

Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill

Chilled Scallop Pasta and
the Philosopher's Stone



Author: Ren Eguchi
Illustration: Masa

15

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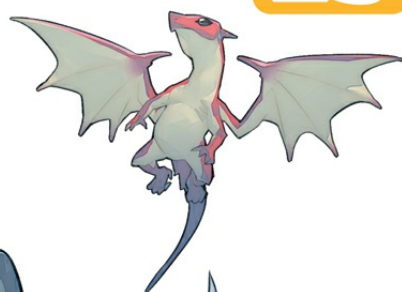




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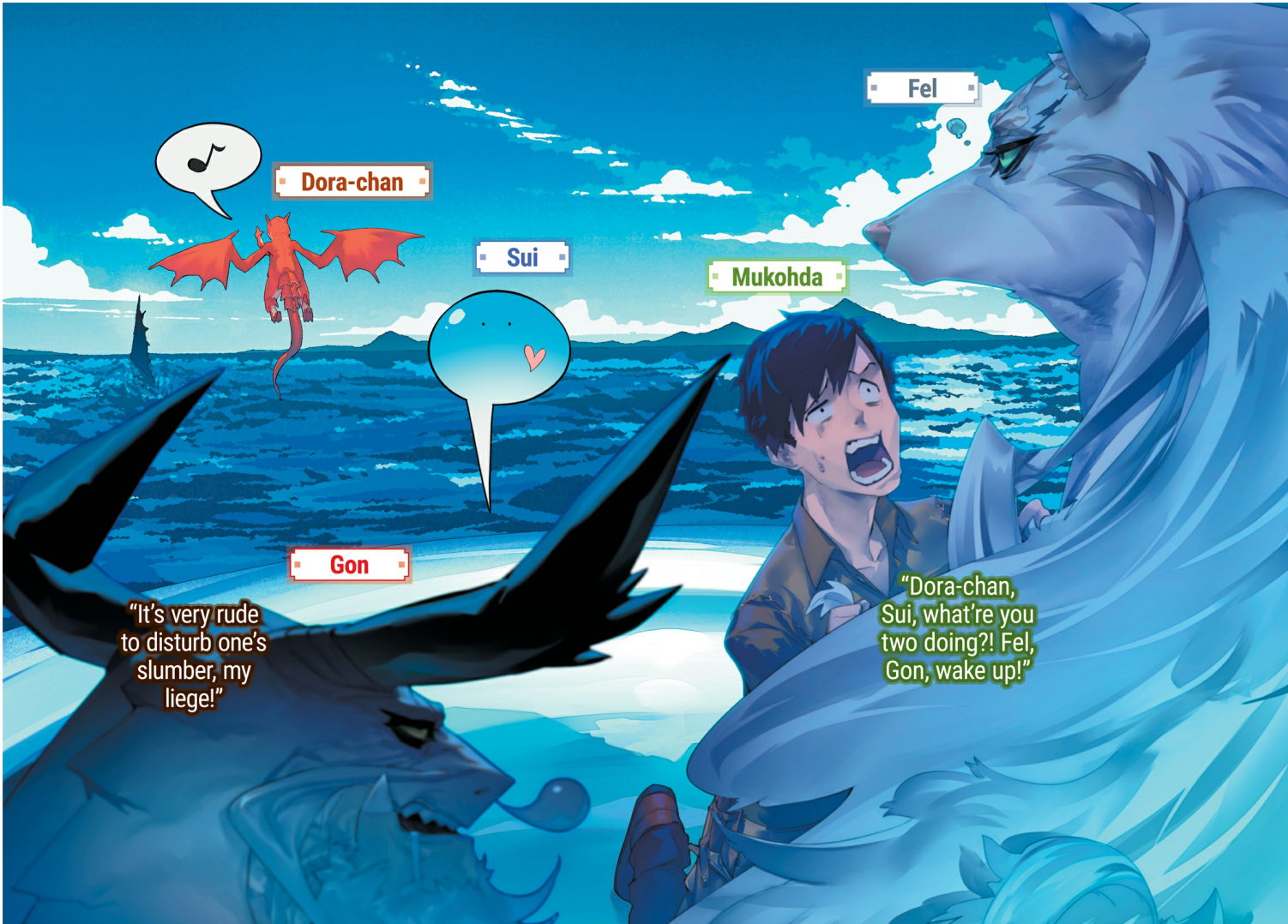
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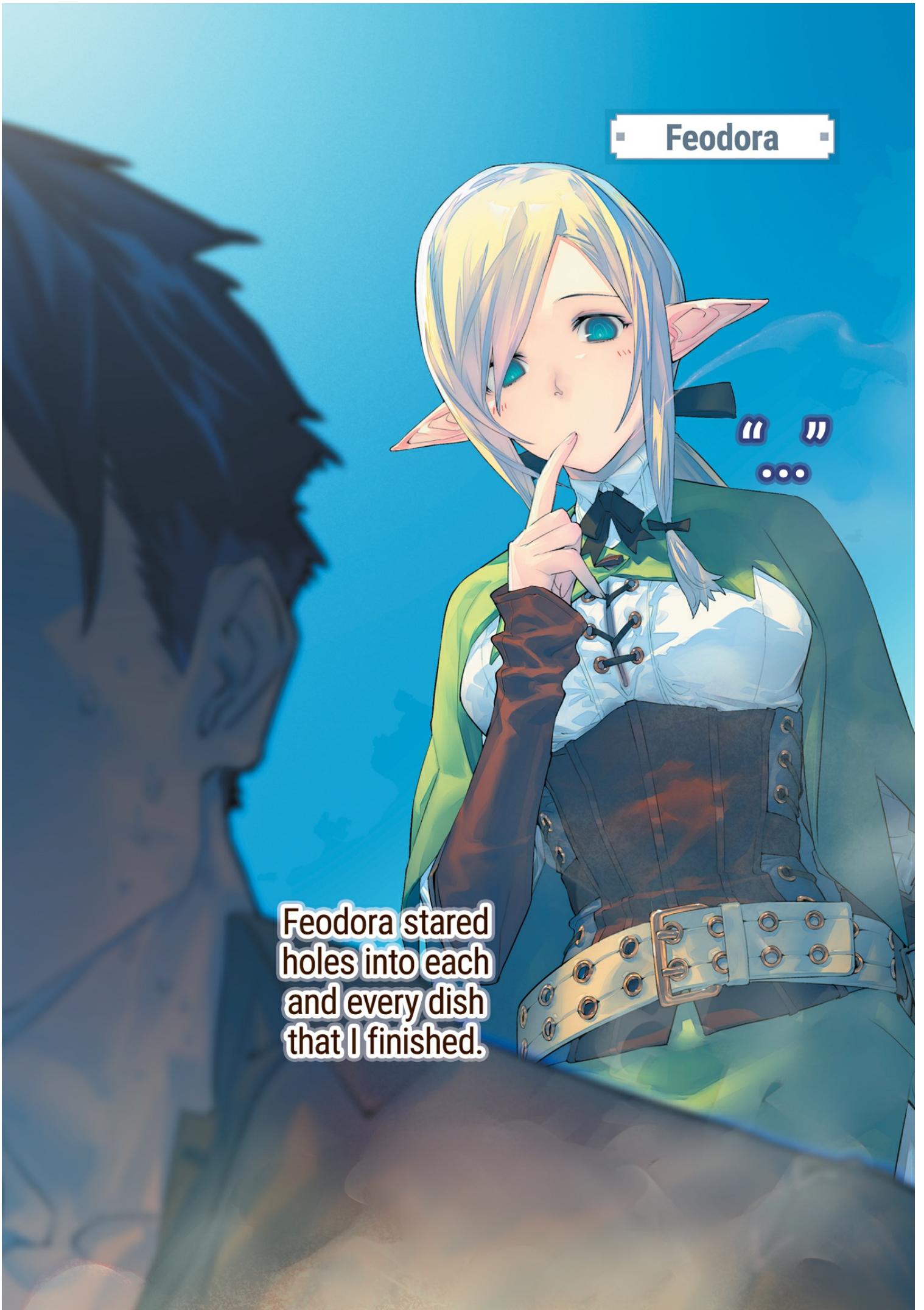
**Campfire
Cooking** 
Another 
**World with
My Absurd
Skill** Chilled Scallop Pasta and
the Philosopher's Stone



▪ Feodora ▪

“ ”
...

Feodora stared
holes into each
and every dish
that I finished.



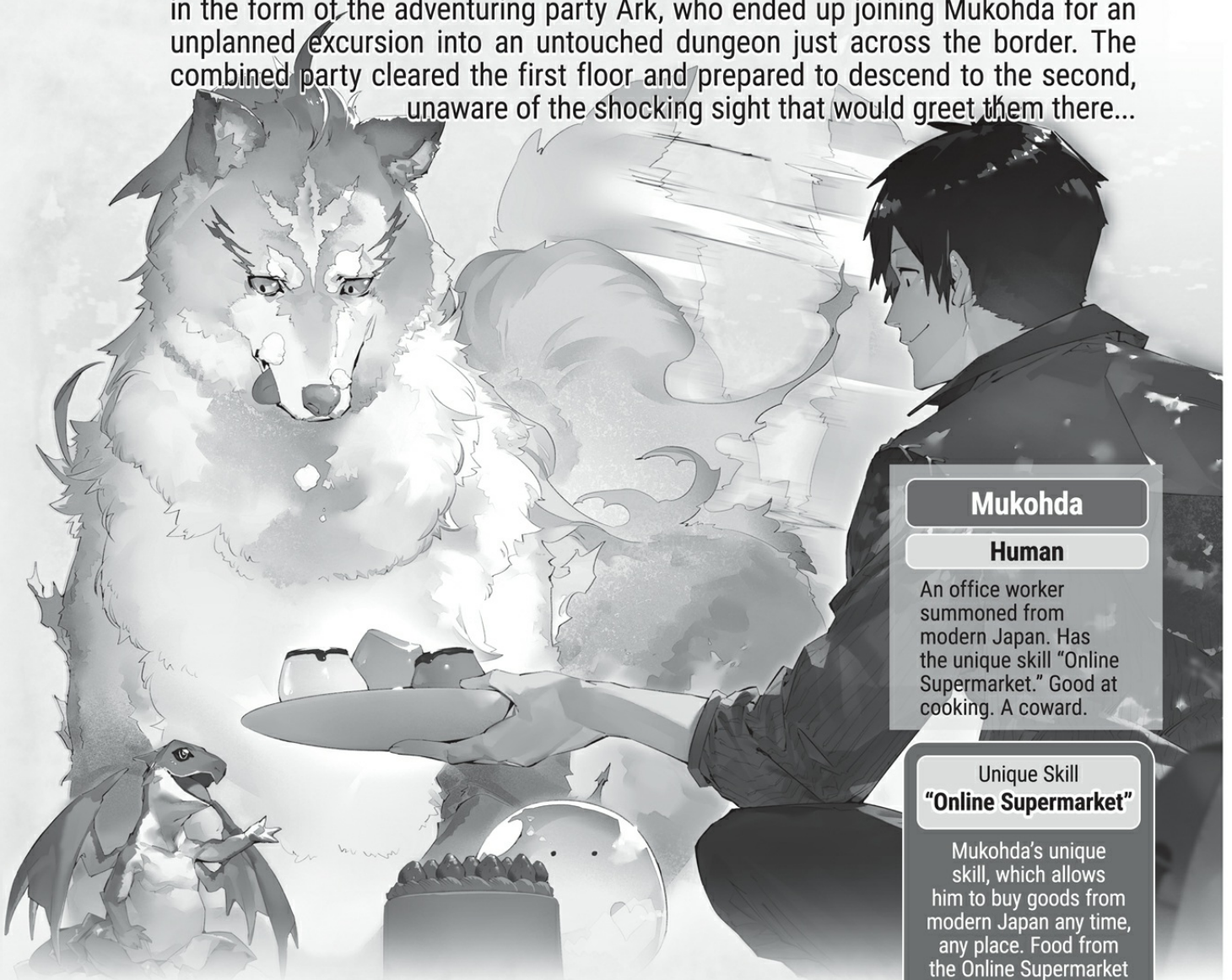


The Story Up Till Now



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

Mukohda and his party dealt out a harsh punishment to the malevolent, cultlike Church of Rubanov at the request of the God of All Creation, then took a side trip to the city of Ronkainen on their way home! There they bumped into old friends in the form of the adventuring party Ark, who ended up joining Mukohda for an unplanned excursion into an untouched dungeon just across the border. The combined party cleared the first floor and prepared to descend to the second, unaware of the shocking sight that would greet them there...



Mukohda

Human

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

Unique Skill "Online Supermarket"

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

Character Introduction

Mukohda's Party



Old Man Gon

Familiar (for 300 years)

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



Dora-chan

Familiar

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



Sui

Familiar

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



Fel

Familiar

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

The Divine Realm



Rusalka

God

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



Kisharle

God

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



Agni

God

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



Ninrir

God

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

◀ Proceed





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The Stairway to Hell	Gossip	+
A Grumpy Guildmaster	Chapter 8	+
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10 ×	Chapters
1 ×	Gossip
1 ×	Extra

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Chapter 1: The Smell of the Sea?

My familiars had dragged me out to an untouched and unexplored dungeon, and Ark, an adventuring party we'd happened to reunite with shortly beforehand, had come along for the ride. We'd just defeated the first floor's boss—a pair of assassin jaguars—and proceeded into a cave framed by boulders that they'd been guarding. Inside we found a staircase a few meters from the entrance and started making our way down it.

"These stairs just keep going and going, huh?" I commented.

They felt way longer than the staircases we'd encountered in previous dungeons. It felt like we'd gone down by the equivalent of fifty stories or so and I was beginning to get a little nervous, when I started hearing a faint splashing sound off in the distance. Then, at long last...

"Do I...smell the *sea*?"

The staircase finally ended, and as I stepped out into the light, I found myself standing on a sandy beach. My jaw dropped as I took in the surroundings. We seemed to have arrived on an island. There were a few palm trees scattered here and there, and beyond the sand, an emerald-green sea stretched out in all directions, lit up by the summer sun above.

"Okay, seriously, how is this a thing? We're in a *dungeon*, aren't we?" I muttered out of sheer bafflement.

"Heh heh heh heh! An ocean, is it? Now *this* is worthy of my attention!" Fel declared.

"Indeed it is!" Gon agreed. "It's been many a year since I last visited the seaside. What a thrill!"

《The ocean? Nice! Bet we'll find a buncha tasty fish on this floor!》Dora-chan commented.

《Ooooh, yay! Fishies!》Sui squealed.

The seascape had my gluttonous quartet in the highest of spirits, clearly. Not even the most bafflingly impossible sights could shake their positivity, and I had to admit, there was something rather reassuring about how consistent they were.

As for the *other* half of our party...simply put, Gaudino, Gideon, Sigvard, and Feodora were all standing in a daze, jaws agape. Ark was petrified, one and all.



“When I heard they were going to an unexplored dungeon, I thought I’d used up a lifetime’s worth of adventurer’s luck. I let my wanderlust get the better of me...and I’m starting to think that was a mistake. I’m a failure of a leader...”

“Don’t be like that, Gaudino. If it was a mistake, then it’s one we all made together. I don’t think any of us could have seen *this* coming...”

“Gideon’s got the right of it. I let my greed blind me too. No sense in blamin’ yourself when we’re all in the same boat.”

“An ocean in a dungeon...? This wasn’t part of the deal...”

The members of Ark were sitting in a circle on the beach, listlessly discussing the situation they’d landed themselves in.

“Tell me, why are the four of them in such poor spirits?” Fel asked.

“Because they saw *that*, obviously,” I replied, gesturing toward the boundless sea. *Seriously, who wouldn’t react along those lines in the face of a sight like this?*

The water stretched all the way out to the horizon, and I had *no* idea how we were supposed to carry on farther into the dungeon. Did this even count as a dungeon at all anymore? Did it even *have* an end? And even if it did, was there any hope of us actually reaching it? It was a sight that raised all sorts of concerns, and I had a distinct feeling that every single one of them was currently running through the minds of Ark’s members. I was only keeping my crap together because I had my familiars there for me. Most people wouldn’t stand a chance of staying calm, and I knew it.

