and did not leave. One time, Kuro had been badly wounded by a praying mantis-like creature, but when we'd retreated outside the room, we'd been able to escape. However, it seemed that this constraint was nullified if you attacked from outside the room. If you made the mistake of taunting the beast, it would chase you endlessly—we knew that from experience. Moreover, those creatures were usually hidden in spots that couldn't be seen from the room's entrance, making a preemptive strike from the hallway nearly impossible.

The second type was the wanderers. Unlike the guardian types, they could move freely through the hallways and smaller rooms. While they were generally weaker than the magical beasts in small rooms, they often excelled at tracking their prey.

The creatures I feared most right now were these wanderers. The scent of blood could easily draw one into this very room. To be honest, there was no telling whether I could defeat a beast in my current condition. A trash mob I could probably handle, but what if a powerful magical beast showed up?

Actually, a certain story had been weighing on my mind. It was the legend of a mysterious demon known as "dungeon malice." I'd only ever overheard my parents discussing it, but I realized that the details matched the shadow we'd encountered. No one knew what form it appeared in, and it could shape-shift into anything. It was an

undefeatable enigma that would hunt down dungeon challengers, wounding them fatally, then simply vanish. At the same time, it would curse its victims. Those engraved with its black mark would be targeted by the dungeon's magical beasts. And even if they made it out of the dungeon alive, after a year, they would meet an unnatural death.

A mortal wound and a death curse...

Countless theories abounded about dungeon malice. Some claimed there was a demon lurking within the dungeon that simply reveled in spreading despair, while others believed it was an evil god that gathered despair itself.

That shadow, without a doubt, was dungeon malice. Mercenaries often spoke of how those who perished in the dungeon had been consumed by its malice, but we had come face-to-face with true dungeon malice.

I became furious. *Why us? We were just living quietly...*

Whatever the case, if we stayed here, a magical beast would eventually find us.

I wish we could get out—no, we have *to get out of the dungeon. We're gonna survive!*

"Ugh..."

It came as no surprise that every movement made my body creak with pain. Still, I gritted my teeth and activated earth magic. The ground bulged beneath Shiro and Kuro, lifting them onto makeshift platforms. It was a combination of Earth Creation and Earth Manipulation, which was usually used to create things like stoves, but it could be repurposed for battle or for transport.

Panting heavily, I focused on maintaining the magic, but even that was draining me. A sharp pain throbbed in my eyes, blurring my vision, but I had to keep up the magic.

With great care, I began to walk, making sure that Shiro and Kuro were kept steady. My only aim was the dungeon's exit. I walked deliberately, one step after another. I had to save them.

Earth magic, holy magic, constant vigilance—it was clear I was using too much mana. Every so often, I forced myself to take a sip of the soup to replenish my mana, but I was getting so full I could

barely stomach it. While it did have mana recovery as an effect, it wasn't like each sip was effective—well, technically it *was*, but only a single sip's worth.

I might run out of both mana and stamina before I reach our hideout. I pressed on. Whenever my resolve began to waver, I would reprimand myself, spurring myself on.

"Ahh..." At that moment, I remembered something. It was a flicker of hope.

Why did so many mercenaries risk their lives in the dungeon? It was for the blessing bestowed upon those who conquered it. It was said that if one managed to reach the deepest end and pray before the god's statue there, it would grant a single wish. One could be cured of fatal illnesses, be healed of deformities, and even have any curse lifted. Some had been granted extended lifespans, while others had been transformed so that their bodies were strong enough to combat a dragon with their bare hands.

These weren't mere rumors—they were genuine miracles. They seemed to have no relation to cooking, but for some reason, I was positive they were all true. The divine knowledge the god had imparted to me seemed to contain information about this blessing. Had it been embedded in me alongside language and other knowledge because it was so crucial? Regardless, the blessing should be able to lift the death curse that had been placed on us.

Conquering the dungeon as children might be impossible. Heck, we only have a year left to live. But even so, if there's a chance, I'm gonna fight for it. We will survive, at any cost.

That's what I told myself as I summoned every last ounce of willpower. I felt as if my spirit would break if I didn't cling on to that glimmer of hope.

"I...will live..."

I pushed through the corridor, opened up the wall, and entered the sewers.

But it was just my luck—a magical beast appeared. Was it because of the curse?

"Dammit..."

It was a gabul root. Normally, it would've been a trash mob, but

in my current state, it was a formidable enemy.

The moment I tried to use water magic, a searing pain gripped my head. It was the same symptom that always hit me whenever I tried to force magic beyond my limits. I'd felt a similar pain while trying to cast advanced spells, so I'd given up on that.

But even so, this pain is on a whole other level.