Speaking of my familiars, Dora-chan and Sui were currently out by the water’s

edge, splashing around in the surf and having a grand old time. Old Man Gon was watching over them like a doting grandparent, calling out an occasional “Careful, now! No swimming out too far!” It was a downright heartwarming sight that couldn’t possibly have cut a sharper contrast with the deathly pallor that had come across the faces of the members of Ark. I wasn’t entirely on my familiars’ side here, to be fair. I *did* have my share of concerns as well.

“So, how’re we going to keep moving ahead?” I asked.

“Is that not obvious? We will simply ride upon Gon or Sui,” Fel replied.

“That sounds great and all, but it’s not like they can keep flying or swimming forever with zero rest, right?”

“And why would that be of consequence? There will be ample opportunities for them to rest.”

“*Will* there, though? Like, where?”

“There are a multitude of islands that would be suitable for that purpose, are there not? We will simply make for one of them when the need arises.”

“Wait...islands?”

“Indeed. Look—one lies right over there.”

Fel gestured with his nose, and I peered out to see what he was pointing at. My eyesight had improved as my level rose, and after a fair bit of staring and squinting...

“Hmm? Oh, is that it?” I asked. I’d finally managed to sight a tiny black dot way out in the distance, no larger than a sesame seed from my perspective.

“It is,” Fel confirmed, **“and it is not the only island. There is no cause for concern.”**

“Oooh, okay! That’s a bit of a relief, yeah,” I admitted. “I can’t believe you got a grasp of the geography here that quickly, though.”

“It was the simplest of tasks,” Fel said with an obnoxious smirk.

“Right, right, of course it was. Praise be to the great Fenrir,” I replied with a rather more strained smile of my own.

“More importantly, it would seem we have already obtained ingredients.”

“We what?”

I looked over in the direction Fel was facing...

《Taaake that!》

Pew, pew!

《How do you like *this*?!》

Shwick, shwick, shwick!

...only to find a legion of shellfish-like creatures, their shells opened up like hungry, gaping maws, getting mowed down by a combination of Sui’s Acid Bullets and Dora-chan’s Ice magic.

“Wh-What are *those*?” I stammered. The monsters swarming up onto the coast were clearly *some* sort of bivalve—a giant clam of one kind or another would’ve been my best guess.

“Monsters, obviously,” Fel replied.

Yeah, I figured that out on my own! I meant it in a “Boy, it sure is creepy to see a bunch of meter-long shellfish charge up onto a beach” sort of way!

I could already feel my smile starting to spasm, but fortunately, the battle looked like it had more or less ended before I’d even realized it had begun. Sui was now bouncing around, shouting, 《Masteeer!》 at me.

“You okay, Sui?” I called back.

《Sui’s okay! There were lots and lots of clammies, so Sui hunted them with Dora-chan!》

“O-Oh?”

《Ayup. And take a look at this! They dropped meat, so I figure we can eat ’em! That’s why Sui and I took ’em all out,》 Dora-chan explained. He was hovering over a pile of shellfish meat stacked up on the shore—the monsters’ drops, I assumed.

I gave the drops a quick appraisal...

【Giant Clam Meat】

Edible, and reasonably tasty.

Wow, now that's vague! And is it just me, or is my appraisal ability way too specialized toward cooking these days? I couldn't remember a single time it had failed to point out whether the monster parts I appraised were edible, and that's not even starting on it telling me whether they tasted good or not. Was this a side effect of the Solitary Chef title I'd picked up? It was convenient, so I couldn't exactly complain, but still.

"Apparently, this stuff tastes pretty good, so I'll try cooking it up for you later," I said.

《Yippee!》 Sui squealed.

《Hell yeah! It's been way too long since we've had some real seafood!》 Dora-chan cheered.

Just as I finished stowing the giant clam meat in my Item Box, I heard Gon speak up.

"A second force has arrived."

"A second what now?" I followed Gon's gaze and peered out into the ocean.
"Gah!"

A massive number of shellfish—these ones looking an awful lot like scallops—were bobbing in the surf, leaping their way toward us at a rapid pace.

"What of those? Are they edible?" Fel asked.

"My appraisal claims as much," Gon said.

《Hear that, Sui?! Let's get 'em!》

《Okaaay!》

With a joyful battle cry, Dora-chan and Sui set out once more to wreak havoc on the approaching bivalve battalion.

.....

.....

...

I found myself staring down a huge pile of shelled scallops, each roughly the size of my head.

《Talk about a haul, eh?》Dora-chan said.

《We caught a whole bunch!》Sui added.

I'd found a type of shellfish called yellow scallops in the seaside town Berléand, which had resembled the scallops I knew in my old world as well, with the exception of their massive size. But as big as those scallops had been, the ones Sui and Dora-chan had caught put even them to shame. They had been about half a meter long with their shells on, so no surprise their meat would be on a similar scale. Anyway, Gon had already confirmed their edibility, but I decided to give them an appraisal as well, just for good measure.

【Giant Scallop Meat】

Edible. Delicious grilled or stewed.

“Grilled or stewed,” huh? Well, that’s a shellfish for you. They’ll probably be good in all sorts of recipes. Maybe I’ll go the simple route and butter-baste a few to start.

《Arright, let’s chow down!》

《Yay, foood!》

“Indeed. We have all the ingredients we need at hand, so we shall eat immediately.”

“I’m in favor of that! It’s been a long time indeed since I’ve partaken of seafood. I trust you’ll cook something truly exceptional, my liege!”

Yuuup, figures. My resident gluttons could never look at a pile of ingredients like that and *not* immediately want to sample them. It was still a little early for lunch, but I figured that eating now couldn’t hurt, especially since a tasty meal seemed like just the thing to lift the spirits of Ark’s members, who were still solidly down in the dumps.

I know exactly what dish to make too! It's been ages since I've been able to have this, I thought to myself as I brought out my special-made barbecue grill and got right to work.



It was time for a long overdue seafood barbecue! My star ingredients: the giant clams and giant scallops that Dora-chan and Sui had caught for me.

The shellfish I was working with were huge, so first I took a moment to chop them up into a more manageable size. I had a feeling they'd be perfectly tasty if I simply grilled them with a little salt and pepper, but I wanted to give the meal a little extra something, and the perfect idea sprang immediately to mind.

"Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure I already saw the exact thing I need in my Online Supermarket when I bought my pots," I muttered to myself. Then, making sure nobody from Ark was watching, I opened up my skill's menu and navigated over to the kitchenware department. "Oh, there they are! These skillets should be perfect!"

I quickly purchased four large skillets, to start. I'd be making something that had been in the back of my mind for my next barbecue for a good long while: a seafood al ajillo dish! I couldn't imagine shellfish with al ajillo being anything other than delicious, so it seemed like an ideal option.

I picked up some shimeji and white mushrooms to throw into the dish as well, which I chopped the base off of and halved, respectively. Then I minced the garlic—probably the most important component of an al ajillo dish—and sliced a few hawk claw chilis into rounds.

Next up, I poured some olive oil into the skillets, added in the garlic, chilis, and a little salt, then put them all onto the barbecue grate. Then, the moment they started smelling nice and aromatic, I threw in the mushrooms and shellfish, the latter of which I kept separated by type—two skillets for the giant clams and two for the giant scallops. Finally, when the shellfish were cooked through, I grated some fresh black pepper over them—the sort that comes packaged in its own little mill.

"All right, it's ready!" I announced.

“Good! Feed it to us at once!”

“With all due haste, my liege!”

《All *right*! Chow time!》

《Masteeer, Sui wants to try it now!》

“I know, I know! Sheesh, hold your horses,” I said, placating my familiars (who had, of course, been waiting on standby that whole time) as well as I could.

I gave the giant clam and giant scallops al ajillo a final seasoning pass with salt and pepper, then plated them up, delivered them to my gluttonous quartet, and realized with horror that I’d neglected to save any for *myself*, even though I’d been just as eager to try them. I headed right back to the barbecue grill, gave a few more clams and scallops the salt-and-pepper treatment, and got them grilling away—while also not forgetting to prepare another four skillets’ worth of shellfish al ajillo, of course!

“You know, this dish *does* rather prompt a thirst,” Gon said, shooting a hopeful glance in my direction.

Nope, sorry. No number of meaningful glances is going to make me bring out the booze. Drinking in a dungeon felt like a bad idea, no matter how you sliced it. Who knew what sort of danger we’d end up in if we got sloshed and let our guards down?

《Yeah, these shellfish *are* pretty tasty,》 Dora-chan said.

《They’re super yummy! Sui’s glad we hunted so many!》 Sui added. The two of them were clearly delighted that they’d hunted down something so delicious.

“I have had far worse,” Fel said. “Indeed, these creatures are palatable, but they do not satisfy alone. No, this occasion demands meat! Meat, on the double!”

《Meat!》 my other three familiars repeated, an excited glint flashing across their eyes.

Yuuup, I should’ve known. Seafood could never satisfy those carnivores. I shook my head, but still brought out a hearty quantity of gigant minotaur meat to cook on the grill. That, hopefully, would satisfy them. I kept the seasonings

simple, by the way—just salt and pepper across the board—and while I was working on those, I took the chance to steal a bite of the second batch of giant clam al ajillo.

“Oh, wow! My appraisal said these would be ‘reasonably tasty,’ but that doesn’t do them justice at *all*! This is *great*!” I exclaimed.

The clam meat was perfectly cooked. It was nice and plump, practically bursting with that particular sort of umami that you could only get from shellfish. The slight spice of the hawk claw chilis and the aromatic garlic were a perfect flavor pairing, as well. Gon was right—it really *was* a dish that made me feel like having a stiff drink. I wasn’t done yet, though, and sampled the giant scallop al ajillo next.

“*Mmmh!* This is great too!”

Once again, the scallop’s umami and the spicy, garlicky flavor of the other ingredients were a match made in heaven. I very nearly dropped everything to stuff my face then and there, but instead, I held back the urge and looked over my shoulder at the members of Ark, who were still huddled up in a deeply dispirited circle on the beach.

I let out a sigh. *I get how they feel, sure, but we’ve come this far already! It’s not like turning around would get us anywhere.* My gluttons’ meat was ready to be served by that point, so I quickly plated it up and delivered it to them, then set my cooking tongs down for a moment and headed over to Ark’s gathering place.

“Hey, everyone! Feel like eating with us?” I offered.

“Oh, Mukohda...” Gaudino droned in response.

“Come on, no need to be *that* depressed! Just leave it to my familiars, and we’ll make it out of here no problem, okay?” I said in an attempt to reassure them. Unfortunately, it seemed to backfire.

Gideon let out a heavy sigh. “The problem is that so far, it feels like we’ve only been holding you all back,” he explained. “There’s absolutely no chance in the world that we *ever* could’ve even made it through the first floor on our own.”

“And *this* floor’s even further outta the question,” Sigvard grumbled with a

nod of agreement, his muscle-bound shoulders slumped with disappointment.

I'd expected Feodora to be lured over by the smell of the barbecue at least, but even she was just sitting there, silently staring a hole into the sand. You'd think the four of them were at a wake, honestly, and it struck me how seriously they took their adventuring business.

"Okay, *look*," I said, "we all agreed to crawl this dungeon together, didn't we? That means that for the time being, we're all in the same party! It's a temporary party, sure, but that doesn't change the fact that right now we're all allies here, and allies help each other out when they're in over their head! Isn't that just the natural thing to do?"

Finally, Ark's members jolted upright in unison.

"Allies... You know what? You're right. We *did* come all the way out here to take this dungeon on as a team," Gaudino muttered. Gideon, Sigvard, and Feodora nodded in agreement, and before I knew it, the gloom in all of their expressions had been replaced with a certain determination.

"All right!" Gideon shouted. "Now that that's settled, I think it's time for us to dig into another of Mukohda's feasts!"

"You got that right," Sigvard agreed. "Everything he makes is a delicacy. We can't let this one slip by."

"I'll eat it all," Feodora said.

I was relieved to see the four of them back in high spirits...but not for long, because barely an instant later, something *enormous* erupted from the sandy beach directly behind them.

"*Pff!* Wh-Wh-What is *that?!?*" I shouted as I wiped the sand spray off my face. I managed to open my eyes up again...only to find an enormous monster bearing down on us, scissorlike pincers clacking away. "*Augh!*"

Compared to my panic, the members of Ark remained remarkably composed in the face of danger.

"Looks like a giant coconut crab to me," Gaudino said.

"You know something about this thing, leader?" Gideon asked.

“Only what I’ve read in books. First time seeing the real deal.”

“Oh? Ever the bookworm, our leader,” Sigvard commented.

“Means I know how to take that thing down, so don’t knock it till you’ve tried it! It’s an A-ranker, but its pincers are its only weapons! If we can just take those outta the picture, we should be able to handle it! Feodora!”

“Right,” Feodora said, then proceeded to mutter something under her breath—an incantation, apparently, because a moment later a number of thick, sturdy vines burst out of the surface of the beach, wrapping around the giant coconut crab and binding it in place.

“Gideon, follow my lead and take out its joints! Sigvard, go for its head and knock its block off!”

“Understood!”

“You got it!”

With that, Ark began a coordinated assault on the crab. I, meanwhile, was off to the side, nodding as it dawned on me that the monster really *did* look like the coconut crabs I’d seen on TV back in the day. If memory served, they were technically a species of hermit crab, though you’d never guess it considering the ones back in my old world were huge in their own right.

This coconut crab was around three meters long—in other words, enormous—but that didn’t dissuade Gaudino from laying into it, driving his bastard sword into the joint where one of its legs connected to its body. Gideon went after the same joint with his mithril spear, and Sigvard slammed his prized warhammer straight into its head, over and over. The vines had sealed the crab’s only weapons, leaving it completely unable to defend itself, and within just a few minutes it crashed to the ground, leaving behind a pincer packed full of crab meat and a smallish magic stone.

“We *did* it! *Yes!*” Gaudino bellowed. The rest of Ark quickly joined him, slapping each other’s shoulders and congratulating each other all around. Eventually, Gaudino turned to me. “Mukohda! Here,” he said, offering the giant coconut crab claw. “I have it on good authority that these are good eatin’.”

“You’re always feeding us the best meals we’ve ever had,” Gideon added,

lacing his fingers behind his head. “It’s only fair that we provide the ingredients for once.”

“Ha ha, fair enough! In that case, what do you say we throw this right on the barbecue?” I suggested.

It wasn’t long before all of us were smacking our lips over the giant crab claw meat. My familiars had spent the whole battle munching away at their piles of meat, by the way, but they ended up partaking as well. As to why they hadn’t lifted a finger to help, in Fel’s words, **“It was a foe that the four of them were clearly capable of felling on their own.”** I wasn’t entirely convinced that he hadn’t just been too absorbed in his meal to notice, of course.

Chapter 2: I Thought I Was a Goner

We set off into the sea, riding atop Sui's enlarged form.

"I never imagined a dungeon could have a floor like *this*," I muttered to myself as I gazed at the vast, cobalt-blue seascape spreading out in all directions around me.

Fel, who had apparently heard me, let out a snort. **"This is the first time I have encountered a floor of this nature as well,"** he said. **"Better still, I sense a number of foes worth battling scattered around this vicinity. This dungeon will indeed be worth the trip."**

What do you mean, "worth the trip"? And don't grin like that when you're saying this stuff! It's really freaking me out! By Fel's standards, "foes worth battling" would almost certainly turn out to be absurdly dangerous monsters, so I wasn't at all happy to hear that piece of news.

"I can't say I ever thought a dungeon like this could exist either," Gon commented, joining in on the conversation.

"So there are corners of this world that not even its most long-lived fossil has seen? Then I suppose there truly is still novelty to be found. Especially within dungeons! I will never tire of them, so long as there are still new discoveries like this one to be made," Fel declared, his eyes glimmering with enthusiasm.

《You can say that again!》 Dora-chan said. 《I never bothered with 'em back when I was on my own, but all it took was going into one to sell me on how fun they could be!》

Ha ha. You really have turned into a dungeon lover too, huh, Dora-chan?