"Gaaah!" *Screw the pain! If I don't take this thing down, Shiro and Kuro are gonna die! Bring it on, dungeon malice! I won't lose. I'll survive this! I'll live through it and break the curse! I'm not gonna let some trash mob get in my way!*

I let out a battle cry. *Get outta my way! You're just a stupid ingredient!*

I failed to properly control a Water Needle, and it flew at the gabul root in the shape of a ball. Still, it blew the enemy into pieces, so it was good enough.

"Shiro, Kuro, just...hang in there a little longer." *I promise I'm gonna save you!*

I started walking again, moving toward our hideout, but just before I reached it, the earthen platform gave way and collapsed. Shiro and Kuro were thrown into the sewer corridor.

I'd just barely managed to keep them from falling into the waterway, but I had no clue how to carry them any farther. As I stood there, stumped, I saw their eyelids twitch. The jolt from the fall must've brought them back around.

I'm sorry, you two.

"Myah...?"

"Arf...?"

"Are you two all right?"

They both groaned weakly.

It was no use. They'd come to, but their minds were still hazy. Even so, with my help, they managed to get to their feet and stagger onward with tiny steps.

It took us several minutes just to cover the last dozen meters or so, but we somehow made it back to the hideout. I guided them to our beds and eased them down. We were all utterly spent, but we weren't out of harm's way. We'd merely escaped the threat of

outside enemies.

My holy magic couldn't heal them beyond this point. The soup was no better. It merely prolonged their lives—no, maybe it couldn't even do that.

I thought I could feel Shiro's and Kuro's heartbeats growing faint. Their faces were drained of all color.

Should I look for medicinal herbs? Get potions somewhere? If it means saving them, I wouldn't hesitate to turn to dishonest methods. I'll do whatever it takes.

But time is slipping away.

Damn it, I can't stay awake. Did I lose too much blood? What could I possibly do aboveground in my condition?

And then, an idea popped into my head. It was the only idea I could still grasp with my weakened mental faculties.

"If I can finish this..." I pulled out the unfinished heaven dragon eye stew. I practically slammed the pot down onto the stove and unleashed my magic, pouring in the last bit of strength, and hope, that I had.

Anything will do. I just need fire to finish this dish!

A crippling headache, even worse than before, shot through my skull as I felt a sensation that I could only describe as my blood draining away.

Then a flame burst to life—a black flame.

Why is it black? Whatever, fire is fire. I have to cook.

My mana was running dry, and I was about to pass out any second. *This is bad.* I squeezed out the last bit of my mana to keep the fire going.

A few minutes later, my magical chef knowledge kicked in and announced the completion of the dish.

"Concentrated heaven dragon core soup, cave style." Magical effects: great...life recovery, great...mana...boost, stamina boo..., mana b..., very...dragon mana...

I couldn't register the information from my cooking magic, but I could sense the intense magical powers emanating from the soup.

I haphazardly dumped some into bowls, and brought them to Shiro and Kuro.

"Shiro, Kuro."

Their answers were barely audible.

Then, the intense, almost aggressive smell must've hit them hard. Their eyes opened, locking onto the dishes I'd set down in front of them.

The dragon's eye and surrounding organs, the blood, the little meat that was left, everything had completely melted into an amber-colored soup. There were no solids left—just a beautiful, translucent liquid that filled the bowls. It was oozing so much power that it was as if I'd poured straight mana.

"Myah..."

"Arf..."

Despite the shadow of death that had fallen over their faces, their eyes gleamed as they looked at the soup. Their instincts as living beings must have been yearning for it.

But before they drank it, I had to tell them something. "If you drink this, it might save you, or your bodies might not be able to handle it...and you could die."

A look of shock took over Shiro, while Kuro just looked perplexed.

A heaven dragon core holds an especially potent power among dragon materials. Stronger than any cure-all, it grants great strength, but just as often, it kills those whose bodies can't withstand it.

This soup carried the name of the heaven dragon core, meaning that just as the legends said, it could grant life or death. I hadn't expected it to be classified that way, since I'd never thought my cooking abilities were at that level.

Yet neither Shiro nor Kuro showed even the slightest trace of fear.

"I'll drink it..." said Shiro.

"Me too..."

They could barely give a nod, but their expressions showed their unwavering resolve. They must've realized that if they didn't do anything, their demise was near.

After taking a moment, I assented. "All right."

The two girls didn't even have the strength to hold their bowls, so I placed them right next to their faces.

For a brief moment, we looked at each other in silence.

Then, we nodded at each other, putting our lips to our bowls at the same time. We didn't have the strength to use spoons, nor did we bother with saying anything before we started eating. We ate in total silence. We were practically gambling with our lives, but this was our only hope.

At first, the sound of airy slurps echoed through the room.