"Becoming his familiar has allowed me easy access to the dungeons within human towns, as well. A valuable benefit indeed. I intend to make use of it at every opportunity. And, of course, to seek out untouched dungeons such as this one," Fel said, to Gon and Dora-chan's immediate approval.

《Sui wants to go into lots of dungeons too!》 Sui chimed in telepathically from beneath us.

I, of course, found the prospect of going along on their dungeon tour to be deeply upsetting.

Meanwhile, in the other half of our party...

“What do you think, Feodora? Can you make the shot?” Gaudino said, pointing at the silhouette of a rather sizable fish a ways off in the ocean.

“Easy,” Feodora replied. She nocked an arrow, took aim, and loosed it toward the fish...

Fwsh!

...scoring a direct hit! The fish’s outline vanished, quickly replaced by its drop items...

《Here you go!》

...which Sui then scooped up out of the water with a tentacle along with Feodora’s arrow, dropping them all on its back.

“Thanks, Sui!” I called down.

Ark had made something of a breakthrough after the incident on the island and were now making an effort to hunt as we made our way through the sea. Recovering the drops from their targets, however, had proved to be something of a dead end, so I’d enlisted Sui to help out by running collection duty.

It wasn’t a completely one-sided arrangement, of course—most of the fish Ark’s members took down dropped, well, fish, which they offered to me as ingredients. The fish that Feodora had just shot had dropped what looked an awful lot like a salmon fillet, in fact. They’d at least obtained a few nonfood drops, though, including the shells of monsters that looked like smallish sea turtles, which were supposedly quite valuable—hence the contented smiles on their faces.

“Hm? What’s that over there?” Sigvard said. He’d been keeping an eye out for potential prey and was now frowning as he peered at the water’s surface.

The rest of Ark’s members and I all gathered around, looking in the same

direction.

“Huh? A *dog*?” I said in disbelief. There was just no way a dog would be swimming around in the middle of the ocean, and yet there one was.

“Fool. A mere dog would never be found in a place such as this,” Fel snapped, mercilessly shooting down my first impression.

“W-Well, yeah, I know *that*! That’s why I’m so surprised!” I shot back.

Rationally speaking, it had to be some sort of monster. It was just the fact that it was a type none of us had seen before, and the way that its head looked pretty much exactly like a dog’s, that was throwing all of us off so much.

“Oh! That would be a cetus,” Gon said.

“Wait...you know what they are, Gon?” I asked. *Leave it to the party elder to have that sort of trivia in his back pocket.*

“They are seabound monsters,” Gon explained. “And, more importantly, you’d all do well to stay on guard! After all, they tend to travel in packs.”

No sooner had the words left Gon’s mouth than another doglike face emerged from the sea...and another, and another. The next thing I knew, we were completely surrounded by a horde of cetuses.

《Master, can Sui beat them up?》

“Y-Yeah, good plan! Take ‘em out, Sui!”

《Okaaay! Take *this*!》

“*Grelp!*” a cetus yelped as one of Sui’s tentacles pierced straight through it.

“W-We’ll help too!” I shouted. There were just so many of them, I felt the need to pull my mithril spear out from my Item Box and steel myself for battle.

“That goes without saying. Sui would fare well enough on its own, but numbers such as these would slow us down,” Fel said with a wave of his foreleg. That casual motion was all it took to carve deep trenches in the water’s surface, quickly followed by a red stain spreading across the path they’d traveled.

“Indeed. They would cause quite the delay, and worse still, they have our

scent. We'll be better off finishing them off here and now," Gon added. He shot a glare at one of the cetuses, which was immediately swallowed up into a whirlpool that appeared out of nowhere in the sea. The vortex turned a sickening bloodred too before I knew it.

《Hey, leave some for me!》Dora-chan shouted before conjuring a few of his signature ice pillars and shish-kebabbing several cetuses at once.

"Do not be careless!" Fel barked at Ark's members. **"Look! They are climbing aboard!"**

That snapped the four of them out of their daze and back to attention. I looked as well and found that a cetus really was clambering its way up onto Sui's big, round body.

"Ugh, that's nasty," I muttered. The cetus's face looked as doglike as ever when it was out of the water, but everything *beneath* that looked close to the body of a dolphin or a whale. It wasn't exactly a pleasant sight.

"Augh, gross! Back in the water with you, you twisted freak!" Gideon shouted with horror as he jabbed the monster with his spear. The cetus let out a sharp and *really* off-putting howl that I knew I'd be hearing again in my nightmares as it plunged back into the ocean.

"Don't let them up here! Everyone, pick a side and drive them off!" yelled Gaudino.

Gideon, Sigvard, and Feodora all followed his lead, splitting up to drive away the creatures, and I joined in as well. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui had the wide-scale attacks covered, so the five of us focused all our attention on making sure that none of the cetuses managed to climb up Sui and cause any problems at close range.

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Finally, the last of the cetuses that had all but buried us fell, vanishing moments later.

“Ugggh, I’m exhausted,” I groaned as I sprawled out on Sui’s back. The members of Ark plopped down as well. They must’ve been pretty worn out too.

“Such a trivial encounter should not cause you to groan so mightily. You are as weak as ever,” Fel snidely commented as he looked down at me.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m a weakling, I get it. How many times have I told you not to judge me by *your* standards?” I shot back. *Also, why didn’t you tell me there were monsters like that out here? This ocean’s terrifying!*

《Masteeer, look!》 Sui said as it extended a tentacle up out of the ocean. It was carrying something that looked like a hide, at a glance.

“Hmm? What’s this, a drop item?”

《There were a whole buncha them, but Sui couldn’t pick them all up. Sui’s sorry.》

“Oh, it’s fine! I wasn’t expecting anything at all, actually, so I’m just glad you picked up what you could. Thanks, Sui.”

I counted up Sui’s haul and found that it had picked up sixteen cetus hides in total. I wanted to give them all to Ark, but they insisted that they’d barely helped in the fight and shot that idea down. I countered by reminding them that *my* party had no interest in anything that wasn’t edible, noting that, frankly, I’d been much less helpful than the four of them had.

It took a little arguing, but in the end, we agreed to split the loot fifty-fifty. I had to reiterate the point about us being on the same team again and essentially forced them to take their half, but thankfully they seemed more or less convinced by the end of it all. Fel and the others had made the fact that *they* didn’t want anything to do with the hides very clear, so the fewer I had to deal with, the better. Really, I just wanted to feel my feet on solid ground again more than anything.

“Hey, Fel, how far away is the next island?” I asked.

“Far,” Fel bluntly replied, then paused and peered out into the distance.

“Hm...? Sui, take us in that direction.”

《Over there? Not straight ahead?》

“We shall take a slight digression from the path forward. Simply follow my directions.”

《Okaaay!》

《Hey, Fel, is your ‘digression’ what I think it is?》

“Oh ho! Yes, that *is* quite the presence!”

I paused for a moment to let *that* sink in.

“Waaait, wait wait wait! Where are you taking us, Fel?!”

“As I already stated, I am leading us on a slight digression. Worry not.”

Funny how nothing makes me worry more than Fel telling me not to worry...



“I *knew* this was a mistake! We never should’ve come to this dungeooooon!”

“Aaaaaaugh! Oh gods, we’re *deaaad*!”

“Graaahhhhhh!”

“Eeeeeeeeeek!”

The members of Ark, each of them a battle-tested veteran adventurer in their own right, were screaming their lungs out in frantic terror.

“What did I do to deserve *this*?!” I wailed. “Fel, Gon, I don’t care which of you gets us out of this, but just hurry up and do it already!”

A massive whirlpool was swirling around with a thunderous roar, and we were currently being dragged down into it. The members of Ark and I had fallen prone, clinging to Sui’s massive form for dear life and shouting like we’d never shouted before.

Needless to say, this was all Fel’s fault. His so-called slight digression had led us to this stretch of the ocean and subsequently right into our current predicament.

Hey, Fel, remember when you said, “I am leading us on a slight digression. Worry not”? Because I sure do! I remember that very well, Fel!!! I screamed internally, still clutching at Sui like my life depended on it.

《Heeey, you guys okay down there?》Dora-chan called out.

《Fel is with them! They're perfectly all right, I'm certain,》Gon casually replied. They were up in the sky, watching from on high as we were swept around in circles by the whirlpool's current.

I hope you two don't think I'm gonna brush off the fact that you flew your way out of this disaster the second it started, because I'm definitely remembering this!

《Master, Uncle Fel, we're spinning so fast! This is sooo muuuch fuuun!》Sui's voice rang out in my head. It sounded just as relaxed about the whole affair as Dora-chan and Gon. In fact, it was *enjoying* what was happening. Sui sounded like a little kid having a blast on a piece of playground equipment.

What exactly is so fun about thiiis?! You're getting way too blasé about mortal danger, Suiiiii!

“Th-This isn't a game, Sui! We're about to get eaten by a monster! We are in big, *big* trouble!” I shouted. The party slime was so unmoved by the terrible danger we were in, I had to wonder if it actually understood what was going on at all.

《It'll be okay, Master! Sui'll beat it up for you!》Sui replied with an air of enthusiastic confidence. I...wasn't so sure about that. Sui could be as confident as it wanted, but I just couldn't see a slime “beating up” a creature like *that*, no matter how I looked at it.

The monster in question was downright hideous, even at a distance. It was dread distilled. It lay at the very center of the whirlpool, its massive, sea-anemone-like mouth packed full of razor-sharp teeth. Said mouth was gaping open, clearly waiting for its meal to plop right into its jaws. If its mouth alone was that huge, I could only imagine how gargantuan the body beneath the water's surface was. It certainly didn't help that the teeth themselves were moving, clacking together in what seemed like anticipation of making a light snack out of our whole party.

“Gaaaaaah! I can't take this anymore! I'm so dead!”

Oh, wow, is this what people mean when they talk about their life flashing

before their eyes? A sequence of images was playing out in my mind's eye, starting from my very earliest memories from shortly after my birth. My elementary school days made an appearance next, followed by memories of middle school, high school, and college, and then my acceptance into a company, my time as a white-collar office worker, and finally my abrupt abduction into another world. That, of course, was followed by my meetings with Fel, Sui, Dora-chan, and Gon.

Sure, I ended up in another world against my will, but I can't say I've had a totally terrible time here. It was nice, even...but I guess that's all over. I was going to get sucked into the gaping maw below me and torn to shreds between its horrible, gnashing teeth. That was the only future I could possibly envision for myself anymore.

“Be silent. Did I not tell you there was no need for concern?” Fel said. He'd been wordlessly standing by throughout the whole situation up until that point, completely indifferent to the danger we were in.

“There is *so much* need for concern! How the *hell* am I supposed to *not* be concerned?! We're gonna *die*! We're *screwed*!” I wailed. We were still spinning our way down into the whirlpool throughout that whole exchange, getting closer and closer to the mouth of doom. “Fel, Sui, Dora-chan, Gon! Living in this world hasn't been all sunshine and rainbows, but when all's said and done, I'm still glad I met you guys! Goodbyyye!!!” I blurted out. I really did think I was a goner, and those words—my final words, I figured—had slipped out before I even realized it.



Fel heaved a sigh. **“What *are* you saying? Just listening to you is an exercise in embarrassment. You are *not* going to die yet.”**

Barely an instant later, a tremendous, roaring *crash* rang out, followed by a series of sharp crackling noises. A massive bolt of lighting had fallen from the sky, slamming directly into the mouth at the center of the whirlpool.

A couple minutes after that, it was all over. The whirlpool had vanished without a trace, leaving us floating on a perfectly still and silent sea. The members of Ark and I were flabbergasted. All we could do was sit there in dumbfounded shock at the sudden change.

《Aww, it’s over already? Sui was having fun spinning around!》 Sui moaned.

《Nah, Sui, this is a good thing! A monster was causing that whirlpool, after all,》 Dora-chan chimed in.

《And a mighty monster, at that. Quite impressive to finish it in a single blow, Fel,》 Gon added.

《**Hmph! Simplicity itself,**》 Fel proudly replied.

《Oh, huh! That mean you know what that monster was, Gon?》

《Indeed!》

《And you too, Fel?》

《**I do not. I know, however, that if *that* was enough to slay it, it was hardly a foe worthy of concern.**》

《Hah! Classic Fel. Okay, Gon, spit it out. What *was* that?》

《Yeah! Sui wants to know what sort of monster it was too!》

《I suppose it’s no surprise that you wouldn’t know of them, Dora—nor Sui or Fel, for that matter. You’ve all been to the sea, yes, but not the *open* sea, where they tend to live. They’re called... Oh, what *were* they called?》

《Oh, c’mon, Gon. Seriously...?》

《**Perhaps your many, many years have at long last rendered you senile?**》

《How rude! And you’re hardly one to talk about being ancient, Fel. The

monster's name has simply slipped my mind, that's all. Let me see... I do believe it started with a c...ca...cha...charybdis! Yes, that was it—it was a monster called a charybdis! They are enormous, and terribly slow as a result. They tend not to move much, instead consuming anything and everything that approaches them. Not even the likes of a sea serpent could hold out against a charybdis's assault for long.》

《**Oh? Not even a sea serpent, you say? A charybdis... I shall remember this.**》

Meanwhile, Ark's members and I were standing off to the side in dumbstruck silence. The four of them couldn't hear my familiars' conversation, of course, but *I* sure could.

You realize that I was positive I was gonna die, right? Why do you guys have to be so casual about this? And also, wait! Are you telling me you steered us toward that monster when you didn't even know what it was, Fel?! Don't do that!

I slumped over with exhaustion, falling flat on Sui's back. What else was I supposed to do?

《Found it! Uncle Fel, look, look! The big baddie you just beat dropped these!》
Sui said as it poked one of its tentacles up from the water's surface.

《**Hmm. They are not edible, clearly, and as such are of no interest to me. Let him deal with them.**》

《Masteeer! Uncle Fel says he doesn't want these!》

"Huh?" I grunted as Sui laid a trio of items out before me: a tooth, a treasure chest, and a magic stone.

One look at them was all it took to make my expression cramp up. The treasure chest was easily as large as the ones that the bosses of the dungeons in Dolan and Aveling had dropped, and the magic stone was as big as they came. I didn't have to appraise them to tell that they were the sort of loot you'd only get from an S-ranked monster.

Actually, come to think of it... "Hey, do you think that monster was this floor's boss?"

《No,》 Fel said.

《I think not,》 Gon replied at the exact same moment.

“Huh? It *wasn't*? But then—”

《The foe that awaits us at the end of the floor is slightly stronger than this one was.》

《**Correct. I know its presence well. It is a type of creature I have not crossed paths with in some time. A foe that will put up a bit more of a fight. Something to look forward to.**》

It took me a moment to mull Fel's words over.

As friggin' if I'd look forward to something like thaaaaaat!



On one hand we had my familiars, who were acting as if nothing unusual had happened at all, and on the other hand we had me and the members of Ark, who looked as if our spirits had burned themselves out and departed our bodies for greener pastures. That didn't mean we couldn't keep ourselves seated aboard Sui, fortunately, who was making its way toward a nearby island.

After everything we'd just been through, I wanted nothing more than to feel my feet on solid ground and take a moment to collect myself. I thought anyone could appreciate why I'd need some time to chill after a near-death experience like I'd just had—anyone except my familiars, of course, but I ignored their grumbling and overruled their suggestion that we simply keep on moving ahead. I said that if they wanted dinner they'd have to suck it up and make landfall, which finally convinced them to begrudgingly acquiesce.

《Masteeer, Sui sees the island!》

“All right! Full steam ahead, Sui!”

《Okaaay!》

Sui picked up the pace, and it wasn't long before we arrived at the beach. I jumped off the slime's back the instant I could, then flopped straight onto the ground, not even bothering to worry about getting covered in sand.

“Ahhh, it’s *so* good to be alive!” I muttered with palpable relief. I wasn’t alone in that sentiment either.

“I lived! I *liiiiived*!”

“Graaaaaah!”

“Phew... Really thought that’d be the end of me...”

“As soon as this is over, I’m going to go visit my grandchild for sure...”

Clearly, I wasn’t the only one of us who’d thought they were moments away from meeting their maker. Ark’s members had finally regained their former vitality when they set foot on the island, and they weren’t being shy about expressing their relief. I understood where they were coming from *very* well. It really did feel like we’d escaped from the clutches of death by the skin of our teeth.

“What a wonderful thing it is to be alive...” I muttered.

“Right?” Gaudino agreed. “Thank goodness we made it through.”

“You can say that again...” Gideon said.

“Being an adventurer means puttin’ your life on the line. It’s part and parcel with the job, and I thought I understood that...but turns out I’m not ready to die just yet after all,” Sigvard added.

Feodora nodded. “Yeah. It really hit me that if I died here, I’d never see my grandchild again, or eat any more delicious food...”

The five of us spent some time celebrating our near escape, slapping each other’s shoulders and basking in the joy of being alive. We’d all come to a keen understanding of our own mortality, and that shared experience had forged a real sense of solidarity between us.

“But man, Mokohda, do you *always* have to deal with stuff like that?” Gideon asked with an almost concerned look on his face.

“Absolutely *not*,” I replied. “If it were always like *that*, I’d have died of a heart attack ages ago! I don’t think it’s ever been quite that touch and go for me before. This might be the first time I’ve *really* thought that I was dead for sure, honestly. I usually get to spend these fights cowering in the back lines...”

I held no illusions about my own combat capabilities. If I ever tried to get involved in my familiars' fights, becoming a liability for them would be the *best* I could hope to do, so I'd always made a point of giving them plenty of space and just observing when they took on high-ranking monsters.

"‘Usually’? So, you’re saying that you don’t get that close to them, but you *do* take on monsters like *that* thing all the time?" Gaudino noted.

"Ah. Welllll," I muttered awkwardly.

I hadn't been counting on him picking up on that. I didn't know if all the creatures we'd encountered in the past had been quite *that* nasty, but we certainly had fought a lot of them—and by we, I mean Fel and the others. *I* had no interest in hunting down mega-beasts, but my familiars were such dedicated battle junkies that they never missed an opportunity to do so.

"We might not be makin' the best show of it, but we *are* A-ranked adventurers," Sigvard said. "We've clashed with an S-ranked monster or two in our time...but that *thing* was outta the question. No *ordinary* adventurers could ever hope to bring it down, no matter what rank they were."

It's not like it's in the question for me either, I swear! Also, if I'd known it was going to be like that, I would've done everything I possibly could to stop Fel before we ended up anywhere near it!

"I think I've probably seen that monster in a picture book," Feodora muttered. "If I'm right, it's called a charybdis."

"A charybdis? And you saw it in a picture book...? Oh! You mean it was that one monster that shows up in *The Hero of Light Sails the High Seas*?!" Gideon exclaimed. He aspired to be a hero himself, so it was no surprise a book like that would be something he'd remember.

"That's right. I read that book to my daughter many times, so I remember it well," Feodora said with a deep nod.

"A charybdis... A monster many consider an embodiment of gluttony itself," Gaudino muttered.

"Never thought they were real," Sigvard said.

Apparently, the names “charybdis” and “the Hero of Light” had rung a bell for Ark’s other two members as well. They explained that the Hero of Light was a legendary figure who had fought for the cause of good and smote down evil at every turn. Apparently, pretty much everyone had had one of the Hero’s tales told to them as a bedtime story at least once over the course of their childhood, and the ultimate enemy that had shown up during the Hero of Light’s seabound adventures had been a monster known as the charybdis.

Hmm, interesting... Wait. Huh? Why’s everyone giving me that look? The members of Ark, for some reason, were all staring directly at me.

“You’ve had it a lot rougher than I gave you credit for, Mukohda,” Gaudino said.

“I would lose my mind if I had to deal with monsters like that all the time,” Gideon added.

“Even if that *was* a special case, constantly dealin’ with one S-ranked monster after another would wear on any fellow’s sanity,” Sigvard agreed.

“No adventurer could take it,” Feodora said.

“Wh-What’re you talking about, guys?” *It really feels like they’re all starting to pity me. Am I just imagining it...?*

“Well, I’m sure if anyone can make it through all that, it’s you, Mukohda.”

“Never lose hope, Mukohda!”

“We’re all rootin’ for you! Stay strong!”

“Don’t die.”

Okay, no, seriously, what are you people saying?! I just finished telling you that this was a first for me, didn’t I?!

《**I hunger. Prepare a meal for us.**》

《I’m rather famished as well!》

《Yeah, same over here!》

《Sui’s hungry too!》

A telepathic chorus of voices rang out to inform me it was meal time.

You guys... You know I wouldn't have other adventurers pitying me if you could just be a little less battle hungry, right?!



I just couldn't bring myself to accept the sudden sympathetic looks that I was getting from Ark's members. *It's not like we're taking on S-ranked monsters all the time, after all!*

I mean...okay, so maybe we do take them on an awful lot of the time. B-But still, that doesn't change the fact that my familiars do basically all the work! I just sit back and watch more often than not! Heck, I wanted to be a merchant, for crying out loud!

It's not like I hadn't engaged in *any* merchantesque work—I'd done a fair bit of business with Lambert and his company, for one thing—but I had to admit that, like it or not, my primary occupation was more or less set in stone as "adventurer" at this point. The more I thought about it, the more I felt like I'd been doing nothing but dungeon crawling lately. My familiars were too fond of dungeons for me to avoid them, and we always seemed to explore them from top to bottom as well. Traveling through the lower levels of a dungeon meant running into nothing but high-ranking monsters, so in a certain sense, Gaudino and the others weren't really all *that* far from the truth...

Y-You know what? I'm just not gonna think about all that stuff! I'm enjoying this lifestyle, more or less, and that's what really matters. A-Anyway, I think it's time to cook something! Yeah, that's the ticket! It's a blazing hot day, even though we're in a dungeon, so let's make something cold and refreshing. Maybe a chilled pasta dish? Those are nice and easy... Ah, of course!

I had plenty of giant scallop meat yet, so I quickly settled on making a chilled scallop pasta. The only problem with that, of course, was that the gluttonous quartet was sure to start badgering me about the lack of *real* meat the second I tried to serve them a seafood-heavy dish like that one.

Hmm... I could cook some of my dungeon pork shabu-shabu style and put it in a chilled pasta? Pretty sure I have some thinly sliced dungeon pork already in stock, so that might actually be perfect!

With that decided, my next step was to check my supply of ingredients. I

already knew I had everything I needed for the scallop pasta, but as for the pork version...

“Shabu-shabu-style pork definitely calls for a sesame dressing, and that means I’ll need to pick up some white sesame paste! As for the veggies, I think some mizuna greens should do nicely.”

I hid behind my magic stove to make sure that nobody from Ark would see me, then purchased the sesame paste and greens I needed from my Online Supermarket.

“All right! First things first, gotta get some water boiling!”

I filled up several stockpots with water, set them on my magic stove, and turned up the heat.

“Heh heh heh! My new magic stove and its six burners really makes this sort of cooking a breeze!” I said to myself.

I kicked things off by boiling the giant scallops and cooking the dungeon pork. I salted the water in three out of the six stockpots I’d prepared, then threw the giant scallops into them. I used the other three pots of unseasoned water to cook the dungeon pork shabu-shabu style, swishing the meat in the boiling water for just long enough to cook it through. Once the meat was all finished and the scallops were cooked, I poured the contents of the pots into colanders to drain them, then slid everything into my magic refrigerator to cool completely.

Next up, I put some more water on the stove to cook the pasta in. While that was heating up to a boil, I minced a few of Alban’s homegrown onions, which I would be using in the scallop pasta’s sauce, before setting them aside to soak in water. The onions Alban grew weren’t unpleasantly sharp in flavor and had a nice sweetness to them, so they didn’t need to soak for very long at all before I was satisfied with their flavor.

I sliced some of Alban’s ultra tasty tomatoes into chunks about one centimeter wide as well. I could’ve blanched them and peeled their skin off if I’d felt like it, but I’d never been bothered by a bit of tomato skin in my pasta, so I didn’t go to the trouble. Once I’d chunked up the massive number of tomatoes I would need, I drained the onions and got to work on the sauce proper!

I put the minced onions into a bowl, followed by some soy sauce, olive oil, black pepper, sugar, and powdered bonito flakes, then mixed them all together and gave the result a lick to test its seasoning. “Nice! Nailed it,” I said to myself.

I moved on to cutting up the mizuna greens next, which I’d be using in the shabu-shabu-style pork pasta. I trimmed off the bases of their stalks, then chopped them up into four-centimeter-long pieces before moving on to the sauce for that pasta. This time I used white sesame paste, a bit of concentrated soup base, sugar, vinegar, sesame oil, and a scattering of whole white sesame seeds. I mixed the second sauce together, then tested it as well. “All right! Looking good over here too!”

That’s when I realized that the pasta water had come to a rolling boil. “Whoops! Better get that salted,” I said to myself, then did just that before dumping the pasta in.

I made sure to stir the pasta on occasion to keep it from clumping together while it was cooking, but in the meantime, I had a little more work to get done on the chilled side of things as well. I pulled the now cold giant scallops out of the magic fridge and cut them into bite-sized pieces, then dumped both them and the chopped-up tomatoes into the bowl with the scallop pasta’s sauce, mixing everything together. Next, I dumped the thinly sliced and chilled dungeon pork into its sauce bowl along with the chopped-up greens and mixed them up too.

By the time I was done mixing everything, the pasta was finished cooking. All that was left was to drain it, cool it down in ice water, then dump an equal quantity of pasta into both sauce bowls and mix it all together one last time.

“And, done!”

It would’ve made the dishes a little more colorful and appetizing if I’d garnished the scallop pasta with some shredded shiso leaves and the pork pasta with some sprouts, but since both of those were sort of acquired tastes, I decided to refrain this time around. Ark’s members probably weren’t used to flavors like those, after all.

“Okay, food’s ready!” I called out.

The whole party wasted no time gathering up to eat. I started by serving both

types of pasta to my familiars (considering how big they liked their meals to be, I knew they'd polish off two platefuls in the blink of an eye), then asked Ark's members which they would each prefer. Pasta was filling enough that I expected them to ask for one or the other, but I was surprised when all four of them requested a full serving of both varieties, then surprised once again when each of them polished off every morsel of the food they'd been served.

"I've never even considered eating noodles cold before!" Gaudino said.
"They're really refreshing, not to mention delicious!"

"Yeah, both of these are great!" Gideon exclaimed.

"Both of 'em are good for sure, but I'm more a fan of the one with meat in it. It's got a richness and depth to it like nothing else," Sigvard said.

"They're *delicious*," Feodora emphatically concluded.

I'm surprised you had time to taste it, considering how quickly you gobbled yours down. Feodora even asked for seconds of the scallop pasta after she was finished. Her stomach was truly a force to be reckoned with.

My familiars, of course, ordered an endless onslaught of extra servings. It seemed that Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui had all taken quite a liking to cold pasta on a hot day and asked for an equal quantity of both types of pasta. Fel was the only one who grumbled about the lack of meat this time, but of course, he ended up asking for more servings of the pork pasta than anyone else.

As for me, I went with a helping of the scallop pasta. Not to brag about my own cooking, but it really *was* both refreshing and super tasty. *Nothing beats a nice, chilled dish when the weather's hot, that's for sure!*

As a side note, I'd made the sauce myself this time, but using a Japanese-style salad dressing as a substitute would've worked just fine for the scallop pasta, and sesame dressing would've been a great shortcut for the pork version as well. Those swaps would make the dishes as easy as could be to throw together—I used to make them all the time during summer back in my old world.

Before long, we'd all finished off our pasta. I took a moment to transfer some chilled apple juice into a pitcher, then poured everyone a glass as we stopped for a moment to rest.

“Come to think of it, you got the drops from that charybdis, didn’t you, Mukohda? What were they?” Gideon asked as he sipped his juice. He sounded keenly interested in the items.

“Oh, right! I noticed that too,” Gaudino chimed in. He seemed just as intrigued.

“Gotta admit, I’m curious too. Y’know, for future reference. Who knows what a monster like *that* might leave behind?” Sigvard said as well.

I was honestly sort of impressed that all of them had had the presence of mind to notice Sui handing the drops over to me, considering the circumstances at the time. Well, *most* of them, anyway. Feodora was too busy silently pouring herself another serving of apple juice (into one of the cups that I’d bought in Nijhoff, by the way) to join in. I couldn’t help but chuckle at her free-spirited devotion to her interests as I thought back on the drops I’d gotten from the charybdis.

“Umm... I’m pretty sure it left a magic stone, a tooth, and a treasure chest behind,” I explained.

The moment the words “treasure chest” left my mouth, Gaudino’s, Gideon’s, and Sigvard’s faces immediately lit up.

“Oh, *really*?” said Sigvard. “A treasure chest, eh? What was in it?”

“I’d like to know too!” Gideon said.

“Same,” Gaudino agreed.

“Riiight, well, the thing is that I actually put it straight into my Item Box. I didn’t really feel like spending too long on it after, y’know, all *that*, so I haven’t even looked inside yet. Why don’t we open it together?”

I was going to have to crack that box open eventually, so I figured I might as well just get it done now. I brought the charybdis’s treasure chest out from my Item Box, and looking at it now that I was a little calmer, I was struck by how impressive its design was. It was colored a deep, indigo blue, with patterns that I figured were meant to evoke waves, and it had a number of diamonds and pearls inlaid into it.

“That chest alone must be worth a fortune,” Gaudino muttered. I heard Gideon and Sigvard gulp as they took in the spectacle as well. It really was exceptional—the most extravagant of all the chests I’d seen up to that point, without question—and even I ended up gulping unconsciously.

Oh, whoops! Almost forgot to appraise it before I opened it up. I gave it a quick, surreptitious appraisal, confirmed that it wasn’t trapped, then laid a hand on its lid.

“Okay, here goes,” I said, then slowly, cautiously cracked the charybdis’s chest open. Gaudino, Gideon, Sigvard, and I all leaned forward to peek inside.

For a moment, the four of us just stared in utter silence. Within the chest was a tiara, decorated with an almost absurd number of sapphires, diamonds, and pearls.

“Now *that’s* one hell of a piece,” Sigvard muttered. Gaudino and Gideon nodded in wordless agreement.

“I wonder if the Adventurer’s guild would want to buy this...?” I suggested hopefully. It was definitely valuable, but I had no use for gems, much less a studded tiara. Selling it was my only idea.

“Not a chance,” Sigvard said. “In fact, in the worst-case scenario, I could see wars breakin’ out over that thing.”

“*Bwaugh?!*” I yelped. It was a really bizarre sound, but the word “wars” had caught me so off guard, I couldn’t hold it back.

“You know how much a pearl’s worth, Mukohda?” Sigvard asked.

Just a normal pearl? I mean, they’re not nearly as expensive as diamonds or sapphires, right?

“Looks like that’s a no. ‘Kay, listen up...”

According to Sigvard, pearls were a lot more scarce than I’d given them credit for. The big problem was that the monsters that they could be harvested from, giant pearl oysters, had been overfished to the point of near extinction a long, long time ago, and only a very small number could still be found in the modern day. To make matters worse, not every giant pearl oyster was sure to have a

pearl in it. It took a long time for their pearls to form, so if they weren't old enough, you could open them up and find nothing at all.

As a result, pearls were so rare that you could only expect a few to go up on the market each year, making them tremendously valuable. They had a reputation for their elegant simplicity and their ability to draw out the charms of anyone who wore them, which led many upper-class women to be completely infatuated with them. As things stood, whenever a pearl went up for sale you could expect wealthy women from nations far and wide to immediately descend upon it in a frenzy.

So bottom line, pearls were actually *more* valuable than the overwhelming majority of precious stones. Sigvard had apparently only caught a single glimpse of a pearl before, when one had been sent to his village in his youth to be used as part of an accessory a member of some royal family or another had commissioned a local craftsman to make.

"The pearl I saw back then was smaller than the ones in that tiara, and even then, it was kept under *strict* guard from the start of the project to the end. I remember it like it was yesterday...and *that* thing's absolutely *lousy* with 'em. Not a single flaw in any of 'em either, as far as I can see. They're damn near perfect, each and every one, and *massive*! If word got out that a piece like this even existed... I don't even wanna think about what would happen, truth be told."