Just a few sips in, we could tell—our mana was recovering. The three of us winced at the pain of the rapid recovery. Even so, we didn't stop drinking. We couldn't. It was like being addicted to a dangerous drug. We couldn't control ourselves. The soup was so good that I wondered if I'd ever enjoy any other soup again.

I could hear the sound of myself swallowing, gulp after gulp, the liquid rushing down my throat.

Oh, my bowl's empty already—

Just then, it hit.

Our stomachs burned with intense heat. Something was stirring inside of us.

A strange force welled up from within us, neither mana nor vitality. No, "welled up" was far too mild a word. This power was erupting, bursting forth from inside us.

"Aaaggghhh!"

"Myaaahhh!"

"Grrrr!"

My whole body hurts! What is that creaking sound? Is it coming from me? Are my bones creaking? Or is it my muscles getting ripped apart? It hurts way worse than when the shadow nearly killed me!

I shrieked, unable to bear the pain. "Shiro, Kuro..."

They whimpered in response.

I turned my head, and there they were. That was enough to keep my spirit from breaking—I could see them fighting to stay alive with everything they had.

Almost instinctively, we reached out our hands, and one by one, they overlapped. This, by itself, gave us strength.

We are not alone.

"Ugh..."

“Myah...”

“Arf...”

We’re going to survive—together.

But despite my resolve, the pain only grew sharper. Shiro, Kuro, and I collapsed to the ground, our backs arching in agony as everything we had, everything we were, was poured out in a collective scream.

There was nothing else we could do.

“Aaaaggggghhhh!”

I couldn’t even tell whose scream I heard. All I could hear was children screaming and bodies creaking.

It sounded as if our bodies were being remade—

“AAAAAAGGGGGGHHHH!”

Epilogue

I had no idea how much time had passed. At some point, everything had gone black—but now, I was awake. The pain had vanished all at once, and my mind rose back up from the depths. It was almost strange how clear everything looked. I could even see the dust clinging to the ceiling. Better yet, I could vaguely see the mana drifting in the air without doing anything.

"I'm ali—!" I gagged, nearly throwing up. Something had rushed up from my stomach, no, from deep within my chest—something incredibly hot.

It came up again. "Whoa!" *I kept it down somehow!*

I still felt intense nausea, like I was on the brink of vomiting. Was it a side effect of the soup?

It seemed like the sound of my groaning had woken up Shiro and Kuro. They both sleepily rubbed their eyes and sat up, but the moment I saw them, I couldn't contain myself. "Sh-Shiro! What's with your eye?! And Kuro, your arm!"

"Myah? My eye?"

"Arf! K-Kuro's arm is weird!"

Shiro's left eye was clearly different from her usual catlike eye. Her pupil had a vertical slit, and her iris shined red-gold, like the sun. It was unmistakable—that was the eye of a reptile. It looked just like the eye of the heaven dragon I'd used in the soup.

Did the soup transform her eye instead of regenerating it? That has to be impossible. But impossible or not, there it is, right in front of me.

Kuro's transformation was even more striking. In place of her lost right arm, a thick, muscular limb had grown. It was wrapped in crimson scales, undoubtedly the same color as the heaven dragon's scales.





It seemed a dragon's arm had taken the place of Kuro's severed arm—meaning, the same transformation must've happened to me too. My throat and organs that the shadow had stabbed through were exchanged with dragon parts—*at least, that's my guess. I mean, I can't tell since I look basically the same. No scales on me either.*

"Wait, what's going on with your bodies?"

"Myah?" Shiro thought for a second. "Oh! Shiro got bigger!" She stared down at her hands and body before realizing that she'd grown noticeably. The same went for Kuro.

"Kuro too! Whyyy?"

You're asking me?!

Once they stood up, the change was obvious. They both looked like they'd turned twelve, maybe thirteen. Was this the power of the heaven dragon?

I don't get why I'm still the same age...

While I stood there, stunned and silent, Kuro and Shiro burst out in excitement.

"Whoa!" Kuro blurted out. "Shiro, your eye's so cool!"

"Kuro, your arm is awesome too! It looks so strong! I want one!"

"Shiro, does your eye feel any different?"

"Myah? Umm... I can see something! Something fuzzy!"

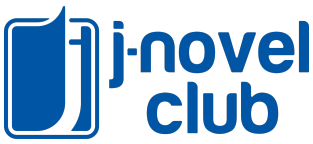
Shiro could see mana now—more clearly than I could, from the sound of it. No doubt it was thanks to that new eye of hers.

Neither of them seemed the least bit upset about how their bodies had changed. They were overcome with bliss. Watching them like that made my own doubts feel kind of silly.

I don't know if gaining a dragon's body parts is a blessing or a curse. But one thing's for certain...

"We survived, for now..."





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The Accursed Chef and His Pair of Furry Foodies Volume 1
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