Gaudino's and Gideon's expressions had gradually stiffened up over the course of Sigvard's explanation. The three of them slowly turned to face me in unison, almost as if they were silently asking me, "So, what the hell do we *do* with this thing?"

"You know what?" I said. "Let's just pretend that none of us ever saw this, okay?"

It was the only solution I could come up with. I would've liked to think that Sigvard's talk about it starting a war was an exaggeration, but after everything he'd just told me, it was distressingly hard to dismiss the possibility.

Gaaah! Nope—this thing cannot make it out into the world at large! Time to pretend I saw nothing, seal it in my Item Box, and let it sit there for all eternity.

This settles it: nothing good can come from an encounter with a charybdis, from start to finish...

Chapter 3: Tyrant Swordfish

The chilled pasta I made ended up turning into a very early dinner for our party. We were all exhausted thanks to the charybdis incident (well, “all of us” meaning “all of us except for my familiars”), so we went straight to bed after the meal was done. I, for one, was out like a light barely a minute after lying down and closing my eyes, and I suspect the same was true of Ark’s members.

I had a nice, restful night’s sleep and woke up bright and early the next morning feeling thoroughly refreshed. The members of Ark seemed to have slept like logs as well and were in considerably higher spirits when they woke up.

In Gaudino’s words, “Even if we wanted to turn around and go home, we’d have no chance of making the trip out of this place on our own. Plus, I now have a new appreciation for the fact that as long we’re with you, we’ll make it through this in one piece. We’ll be sticking with you to the bitter end.” All of his companions smiled and nodded in emphatic agreement as well.

I wasn’t sure if they’d resigned themselves to their fates, or if they were just looking at things from a more long-term perspective than before, but either way, I couldn’t help but feel a little awkward about the whole situation. After all, I knew very well that my familiars wouldn’t be satisfied unless we cleared the whole dungeon from top to bottom. Unless we found a teleportation circle or some other means of getting back to the surface in a single jump, there was no way we’d be pulling out partway through.

“W-Well, anyway, let’s have some breakfast!” I said, for lack of anything more encouraging to contribute.

For breakfast, I decided to make a light, Western-style assortment consisting of plain omelets, consommé with veggies in it, and buttery bread rolls. That, needless to say, was the menu for me and Ark. The gluttonous quartet got giant minotaur steak bowls instead, at their request. Then, after everyone had finished off their breakfasts—and everyone other than me had seconds on top

of that—Sui grew to its massive, enlarged form and we set out into the ocean once more.

The sun's brilliant rays beat down upon us, and the sea shone a calm, beautiful shade of marine blue. If it were just us and the ocean, then I really couldn't have asked for nicer circumstances. This, however, was a dungeon, and that meant it was only a matter of time before things started going wrong.

"Hey, did anyone else see something move out there?" Sigvard said as he pointed off into the distance at what seemed to be some sort of shadowy presence in the sea, just barely visible as it drifted along.

I looked out in the direction he'd indicated and squinted as I tried to make the shadowy something out more clearly. "Yeah, whatever that is, it's moving all right," I confirmed.

"I see it too," said Gaudino, who'd turned to look as well.

"Looks like a dorsal fin, maybe?" Gideon added.

"A dorsal fin...?" I repeated apprehensively. I had a bad, *bad* feeling about that possibility, and lo and behold, the moment the thought crossed my mind...

Splaaash!

...the shadowy presence leaped out of the sea with a mighty spray of water!

"A *s-s-swordfish*?!" I yelped. There was no mistaking its distinctively pointed bill. I'd watched celebrities catch swordfish on fishing TV shows plenty of times, so I knew they were *big* fish, but still... "Come *on*! That thing's *way* too huge!" *This must be some sort of forced perspective thing, right?* Counting its pointed bill, it looked like it was over twenty—no, *thirty* meters long at least, even from this distance.

"I-I think that's probably a tyrant swordfish," Gaudino quietly muttered.

"A *tyrant swordfish*?!"

"Right. I read about them in a book once. They're considered A-ranked monsters because they only live in the open sea, which makes them really easy to avoid...but if you're unlucky enough to run into one mid-voyage, they're just as hard to deal with as a kraken would be. Supposedly, a single thrust of one of

those pointed bills is all it takes to sink a galleon.”

“A *single* thrust?” Gideon marveled.

“I can’t swim, by the way,” Sigvard noted, looking just as gobsmacked.

“It’s coming!” shouted Feodora, who’d been quiet up until that point.

《Master, a really big fishy’s coming this way!》

“Wha— *Aaaugh?!* ” I wailed. The tyrant swordfish really was swimming straight at us, leaving huge white-crested waves in its wake. But while I was panicking...

《Got it!》

“Sui?!” I yelped in surprise all over again. Before I knew it, Sui had wrapped one of its tentacles around the tyrant swordfish’s pointed bill.

《Huh? Huuuuh?》 Sui squealed in confusion. The tyrant swordfish barely even seemed to notice the slime’s tentacle and kept barreling straight toward it, point-first. Instead of holding the fish back, Sui’s grip on the monster’s bill led to Sui *itself* being propelled backward through the water at the same rate the tyrant swordfish was advancing.

《All right, looks like it’s up to me to finish it off! Stay just like that, Sui!》 Dora-chan called out. A moment later...

Shwick!

...a pillar of ice—easily as sharp as the swordfish’s bill—came crashing down, skewering the massive fish straight through.

《Awww! Sui wanted to beat up the big fishy!》

《Hey, what’re you shouting at me for?! See if I help you next time you’re in a bind!》

Yeah...honestly, it feels silly for you guys to be fighting over a monster you could finish off without breaking a sweat. Guess there was no reason for me to panic in the first place. I felt my nerves start to relax again, and I could tell that Ark’s members were in the same boat.

“Welp. Guess I didn’t need to worry after all,” Gaudino said.

“When it comes down to it, we might be safer here than we would be in a fortified castle,” Gideon added.

“Did’ja notice that the Fenrir and the ancient dragon slept through all that? Guess they knew the slime and the little dragon could handle it just fine,” Sigvard noted.

“This is ridiculous,” Feodora concluded.

All I can say is “Fair enough.” Oh, that and “You’re the last person I want to hear that from,” directed at Feodora specifically.

I sighed, then sent a telepathic message over to Sui and Dora-chan, who were still quibbling over the swordfish. «Okay, quit arguing, you two! Don’t you want to see what the fish dropped?»

«Oh! Just a second...» Sui said. «Umm... Here it is!»

A moment later one of Sui’s tentacles emerged from the sea, grasping a large lump that it brought over to me.

“Oh! Looks like it dropped some tyrant swordfish meat, huh?”

«Is that tasty, Master?»

“Let’s find out. One sec...” I appraised the meat and learned that it was indeed supposed to taste quite nice, if you cooked it properly. “Yup, looks like! I bet it’d be good as teriyaki, or with a garlic and soy sauce seasoning, maybe,” I said, reasoning that the classic swordfish dishes I knew about would probably work well with it.

«Wait a minute! Sui, did he just say it’d taste good?»

«Yeah! Master says it’ll be yummy!»

«All *right*! In that case, let’s bag a few more of ’em!»

«Yeah!»

Huh? I hate to rain on your parade, guys, but there can’t be all that many of those swimming around in this ocean!

«Hell yeah! I’ll fly around and find some more!» Dora-chan shouted as he bolted off into the sky. «There’s one! Another fin, up ahead and to the right!

After it, Sui!》

《Okaaay!》

Wait, what? Really? Are there actually enough tyrant swordfish nearby to find another one instantly?! “W-W-Wait, wait, no! Dora-chan, Sui, what’re you two doing?! Don’t I get a say in this?! Fel, Gon, wake up!”

《**What?**》 Fel grunted irritably. 《**Was there truly a need to interrupt my nap?**》

《I second that, my liege!》 Gon grumbled. 《It’s very rude to disturb one’s slumber!》

“This is no time to be *napping*! Dora-chan and Sui found a monster, and now they’re dragging us all over the place! I can’t stop them!”

《**Dora and Sui are? Then you are at no risk. Let them do as they will.**》

“What do you *mean*, let them do as they will?! They’re leading us in the *opposite* direction of where we wanted to go!”

《Oh, well that hardly poses an issue! Fel and I will know the correct path just as well after their little venture as we do now.》

《**Indeed.**》

《And there you have it!》

Just like that, Fel and Gon nodded right back off again.

“Oh, for the... Would you two *please* try to keep them under control at least *once*?!”

《You hear that, Sui? Fel and Gon are down for this too! Let’s do it!》

《Let’s do *iiit*!》 Sui cheered, immediately picking up the pace.

“Whoooah, nope nope nope! / don’t approve! Dora-chan, Sui, stoop!” I shouted in vain. Meanwhile...

“Heh. Yeah, nothing we can do about this,” Gaudino said.

“Not a chance in hell we’ll be able to stop ’em,” Sigvard agreed.

“All we gotta do is stay on our toes and try not to die,” Gideon added.

“Right. Just stay alive,” Feodora said.

Judging by the calm on Ark’s members’ faces, they were starting to reach an understanding that this was just how it went in my party.



《Huuuh? This isn’t the same as the big fishy from before!》

《Hey, no kidding. Can we even eat this thing? Looks pretty damn nasty, if you ask me.》

Dora-chan and Sui had locked on to another fin poking through the surface of the sea. It had turned out to belong to a massive shark monster, and before I knew it, said monster had also locked on to *us*, opening its gargantuan jaws wide and making a beeline in our direction. It very clearly intended to swallow us whole.

“Hey, guys? *Guys?! Not* the right time for a chat! Do something about thiiis!” I wailed, flopping over onto my backside as the shark closed in. “Gaaaaaaaah!”

Fel and Gon, on the other hand, didn’t so much as budge in the face of the oncoming monster. In fact, neither of them bothered to do more than open a single eye to assess the situation before going right back to sleep again.

Excuse me, guys?! How is it even possible for you to nap through this?! Wake up, already!

《It’s okay, Master! Sui’ll beat it up real quick! Take *this!*》 Sui shouted as it fired several Acid Bullets directly down the shark’s massive gullet, just seconds before it would’ve eaten us alive.

A trio of incredibly loud splashing sounds rang out as the Acid Bullets hit home, and the shark flipped over backward, snapping its toothy mouth shut and flailing its fins as it slammed into the water’s surface.

“Whoa, *whoa!*” I shouted. The shark’s frenzied writhing had kicked up a series of enormous waves, and Ark’s members and I had to crouch down and cling to Sui’s back once again to avoid getting thrown off.

《Ooh, it’s all wavy now! This is so much fun!》 Sui squealed with glee as the waves tossed it to and fro. It was...surreal, to say the least.

Meanwhile, the giant shark's movements grew duller and slower with each passing moment. It finally came to a complete standstill, floating belly-up on the surface of the sea.

《Aww, it's over,》 Sui whined. 《Oh, it disappeared! Hmm... Ah, found them!》

Once again, a tentacle burst out from the water.

《Here, Master!》

“R-Right, thanks,” I said as Sui passed me the shark's drops: a sharp, jagged tooth and a large magic stone.

《Hey! Dang it, Sui, you didn't even give me a chance at that one! The next one's mine! Keep your slimy tentacles offa it!》

《Booo!》

《Don't you boo me! It's not fair if you take on *all* the monsters!》

《Oh, okaaay. Sui'll be good and let you have the next one, Dora-chan. The one after that's Sui's, though!》

Wait. Does that mean...? “Uh, guys? Are you planning on going after *more* of those things?”

《Uhhh, duh? We've gotta keep it up until we get some meat from another of those fish, at least.》

《We'll get tons of tasty meat for you, Master!》

Clearly, neither of them were even close to tired of hunting yet—unlike me. “N-Nah, it's fine, you don't have to do that! We already got swordfish meat, after all. That's plenty, in my book!”

《You're kidding, right? Since when was more food ever a bad thing?》

《Sui wants lots and lots of tasty food!》

《Right? Okay, let's track down the next one!》 Dora-chan said, then took off once more. 《Lessee... Ah, there's one! Another fin, forward and to the left! Go for it, Sui!》

《Okaaay!》

“No, seriously, wait! We already have plenty!”

《This way, Sui!》

《Got it!》

Dora-chan led the way and Sui happily followed along, sailing at a rapid enough pace to leave waves splashing in its wake. The two of them were so worked up about their hunt, it was like they literally couldn't hear me at all.

I sighed. “Well, that's that. There's no stopping those two, at this point,” I said to myself. *Guess we'll just have to ride this out until they're satisfied.* I turned to glance at Ark's members, intending to apologize...

“Oh, great...”

...only to find all four of them just sitting there, silently smiling. Apparently, fear had more or less lost all meaning to them at that point.



“Ugh, what a day,” were the first words out of my mouth when we made landfall on the island where we'd be camping that night.

It had been an exhausting day, in more ways than one. In the end, Dora-chan and Sui had dragged us along on their hunting excursion—or, well, fishing excursion—all the way until dusk. The tyrant swordfish they'd been trying to track down had proved awfully elusive, in the end...though then again, it sort of went without saying that monsters like *that* wouldn't be swimming around en masse.

To make a long story short, Dora-chan and Sui had been less than satisfied with their unimpressive results, and we'd ended up wasting the whole day on the endeavor. We *had* obtained two more tyrant swordfishes' worth of meat thanks to all that hard work, but the path we'd had to take to get them was roundabout, to say the least.

The fact that Dora-chan wasn't capable of sensing monsters like Fel and Gon were certainly hadn't helped. His only means of locating the swordfish was looking for their fins sticking up out of the ocean, and tyrant swordfish were far from the only finned monsters out there. In fact, they weren't even the

majority. We'd almost been eaten by a monster that looked like a giant orca, followed by a monster that looked like a whale with the sort of huge, jagged teeth you only saw on carnivores, and on and on... It had been a miserable experience, all around.

Despite all the trials and tribulations we went through, Fel and Gon had insisted that Dora and Sui had everything under control and had slept the whole afternoon away. The members of Ark, meanwhile, had ended up being so burnt out by the repeated monster encounters that I was sort of afraid they might literally crumble to ash.

Ugh... Yeah, today sure was rough, all right. I really wish I could just go straight to bed, but first...

"What will we be eating tonight?" Fel asked.

"The fish that Dora and Sui caught, perhaps? It seems they caught more of them, so I'm certain we have an ample quantity," Gon said.

"Yes, indeed. It *was* supposed to be delectable, was it not? Make that."

"Make that" yourself, Fel! Grrr! And, wait a second... "You two were listening awfully closely to all those conversations considering you were supposedly *asleep* at the time, weren't you?" I jabbed. I'd meant it a hundred-percent sarcastically, but Fel and Gon just steamrolled straight over me by insisting that, yes, it *was* only natural that they'd hear us that well in their sleep. They were smirking while they said it too.

You really think it's gonna be that easy, don't you, you insensitive jerks?! I thought, but it wasn't long before Fel and Gon got just the backup they needed.

《Hey, I wanna try the fish we caught today too!》Dora-chan piped up.

《Sui too!》Sui agreed. That made four out of four familiar votes cast for tyrant swordfish for dinner.

I sighed. "Okay, okay. I'll make the fish you caught for dinner! I'm granting your request here, though, and that means that you have to grant *my* request too, got it?"

"Your *request*? And what would that be?" Fel asked.

Grr! Don't give me that condescending look, Fel! "We're taking a break! One full day off, right here on this island! It's exhausting spending every single day out on the ocean, so we'll spend tomorrow relaxing instead of exploring. How's that sound?"

The moment I made my proposal, Ark's members' eyes lit up with excitement. Gaudino, Gideon, Sigvard, and Feodora were clearly all just as worn out as I was.

"Hmph. Very well, then."

Huh? That was...easy? Surprisingly so?

《Whoa, hold the phone! You sure you're okay with not going anywhere?》
Dora-chan said. *Someone* had to object, I guess.

"Quiet now, Dora. This is for the best. I'll explain why later," Gon said.

《What's *that* mean?》

"Later. Trust me. I'll explain everything to you and Sui, and you'll understand then."

So, *that* was clearly suspicious. Suspicious indeed...but, well, it worked out, one way or another. Getting the day off I so desperately needed was the most important thing.

All right! Tomorrow, we're taking it easy!



Now then, I think it's time to cook up some tyrant swordfish for dinner!

Tomorrow, I'd finally have the day off I'd been longing for. I was going to spend the entire day lounging around and ignoring anyone who tried to complain about it, and to enable my leisure time, I was planning on serving nothing but premade meals. I figured that the least I could do to make up for that was go a little fancy with tonight's dinner and make a real swordfish banquet.

When I inspected the tyrant swordfish meat, I found that it really was identical to the swordfish meat I knew—size excepted, of course. That meant I just *had* to make swordfish teriyaki and cook up some rice to go along with it. A

garlic soy sauté seemed like it could be good as well, and if I took it up a notch by making it a garlic *butter* soy sauté, it would pair just as incredibly with rice as the teriyaki would.

Those both seemed like great ideas, but so far, all of my plans revolved around grilled meat dishes that didn't have much going on beside the swordfish. *Some variety would be nice... Ah, I know! I can make a veggie and swordfish stir-fry!*

Swordfish was very mild in flavor, and its meat tended to stand up to cooking nicely without crumbling. It seemed like it'd be a really good candidate for stir-frying, all around.

What veggies to throw in with it, though...? Oh, I know! I bet cucumber would be great! I still had a ton of Alban's homegrown cucumbers in stock, and though they weren't the most traditional stir-fry ingredient, I'd found they worked surprisingly well for it in the past.

What else...? If I want more variety, I could try deep-frying some of it? I bet swordfish tatsutaage would be pretty tasty! I'd want something a little more refreshing as well if I go that route, though. Hmm... Maybe a marinated swordfish salad would be nice? Yeah, that should do it. This sounds like a plan!

Tonight, I'd be making five dishes in total: swordfish—excuse me, *tyrant* swordfish teriyaki, a tyrant swordfish garlic butter soy sauté, a tyrant swordfish and cucumber stir-fry, tyrant swordfish tatsutaage, and a tyrant swordfish salad marinated in a Japanese-style sauce. That would be a lot of cooking to get done, but I had basically all the ingredients I needed already, so I could get started right away. If I ended up needing anything extra, I figured I could just snap it up from my Online Supermarket on the spot.

First up on the docket was making the marinated swordfish salad, then doing some prep work for the tatsutaage! I could store the other dishes in my Item Box the moment they were finished and bring them out still fresh and piping hot whenever I wanted, but those two both needed time for their flavors to meld and their seasonings to soak in. I could handle the rest of the cooking during the time they would have to sit.

I kicked things off by making the salad's marinade. I decided to do a Japanese-

style marinade this time, which meant using soy sauce as one of the base flavors. I combined soy sauce, vinegar, sugar, olive oil, and coarsely ground black pepper in a bowl, mixed it together, and that was all it took!

With the marinade done, I moved on to cutting up the veggies and the (tyrant) swordfish. I decided to use a very standard assortment of onions, bell peppers, and carrots for the vegetables, since I had plenty of all of them courtesy of Alban. I sliced the onions thinly, then julienned the peppers and carrots before cutting the tyrant swordfish into bite-sized chunks.

I salted and peppered the swordfish chunks before coating them in potato starch. Then I heated up some olive oil in a frying pan and gave them a nice sear, dumping them into the marinade when they were finished. I lightly stir-fried the veggies as well, adding them to the mixture once they were soft. Finally, I stirred everything together and waited for it to cool down a little so I could store it in my refrigerator. It'd be ready to serve once it was fully chilled.

While I waited for the marinade mixture to cool off, I decided to get to work on my tatsutaage preparations. I sliced the tyrant swordfish I'd be using for this dish into bite-sized pieces as well, then combined some grated garlic, grated ginger, soy sauce, sake, and mirin in a bowl. I mixed up the seasoning liquid, then dumped in the tyrant swordfish meat and lightly massaged it to help the flavors all soak in. In thirty minutes or so, the fish would be nicely seasoned and ready to fry! By that point the marinade mixture was ready to go into my magic fridge too, which meant I could get to work on the next dish.

Think I'll move right along to the swordfish and cucumber stir-fry next! I trimmed the stems off the cucumbers, split them in half lengthwise, and then rubbed some salt into them to draw out their moisture. Then I cut the tyrant swordfish meat into thin slices, gave them the salt, pepper, and potato starch treatment, and cooked them in an oiled frying pan.

Up to this point, the process was more or less the same as how I'd cooked the swordfish for the marinated version. It diverged, however, when I added a seasoning mixture of soy sauce, oyster sauce, sake, mirin, grated ginger, and sesame oil into the pan, continuing to stir-fry until the alcohol was all cooked out. Then I added in the cucumbers and stir-fried for just a little longer to finish off the dish! It came out as an almost Chinese-style stir-fry in the end, and I

used all six of my magic stove's burners to make a massive quantity of it, which I then stored in my Item Box for later.

"I'll finish up the tatsutaage last, I think, which means that I should move on to the teriyaki or the garlic butter soy sauté. Hmm... Guess I'll handle the teriyaki first!"

I sliced some tyrant swordfish into centimeter-thick pieces, heated some oil in a frying pan, and threw the fish in, searing each piece on both sides. Then I sauced them up with a mixture of soy sauce, sake, mirin, and honey (sugar would've worked just fine, but I figured that honey would give the teriyaki a certain depth, so I gave it a try instead), stirred it all together, and let it cook a little longer.

That's all it took. It couldn't have been an easier dish, especially since the tyrant swordfish didn't have so much as a trace of unpleasant fishiness to it. Maybe that was because it was so fresh? In any case, I piled the teriyaki onto a plate and stored it in my Item Box as well.

It was time to move along to the tyrant swordfish garlic butter soy sauté. I sliced up the tyrant swordfish in the same manner for this dish as I had for the teriyaki, though this time, I gave the pieces a shake of salt and pepper afterward. Then I minced up the garlic, threw it into a frying pan with some butter, and cooked it until it smelled nice and aromatic, at which point I tossed in the swordfish as well. Once both sides of the fish were seared, I added some soy sauce, sake, and mirin, keeping everything moving to make sure nothing burned until the alcohol was all cooked out and the sauce nicely reduced. Finally, I piled the swordfish meat up on a plate, then drizzled the remaining sauce over it.

The garlic butter soy sauté didn't exactly pop visually—neither had the teriyaki, for that matter—so I minced up some parsley to sprinkle on top of it as a garnish. *Yeah, that's looking good!* I thought to myself, then put it straight into my Item Box for later.

Now all that was left was what would almost certainly be the gluttonous quartet's favorite, given its similarity to karaage: the tyrant swordfish tatsutaage. All I had to do was coat the now thoroughly seasoned tyrant

swordfish pieces in potato starch, then fry them until they were nice and crispy.

“Okay, that’s everything!”

I finished the last of my plating and was about to bring everything out to serve...

“I guess you all just couldn’t wait, huh?”

...but when I turned around to do so, I found that the gluttonous quartet plus one gluttonous elf were already gathered up behind me.

“You have made quite an assortment of dishes this time, have you not? Feed them to me at once.”

“And me as well! As soon as possible, if you please.”

《Yeah, I’m famished over here too! C’mon, get a move on!》

《Sui wants to eat the fishies right away!》

“I want some too.”

I couldn’t stop from cracking up at their faces—they looked so hungry, I almost expected them to start drooling at any moment—as I called over Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard, then got to work serving all five dishes as quickly as I could manage. The gluttonous quartet plus one elf started chowing down before I knew it.

“It may not be meat, but it is far from unserviceable. This dish in particular is especially pleasing. Give me more of it,” Fel said, barely pausing for long enough to prod the plate with the garlic butter soy sauté on it with his paw.

“I’m partial to this one most of all, myself! There’s just something about fried foods. This would be my next favorite, though,” Gon said, indicating the marinated swordfish salad. It was no surprise that he’d taken a liking to the tatsutaage—fried foods were as reliably popular as ever—but I was a little surprised by his second choice. According to him, “It has a refreshing quality that makes it the perfect palate cleanser to follow fried foods.”

《These are all pretty awesome, but yeah, I like the fried stuff best. Guess even fish taste great fried!》Dora-chan said. I wasn’t at all surprised by that choice, though again, I *was* struck with a renewed appreciation for just how universally

beloved fried foods were.

《Sui likes these! Oh, and these, and these, and these, and these!》

“Sui, that’s all of them.”

《Yeah! They’re all super yummy, Master!》

“Oh, really? Glad to hear it.”

“I like these and these best. They pair incredibly with the white grains you served. Seconds, please.”

Oh, so you’re joining in with your impressions this time, Feodora? It was kind of amazing that even though she could theoretically only hear Fel’s and Gon’s voices, she still somehow managed to wait until after Dora-chan and Sui were finished to put in a word herself. This was the *one* time that she could take a hint, it seemed, and to a rather remarkable degree.

Anyway, she likes the teriyaki and the garlic butter soy sauté because they pair well with rice, huh? She really knows her stuff! The way she’d taken the opportunity to casually ask for another helping was quite something too. The title “Feodora the gluttonous elf” was really starting to solidify in my mind for her at this point.

As I put together extra helpings of everyone’s favorite dishes, I also prepared some tyrant swordfish teriyaki and a bowl of white rice for myself, bolting down a bite or two whenever I had the chance to steal them. I also snagged some of the tatsutaage and a beer to go with it, figuring that it couldn’t hurt to indulge a little since we were taking tomorrow off anyway. Ark’s members were around, of course, meaning I couldn’t drink the beer straight from the bottle, so I poured it into the self-cooling cup I’d bought in Nijhoff instead. I’d barely used the thing at all since then, but it *was* really nice how it kept my drinks perfectly chilled.

I wasn’t drinking alone, naturally. I’d given Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard a pitcher of cold beer and a few cups to drink it from as well, which they’d been enjoying as they powered through their tyrant swordfish feast. The booze seemed to be getting to them a little already—they were shouting stuff like “I’m makin’ it out alive, no matter what!” and “Me too! No dyin’ in this hole!” and

“We’re all gettin’ home in one piece!” I decided to be the adult in the room and pretend I hadn’t heard them.

Oh, and I was also surprised when Gon, who I’d assumed would be up for a drink as well, actually turned the offer down. It was strange, to say the least. There was no way he *didn’t* like alcohol, and I couldn’t think of any reason the current circumstances would make him abstain.

Eh, maybe he’s just not in the mood to drink tonight? It happens. More importantly, I finally get a day off tomorrow! I’m gonna take it easy and nap my heart out! Heh heh, this is gonna be great!

Chapter 4: The Philosopher's Stone

I let out a sigh of relief after we finished eating breakfast—which, as planned, had consisted entirely of premade food. The gluttonous quartet had wanted plenty of meat, of course, so I brought out ginger-fried meat bowls for them to stuff their faces with.

The members of Ark and I, on the other hand, had eaten miso soup with Chinese cabbage and shiitake mushrooms, plus rice balls with wakame mixed into them, rolled omelets, and pickled cucumbers, which made for a nice, light, Japanese-style breakfast all together. Maybe a little *too* light in Feodora's case—when I offered her one of the ginger-fried meat bowls, she'd gratefully scarfed it right down. I couldn't have been more grateful to my past self for having made extra food to save for later in my Item Box every time I had a moment to spare back in Karelina.

Anyway, breakfast was finished and I was busy partaking in a laid-back after-meal break. Not to say that I had any plans to do anything *other* than rest up that day, of course. I'd also served my familiars and Ark's members some one-hundred-percent orange juice, which I figured wouldn't raise any uncomfortable questions. I'd used earthenware cups from my Item Box to do so, by the way. Serving orange juice in anything other than a clear glass felt sort of wrong to me, but glasses would've likely caught our guest's attention in a way I preferred to avoid.

I, meanwhile, was enjoying the clink of ice in a cup and the delectable aroma of coffee. Seeing as we were currently smack-dab in the middle of a seemingly eternal summer, iced coffee felt like the perfect drink for a coffee aficionado like me. I'd bought some slightly fancy grounds from my Online Supermarket and had brewed it the night before, so all I had to do now was pull it out and enjoy.

I'd chosen a Kilimanjaro blend, which was, in my opinion, the best possible option to make iced coffee with. I'd used about twice the quantity of coffee

grounds as I normally would to make the brew stronger, setting up the dripper right above a pitcher with ice in it. That had cooled the coffee off almost instantly, preserving its aromatic qualities, and since I'd kept it in my Item Box, it came out all but fresh brewed and I got to enjoy its scent all over again.

"Hm? What're you drinking, Mukohda?" Gaudino asked. His eyes were as sharp as ever.

"This?" I said. "It's a drink from my homeland. It smells great, but fair warning, it's pretty bitter." *If you drink it black, anyway.* I'd come up with that explanation in advance, so I was able to give it casually and naturally. I wasn't *technically* lying either.

Feodora's eyes had instantly lit up at the thought of trying a totally new drink, but she'd lost all interest just as quickly the second she heard the word "bitter." I chuckled at her conspicuous mood swing and asked Gaudino if he wanted to try it, but he took one look into my cup and said, "I'll pass, thanks. I don't like the look of that color..."

I guess pitch-black drinks don't qualify as safe in his mind? That's how coffee's supposed to look, though! It's always that color! It really is, honest, so stop looking so grossed out, Gaudino! This is just how coffee works!

"Though speaking of drinks that smell nice, I've got something of a taste for tea, myself," Gaudino added as an afterthought.

"Oh, yeah, he's not kidding," Gideon chimed in. "Every time we travel somewhere, he always buys all the tea he can get his hands on."

"True," Sigvard said with a nod. "Can't say I approve. A real man drinks booze, not some fussy leaf water."

"Nobody asked you two jokers! If you've got a problem with my hobbies, you can keep it to yourselves," Gaudino grunted.

It might be rude to admit it, but I was pretty surprised to hear that Gaudino was a tea person. *Though in that case...*

"Oh, I actually have tea too! It doesn't have quite the same aroma when it's served cold, but it *is* refreshingly bitter and goes down really nicely on a hot day," I said.

As it happened, I'd been on a tea kick myself lately and had prepared iced tea as well as coffee. I'd used Earl Grey—a real classic—that I'd bought from my Online Supermarket. In my book, the most important characteristic for an iced tea to have was a refreshing flavor profile, and Earl Grey cleared that requirement with flying colors. I'd just scooped more tea leaves into my pot than I usually would, poured in some boiling water, closed it up to steep for a while, and then poured the end result through a strainer directly into a pitcher full of ice to cool it down at high speed.

"Oh, you do? I'd love to give it a try," Gaudino said. Talk of tea had instantly grabbed his attention. I brought the iced tea pitcher and an extra cup out from my Item Box and poured him a cup, which he gulped down right away. "I see what you meant about the aroma being weaker than usual, but still, this tea's got a real nice fragrance. It's refreshing too, like you said it'd be. More than anything, I could see gulping down a cup of this stuff being just the thing to make heat like this more bearable."

"I know, right? It's not bad hot either, but when the weather's like this, it really is tastiest cold."

"I can imagine. Not that I'll get many chances to try it. A drink that uses this much ice is one hell of a luxury."

Oooh, yup, I had a feeling that might be the case. I had Fel with me, which meant that I could have all the ice I wanted, whenever I wanted, but if a party didn't have anyone with Ice magic or a magical freezer on hand, they'd be out of luck. Plus, even if you *did* have an Ice magic caster on hand, you'd need to bring along water for them to freeze, supposedly. I'd heard that the water that you get from Water magic isn't generally potable, after all, or something to that effect. I reflected on how grateful I was that we didn't have to deal with that restriction and could have all the water we wanted as I sipped my iced coffee.

"You," Fel said, cutting into my relaxing iced coffee time.

"Hmm?" I grunted.

"We are going hunting."

"Hunting? What? Today's a day off, isn't it?"

“You need not accompany us.”

“You mean, like, the four of you will all go on your own?”

“Correct.”

“Okay, but then who’s gonna be here to protect us? I do *not* want a repeat of the behemoth incident, for the record!” I said as very bitter memories of our time in Ouranos, the so-called Heavens’ Woodland, resurfaced in my mind.

“That was but a matter of happenstance,” Fel said.

“Oh, *really*? Well, it being happenstance doesn’t change the fact that it, y’know, *happened*.”

“This region is populated by nothing but weaklings! Moreover, I will erect a barrier.”

“Ugggh,” I groaned. This was one trauma I *really* wasn’t over yet.

“I shall center the barrier upon you, and it will extend as far as that tree,” Fel said, indicating a palm tree about fifteen meters away.

A fifteen-meter radius...so, I guess we’ve got a thirty-meter-diameter dome to work with?

“Gon will contribute his barrier as well. You will find no stronger protection than this.”

“You’re *really* sure there’s only weak monsters around here? Like, *positive*?”

“Yes. I would not stoop to lying about such a matter.”

“Well, all right, then. Go have fun, I guess. Will you be back in time for lunch?”

“Ugh, lunch! I had not considered that factor...”

Kind of a dramatic reaction, don’t you think? Missing lunch once or twice doesn’t feel like something worth getting that depressed over. “Okay, okay, I’ll pack some food for you in your magic bag! It’ll be like a lunch box. The four of you can eat that.”

“*What?! That is thoughtful of you indeed!*”

I piled a plate high with cutlet sandwiches—I figured they would be nice and

easy to eat on the go—then added a few extras for the inevitable second helping and shoved them all into Fel’s magic bag.

“Very good. We depart!”

“Wait a second! What about the barrier?!” I protested.

“My liege, Fel and I already raised it.”

《All right, let’s get out there! Woo-hoo, this is gonna be *great!*》

《We’ll be back soon, Master!》

“Just be careful, everyone! And make sure you’re back before sunset!” I called out as Fel, Gon, Sui, and Dora-chan set off.

“Hey, Mukohda,” Gideon said, “where’re they going?”

“Oh, just out to hunt,” I explained. “They put up a barrier around me, though, so we’ll all be totally safe here. We can spend the day taking it easy.”

“Ooh, gotcha.”

You could try to look a little less relieved, you know?

“Speaking of, was it just me, or did you say something about a *behemoth* a minute back? Now that’s a name I’d sooner not have anything to do with,” Sigvard said, his expression stiff with the exception of an occasional twitch.

Oh, he heard that? Well... “All I can say is that it’s a long story. Like, a *long* story.”

Suddenly, Gaudino’s and Gideon’s expressions looked just as strained as Sigvard’s. *But why, though?!*

Anyway, we spent the rest of the morning lazing about on the beach, enjoying our iced coffee and tea. Lunchtime arrived, and I served Ark’s members cutlet sandwiches, which I’d developed a hankering for after giving my familiars their lunch package. I also brought out a few beers for Gaudino, Gideon, Sigvard, and myself, though I took care to not overindulge this time. Feodora, by the way, took such a liking to the sandwiches that at one point she ended up with one in each hand, stuffing her face with maximum efficiency.

I was planning on going right back to taking it easy like a true beach bum after

lunch, but I happened to notice that the stock of preprepared food in my Item Box was getting rather thin, and I just couldn't take my mind off it. In the end, I decided to do some cooking and refresh my supply. It seemed like a good use of time, and though the way Feodora took up position in front of my magic stove as I cooked and stared a hole into each and every finished dish *was* a little obnoxious, sharing an occasional sample was enough to convince her to not try to sneak a bite herself and I was mostly able to ignore her.

And so, I ended up spending most of the afternoon cooking up a storm. It wasn't quite the easy day off I'd been counting on, but I knew I would've ended up worrying about my lack of ready-made meals if I hadn't taken care of it, so it seemed worth the effort to me.

"This is weird, though. I sort of thought they'd be back by now. And I made karaage for dinner too! They wouldn't want to miss out on their favorite, would they...?"

Just how far away did they end up going for this hunting trip?



Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui made their way around to the opposite side of the island from the beach their party had made camp on. The topography on the island's far side was totally different from the beach—here, the land met the sea in a sheer, rocky cliff face. Waves splashed against the wall-like cliffside, with the exception of a single area, where they instead flowed into what seemed to be a cave, leading somewhere into the island's interior.

"Heh heh heh! There it is," Fel said.

"Indeed," Gon added. "Our prey lies within, no question about it."

《Guess this must be the cave you guys were talking about, eh?》Dora-chan said.

《Are we gonna be hunting here?》Sui asked.

The gluttonous quartet's eyes sparkled with anticipation as they prepared to plunge into the cavern.

Turning the clock back to the day before, Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui were engaged in a hushed and heated conversation on the beach.

《Okay, you had some sorta reason to go along with this whole ‘day off’ deal, right? Spit it out!》Dora-chan said.

“Indeed I did. I agreed to enable a hunting expedition.”

“Now hold on, Fel, they’ll need more information than that!” Gon interjected. “Honestly... / shall explain the details. As it so happens...”

Gon launched into an explanation, quickly bringing Dora-chan and Sui up to speed. In short: although Fel had said they’d be going hunting, they wouldn’t be targeting their typical beast-type monsters this time around. In fact, unless one counted sea creatures among that number, there *were* no such monsters on this floor of the dungeon at all, even on its islands. Fel and Gon had each reached that conclusion independently through their respective senses and were quite certain it was the case.

However, that was not to say there was *nothing* worth hunting on this island in particular...

“We’re all but positive that there’s a cave to be found on the opposite side of this island, and we sense something rather *odd* within,” Gon said.

《Odd how?》Dora-chan asked.

“Odd, in the sense that it is likely undead.”

《Undead?!》

《Bonies!》

“Precisely, Sui! There are indeed monsters of bone among them.”

《Wait, hold your horses! Don’t give me that ‘monsters of bone’ crap! I thought this was supposed to be the *sea* monster floor! What gives?!》

“It is indeed, and that’s precisely what makes this opportunity so appealing! If you say so much as a word of it to my liege, though...”

《He’ll tell us not to go anywhere near the place. Hell, I bet he’d say he’d rather ditch this island and keep moving if fighting undead was the alternative.》

“Indeed. In spite of the gods having given him a seal for that precise purpose,” Fel interjected.

“A seal?” Gon said. “This is the first I’m hearing of it!”

“They granted it to him when we challenged the dungeon in Aveling, if I recall.”

《Yeah, and if he stamps you with it, it lets you mow down undead in a single smack!》

《Sui pew-pewed a whole bunch of bonies!》

“Oh? I hadn’t the foggiest idea my liege had something like that in his possession. However, we still shouldn’t say a word to him. I’ve spent the least amount of time with him out of all of us, but I already understand *that* much perfectly well.”

“He is truly feeble of spirit when it comes to such matters.”

“But in any case, now you know the situation as it stands, Dora. Well, aside from one last detail.”

“There is a monster of considerable strength within that cave,” Fel concluded, a dangerous glint shining in his gaze.



The gluttonous quartet plunged straight into the cave without wasting a moment. Although it was almost completely inundated with seawater, a rocky outcropping by one of the walls formed a path, allowing them to make their way inside easily enough.

The party pressed onward until suddenly, a small boat appeared seemingly out of nowhere in the center of the channel. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all turned their attention toward the boat...and a moment later, a skeleton clattered to its feet aboard it.

《Ah! Bonies! Take *this*!》

Pew!

Sui responded immediately, firing an Acid Bullet...

《Huuuh?》

...but the skeleton hardly flinched. Sui's Acid Bullet had melted a chunk out of its rib cage but hadn't done enough damage to hinder its movements.

“This will not be as simple as our previous encounter with the undead, Sui,” Fel cautioned. “They are tenacious foes. If you wish to finish one off, then bathe its head in as much acid as you can muster.”

《Yeah, we don't have that seal helping us out this time, so it's not gonna be *that* easy!》 Dora-chan added.

《Okay! Sui'll give it a try! Taaake this!》

Sui followed Fel and Dora-chan's advice, aiming at the skeleton's head with a series of larger-than-usual Acid Bullets.

Pew! Pew!

Acid Bullets slammed directly into the heads of both that monster and another that had stood up behind it. Their skulls melted away in an instant, and the now decapitated skeletons crumbled to pieces.

《Hooray!》 Sui squealed with an elated bounce.

“Very good, Sui. Tenacious though the undead may be, destroying their heads will always finish them.”

“True, true! And finishing them *is* quite necessary. They tend to just stand right back up, otherwise.”

“Irritating though it may be, we should destroy the heads of all the undead we encounter as we move along.”

《Peh! This is gonna be such a pain, but sure, guess that's our only option. Let's do this, Sui!》

《Yeah!》

The party pressed on, fending off waves of skeletons that grew larger and more frequent the deeper into the cave they traveled. Some of them arrived on boats, while others sprung out from behind the cover of rocks. They grew in strength as well, transitioning from ordinary skeletons to skeleton warriors,

skeleton knights, and even skeleton mages.

A skeleton could never be a match for the gluttonous quartet, though, no matter how high-ranking it was. In fact, Dora-chan and Sui finished off the vast majority of them without needing their elders' assistance at all. Dora-chan used his trademark Ice magic to pulverize their heads to powder, while Sui's Acid Bullets melted skulls with ease. Fel and Gon, meanwhile, plodded calmly along behind their enthusiastic charges. In every aspect, the trip into the cave felt less like a danger-ridden exploration and more like a walk in the park.

Finally...

《Oh, wooow!》

《This part of the cave's pretty wide open, huh?》

...the party emerged into what seemed to be a vast underground dome at the cave's deepest point. The seawater seemed to collect in the chamber, forming a natural harbor that was shielded from any rain or storms outside.

“Hm? Look—a boat.”

“Indeed! And I sense the presence we're searching for aboard it.”

The ship in question was an eerie, decrepit galleon, its sails tattered and its hull partially rotted away. A moment later, a large skeleton wearing what seemed to be an old, threadbare pirate's outfit and hat leaped out onto the ship's deck.

“*Graaa* ha ha ha ha ha! Ye've done well to reach me, but yer quest ends here!” the skeleton bellowed. A deep, red light shone in its sunken eye sockets, which it turned toward Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui. Then it paused. “*Bwuh?*” it finally grunted in a confused, buffoonish voice.

“Hmm. A skeleton king, is it? I shall slay it,” Fel said with a warlike scowl. He was already locked onto the skeleton king and ready for battle. **“Prepare yourself!”**

“W-Wait! What's a *Fenrir* doing here?!” the skeleton king yelped, but its question was in vain. Fel's Rending Claws carved straight through it before it could say another word. “*Aaaaaaugh!*” it wailed as it—and, for that matter, the

boat it was standing upon—fell to pieces in an instant.

《Hey! No fair, Uncle Fel!》

《Yeah, what Sui said! What's the big idea, keeping the best part all for yourself? That's outta line!》

"I was hoping to have a hand in the battle, myself."

Fel's companions badgered him with complaints, and he glanced away uncomfortably. **"I-It was a dungeon monster, which means that another will be along before long. The three of you can simply defeat that one,"** he said, but that was one excuse his allies weren't about to buy.

《Oh yeah? When's 'before long'? Got any numbers for us, Fel?》 Dora-chan asked.

"Ugh," Fel grunted with a grimace. Fortunately for the Fenrir, however, a ticket out of his dilemma was about to come from an unexpected source.

《Hey, Sui's getting really hungry!》

"Y-Yes, indeed! We shall stay here and eat the lunch we were given while we wait for another skeleton king to arrive. How about that?" Fel suggested, all too happy to jump aboard the lifeboat that Sui had inadvertently provided him.

《Kiiinda feels like you're pulling a fast one on us, but I'm hungry too, so whatever. Works for me.》

"Before that, however, it seems the monster has left a treasure chest behind. Shall we claim it as a souvenir for my liege?"



Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all gathered up around the treasure chest.

"I shall open it," Fel declared before pushing the chest's lid open with his foreleg...

Fshhh!

...prompting a cloud of black smoke to spew out from within.

"Hmph!" Fel snorted. That snort, augmented with a touch of Wind magic, was

all it took to disperse the noxious fumes. Once again, everyone clustered together to look inside.

《What, coins? That's it?》

《They're the same shinies that Master has a bunch of already!》

“Peh. A waste of effort, then.”

“How strange. Skeleton kings are purported to be among the upper echelons of the undead, standing alongside liches. The one you defeated spoke the human tongue as well. It's odd indeed for a monster of such note to leave behind such a paltry prize.”

The gluttonous quartet were less than impressed, and they weren't shy about sharing that opinion. Needless to say, a chest that large filled to the brim with gold was worth a literal fortune. Any ordinary adventurer would have fallen to their knees and wept at the sight of it. It was *easily* enough coin to retire with at any age, so long as one didn't demand too lavish of a lifestyle.

“I suppose we ought to take it back with us, in any case,” Gon said, then stowed the chest in the magic bag they'd been given.

“And now we are left with nothing to do. Let us eat while we wait.”

“I certainly won't object to that!”

《I'm down!》

《Foood!》

The vote was unanimous: it was lunchtime. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui eagerly brought out the meal that Mukohda had packed for them in the magic bag. A distinctive glimmer of excitement shone in their eyes as they stared at the mountain of cutlet sandwiches piled high on a plate. Cutlet sandwiches were universally beloved among the gluttonous quartet, and all four of them opened wide and dug in without wasting a moment.

《Man, cutlet sandwiches are the best!》 Dora-chan said.

“Fried meat held between slices of bread—truly, my liege is a genius for creating such perfection!” Gon added.

《They're sooo yummy!》 Sui squealed.

The sandwiches were perfectly sauced, and there was simply no way they could be anything other than delicious. Fel, however, was notably less enthused than his fellows and wrinkled his nose at the meal.

“I do not detest these sandwiches...however, I cannot fathom why he feels the need to put *vegetables* within.”

Roughly half of the cutlet sandwiches featured a substantial helping of shredded cabbage inside them. They were, presumably, Mukohda's desperate effort to make sure his familiars ate their veggies.

《Okay, but the cabbage ones really aren't that bad if you'd just give 'em a try,》 Dora-chan said. 《It gives 'em a nice crunch! Makes them tasty in a whole different way.》

“Yes, agreed. I certainly don't object to the ones with meat alone, but as Dora says, these are quite scrumptious as well,” Gon said.

《They're all really yummy!》 Sui added. Fel, it seemed, was alone in his distaste.

“In that case, I will gladly trade my sandwiches with vegetables for some of yours that have meat alone,” Fel proposed, seizing the opportunity presented by his fellows' appreciation for cabbage...or at least attempting to.

《Nah, no way. *That's* a whole different conversation.》

“Quite. I would not give up the chance to enjoy both varieties.”

《Sui wants to eat them both too, so no!》

Fel reeled as his plan was shot down from three sides at once, then reluctantly bit into a cabbage and cutlet sandwich with a scowl.

The party polished off their first plate of sandwiches with ease, and they were just about to dig into the other plate Mukohda had packed as seconds when a change began to come over the cavern. A strange grayish mist began to rise, and an instant later, the same old, decaying ship that had been present when they first arrived reappeared out of nowhere. And atop that ship...

“I am *reborn!*”

...the skeleton king, returned to its full former glory, struck a pose. It took a moment to survey the cavern...and then the two points of red light within its sunken eye sockets turned toward Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui.

“Agh! You’re still here?!” the skeleton king, theoretically a tremendously strong monster in its own right, shrieked in bewildered terror.

“Oh ho? It would seem it takes roughly half an hour for it to return.”

《Aww, yes! This one’s mine! I call dibs!》

《Aww, no fair! Sui wants to fight it!》

“Now, just a moment, you two! Matters such as these must be resolved by seniority, and as you well know, I am the oldest among us. Which is not to say that *some* among our ranks aren’t prone to overstepping their station and cutting in line.”

“Grrr! My *station* is not yours to decide!”

“Well, regardless, I think we can all agree that it can wait until after we’ve eaten.”

“That goes without saying.”

《Yeah, seriously.》

《Seconds!》

And so the gluttonous quartet went right back to their meal—much to the annoyance of the skeleton king they’d snubbed.

“Damn it all! I’ll have ye know I was a pirate feared far and wide back in my day! My ship was sunk in a pitched battle with a kraken, but I came back as a monster and climbed the ranks till I was a mighty skeleton king!”

The skeleton king’s words fell on deaf ears. The gluttonous quartet was simply too preoccupied with their cutlet sandwiches to pay it the slightest hint of attention. Being the former pirate it was, however, the skeleton king knew a chance for an underhanded sneak attack when it saw one. If its enemies were occupied, it reasoned, this would be the perfect moment to go on the offensive! It drew the massive sword it carried on its back, charged forward, and swung the blade in the direction of its victims.

“Die, damn ye!”

Through either magic or some sort of skill, the skeleton king’s single slash produced dozens of furrows in the air, all of which flew toward the party...

Ting! Ting! Ting! Ting! Ting! Ting! Tiiing!

...and all of which were intercepted midair by an invisible force. The skeleton stopped in its tracks and gaped, aghast at the fact that its mightiest attack had been deflected seemingly without effort. It had thought that the Fenrir and the dragon were defenseless, and that it would surely be able to inflict a fatal wound on *one* of them...but it hadn’t counted on the fact that they could *both* produce barriers easily strong enough to ward off any attack it could throw at them.

“You dare to interrupt our mealtime? Death is the only punishment for such an offense.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself!”

《Yeah, drop dead, pal!》

《Sui hates bonies that get in the way of mealtime!》

“I did not intend to take my turn just yet, but I suppose I shall handle it this time. I didn’t intend to go *this* far either, but a swift punishment has been earned!” Gon said. A flicker of light within his mouth quickly turned into a flare, which overflowed into a devastating surge of dragon’s breath.

“Not agaaaaaain!” the skeleton king wailed as it was disintegrated, ship and all, before it even got the chance to launch a counterattack.

The party took their time enjoying the rest of their sandwiches, then went over to collect the new chest that the skeleton king had dropped. It contained a shortsword that could only be described as opulent. A massive sapphire surrounded by diamonds and other gems was set into its hilt, and even its sheath had a smattering of precious stones inlaid in it.

《A sword, eh? Any chance we could find a use for this thing?》 Dora-chan asked.

“Unless it is a magic sword, then no. This, too, was a failure.”

“Oh, don’t be so quick to dismiss it! I’m certain the gems must have value, at least.”

《Sui thinks the one Sui made was prettier.》

The blade was, of course, valuable enough on its own to ensure a life of leisure for any ordinary adventurer who happened to lay claim to it...but looking at the gluttonous quartet’s reaction, you’d think it was worth no more than a rusted dagger. They still collected it, just for good measure, then settled down to wait for roughly another half hour.

“Hmh? It has returned once more,” Fel muttered through a half yawn.

“Yes, I can tell. It’s watching us from hiding, it seems,” Gon noted. In spite of its attempts to steer clear of them, the two had sensed the newly revived skeleton king with ease.

《Hell yeah! I’m next! Have some of *these*!》

Pshoo, pshoo, pshoo, pshoo, pshoooooooo!

Dora-chan conjured an explosive burst of magical ice, skewering the skeleton king and its ship with a preposterous number of icy pillars.

“What’d I do to deserve thiiiiis?!” the skeleton king shrieked as, once again, it and its ship were sent plunging into the depths without the chance to launch a single attack. And, as always, a chest appeared a moment later, containing...

“One, two, three...ten gemstones in total! All diamonds, I do believe.”

《Peh! That’s all? Seriously?》

“The chests within this cavern leave much to be desired.”

《Sui thinks they’d be way better if they had meat in them!》

Once again, the party’s members were less than restrained with their opinions. Ten large diamonds—each weighing in at easily over ten carats—would be worth a tremendous price, but yet again, the gluttonous quartet only begrudgingly deigned to collect them, grumbling all the while, before settling in for another half-hour wait.

“Oh! It’s back again.”

“Very good. This one is yours, Sui.”

《Yaaay! Sui’ll get it good! Take *this!*》

Pew, pew, pew, pew, pew, pew pew peeew!

The ship barely even had time to manifest before its hull was perforated by Sui’s larger-than-usual Acid Bullets. “Just leave me *aloooooone!*” the skeleton king wailed as, once again, he and his ship were banished back to the depths, this time melting away into the seawater. A treasure chest arrived a moment later, as usual, and when the party peeked inside...

《Oooh, what’s that?》

《Some sorta red rock? Is it a gem?》

“Not a gem, no. According to my appraisal, it is a ‘Philosopher’s Stone.’”

“A Philosopher’s Stone? I have the strangest feeling I’ve heard that name somewhere before... Hmm... No, it’s not coming to me. But regardless, look closer—there’s a piece of paper beneath the stone!” Gon jabbed at the sheet of paper with a claw, lifting it cleanly out of the chest. “Let’s see here... Oh! It seems *this* is the reward from Demiurge we were promised after we chastised those Rubanov louts for him. This Philosopher’s Stone has the power to transform ordinary metals into mithril, orichalcum, or scarletite, it would seem.”

“Oh, can it? The gods’ gifts are ever impressive. Scarletite is so rare, not even I have seen it more than a sparing handful of times.”

《Ah, lame! Why’s Sui the only one who gets good stuff in its chest?!》

《Yaaay!》

To Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui, the Philosopher’s Stone bestowed upon them by the gods registered as nothing more than “a slightly decent drop.” To the world at large, however, it was not only an item worth killing for, but also an item that entire nations would go to war without hesitation to obtain. If there was one thing that this expedition made clear, it was that the gluttonous quartet’s appetites would forever overpower any chance of them coming to an understanding of the human world’s sense of value.

“Let us be on our way, then. I was hoping this would prove more of a challenge, but it seems there is little more we can expect here.”

“We’re just too capable, Fel, that’s all. I’m sure a nice meal courtesy of my liege will quell the disappointment.”

《That sounds good to me. Let’s hurry back and chow down!》

《Yaaay! Master’s cooking!》



When my familiars finally returned from their hunting excursion, the first words out of their mouths were “We’re starving!” I chuckled as I got to work serving up their dinner; their title, “the gluttonous quartet,” was most definitely well earned. It wasn’t until after they’d gorged themselves on their beloved karaage that we got to talking about how their trip had gone.

“So, what did you end up hunting today?” I asked Fel. Ark’s members leaned in as well, ears perked with keen interest in the story.

“W-Well, we chose to hunt in a cave on the opposite side of this island,” Fel said.

“Y-Yes, quite!” Gon agreed.

Hmm? That was awfully vague of them, wasn’t it? In fact, it kiiinda feels like they’re dodging the question!

At times like these, the solution was always to ask Sui, the most honest member of our party. “Oh, *really*? The opposite side of the island, huh? So then, *Sui*, what exactly were you hunting over there? I’m so curious!”

《Umm, well, we hunted bonies!》 Sui answered as it engulfed a plateful of karaage. Dora-chan, who was sitting off to the slime’s side, facepalmed.

“*Bonies*?” I repeated.

《Yeah! Bonies!》

I paused for a moment to ponder that.

“What’re ‘bonies’? Does he mean skeletons?” Gideon whispered. He couldn’t have heard Sui’s telepathic answer, but he *had* heard my incredulous

exclamation and put the pieces together, apparently.

Yeah, that kinda has to be what it means, right? That's just about the only sort of monster made out of bones, after all!

"Fel? Gon? Care to explain yourselves?" I prompted. There was no way we could've landed on an island populated by undead without those two picking up on it.

When they'd said they were going out hunting, I had assumed they meant they'd be hunting for *meat*, but this little revelation sure called that into question! The way that Fel and Gon opted to dodge eye contact and focus solely on their karaage wasn't doing my suspicion any favors either. *Well, if they think they can dodge the question, I guess I'll just have to pull out the big guns!*

"Hmm, I wonder what I'll make for us to eat tomorrow? I have so many of Alban's veggies on hand, so maybe I'll make a stir-fry with *tons* of those and barely *any* meat in it at all!"

"H-Hey! That is underhanded!"

"Indeed! How could you be so callous, my liege?!"

"Why, what're you two *talking* about? What's so underhanded and callous about me planning out tomorrow's meals?" I said, playing dumb. Fel and Gon scowled at me. "Oh, there are just so many options... Ah, I know! I think this will be the perfect chance to not use *any* meat at all! Just think—a full day of *nothing but veggies!*"

"Guh!"

"Ugggh!"

My meatless meal plan prompted synchronized groans of protest from Fel and Gon. The prospect was so terrible, in fact, that it finally made the two of them give in and confess their whole scheme to me.



"Look, it's not that I don't understand *what* you did. It's the *why* that I don't get. You could've just told me from the start!"

"As we already made clear, we knew very well that you would not be willing

to come along, whether we told you or not.”

“I mean, fair enough, I guess.”

That was just a given. No way in hell was I going to willingly walk into *any* place where the undead hung around.

“And that, you see, is why we agreed so readily when you requested a day off,” Gon said.

“Because you knew you’d be able to go off on your own to fight skeletons if you did? Talk about an ulterior motive.”

“That...is not entirely incorrect.”

“Not entirely incorrect,” my foot! You guys had no intention of clueing me in on any of this from the start! “Look, I’m not worried about you two or Dora-chan, but Sui’s still a kid! You can’t just go waltzing into death traps and bring it along!”

“Hmph! There is no such thing as a ‘death trap’ for Sui. It has proved its might time and again. You have seen it in battle yourself, have you not?”

“Quite so! I’ve never seen a slime as strong as it is before, in fact. There aren’t many beings out there that could slay it.”

《And can we talk about how you’re *way* too overprotective of Sui, while we’re at it?》

I mean, yes, Sui was tough. I *knew* that. I’d been with it for its whole life, so of course I did! I also knew that I really was being overprotective, and yet...

《Master, the karaage’s suuuper yummy!》 Sui squealed with a happy bounce between bites.

“Suiii!” I cooed. It was just so innocently adorable, I couldn’t stop myself from swooping it up into a big ol’ hug.

Nope! No can do! Gonna keep worrying!

“How could I possibly keep myself from being protective when I know my cute little Sui’s gonna be in danger?!” I snapped as I rubbed my cheek against Sui’s wiggly body.

《Hee hee! Master, that tickles!》

“Hee hee, oh, does it? Then maybe I should keep it up! Tickle tickle tickle!”

As I played around with Sui, for some reason, Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan all sighed.

“A doting parent at his worst.”

“Truer words are rarely spoken.”

《He’s going at it *hard* today.》

Oh? A doting parent, am I? I’ll wear that label with pride! What’s so bad about doting on your kid?!

“Hmph! I tire of this talk. Let us speak instead of the gifts we brought you,”
Fel said.

“Gifts?”

“Indeed! The spoils of battle: treasure chests. We brought them back because we thought you would appreciate them—four of them, in total.”

《See? They’re right in here!》said Dora-chan, who then passed me the magic bag I’d handed over when they went out to hunt that morning. I pulled out the first item inside...

“Oof, that’s heavy!”

...and found a treasure chest so full of gold coins, I was shocked they hadn’t overflowed already.

“Oooh, dang!”

“Hot damn...”

“Not every day you see a pile of coins that big...”

“Shiny...”

Apparently, I’d gotten Ark’s attention. Their eyes were locked onto the loot as they oohed and aahed in astonishment.

Is this really all that surprising? I thought gold coins were pretty standard fare, as far as dungeon chests went. Heck, my Item Box is packed full of dungeon-

made gold coins from all the chests we've found in the past.

I moved along to the second chest. Inside was...

"Oh, a shortsword?"

The sword was decorated with an excessive number of precious gemstones. I could tell at a glance that it was more of a display piece than something meant for live combat.

Gaudino gulped. "Now *that's* really something."

"Do you *see* how big those gems are?" Gideon said.

"I've never seen a more lavish short sword in my life, and I don't expect I'll ever see another that tops it," Sigvard muttered.

"It's made of mithril," Feodora noted.

It *looked* fancy and all, but it just didn't seem very usable to me. The sheer number of gems on the hilt made it look hard to hold at best, and painful at worst. Even if the blade *was* made of mithril, I had a hard time seeing myself getting any use out of it. *Into the "to sell" pile it goes.*

I set my sights on the third chest. Opening it up, I found...

"Oh, diamonds!"

Ten rather hefty diamonds sat within. *Yup, those go right into the sell pile too!*

"Diamonds..."

"I didn't know they *came* that big..."

"They're a gem that's always in demand. You'll find a buyer for 'em before you know it."

"Sparkly..."

Once again, the envy in the members of Ark's eyes was plain to see.

"That's three incredible chests in a row, though. Hard to believe it," Sigvard noted.

"True. I really have to wonder what they defeated to earn a reward like that," Gaudino added.

“Right?! I was just thinking that too! I’ve *gotta* know,” Gideon said.

All three of them had their gazes fixed on the chests, as did Feodora, who was nodding along all the while.

“Hm? You refer to the beast that left behind the chests? It was a skeleton king,” Fel explained.

“That it was!” Gon continued. “It spoke the human tongue, and I’d hoped it would prove a challenge, but alas, it hardly measured up in battle.”

Wait, back up. It “spoke the human tongue”? I know you said it wasn’t a big deal, but are you sure that thing wasn’t actually super terrifying for anyone other than you four?

《Yeah! Sui beat up the talking boney!》

《We took turns so all of us could fight it at least once, but it only took one shot every time,》 Dora-chan added.

Just one shot? Maybe it wasn’t all that big a deal after all, then? I have no idea how I’m supposed to judge this.

“No, no no no—a *skeleton king*?! That’s a *top-class* undead! They’re supposed to be as strong as *liches*!” Gaudino shouted.

“I remember an old story about a skeleton king,” Gideon said. “They say a country sent out an army ten thousand strong, and the skeleton king wiped out every last one of them.”

“Hard to imagine even tryin’ to fight one of those and living to tell the tale,” Sigvard said.

“A skeleton king...” Feodora muttered in horror.

Ark’s eyes were once again as wide as dinner plates. *Okay, yup, definitely a big deal after all. Another S-ranked death machine, sounds like. Then again, if my familiars can all take one of those out in one shot, what does that say about them...? I’m just not gonna think about that. Yup. Moving on!*

Last but not least, I opened up the fourth treasure chest to find...

“Huh? What is this? Some sort of red rock?”

“Oh, yes, that! It would be the gift that Demiurge sent to thank me and Fel for our help with the incident the other day.”

“Your help with an incident? A gift from Demiurge...? *Oh!*”

That’s right—that whole thing with the Church of Rubanov! Looks like Demiurge always makes sure to pay back his favors.

“It’s called a Philosopher’s Stone, it seems,” Gon said.

“A Philosopher’s Stone?” I repeated.

“Indeed. It will allow you to convert ordinary metals into mithril, orichalcum, or scarletite.”

It... Huh? I’m sorry, Fel—you made that sound pretty trivial, but isn’t what you just said kind of a huge deal? I gulped, then gave the so-called Philosopher’s Stone an apprehensive appraisal.

【Philosopher’s Stone】

A legendary and almighty stone sought after by alchemists throughout the ages. Can be used as a medium to channel magic through iron, transforming it into mithril, orichalcum, or scarletite, depending on the quantity of magic used.

“Pffft!”

O-Oh, god, they weren’t kidding. It can seriously change iron into mithril, orichalcum, or scarletite... First things first, there’s something I definitely need to have clarified.

“So, I know mithril’s rare, but there’s a *bit* of it on the market, right?” I asked rhetorically. I’d found some out and about myself, which I’d had Sui use to make me a mithril sword and spear, and I’d seen high-ranking adventurers with mithril gear as well. “Well, what about orichalcum and scarletite? Do you see those around much?”

I’d never even *heard* those words get dropped in casual conversation before. Thankfully, Sigvard had an immediate answer.

“We know they *used* to be around ’cause they turn up in old records

sometimes,” he said, “but these days? Not a chance. The means to refine and forge ’em were lost an age ago, and now they’re considered the stuff of legends. I *have* heard that a lotta master smiths—dwarves, every one of ’em—are still set on rediscovering those old techniques, though.”

I gulped. “S-So, hypothetically, if actual orichalcum or scarletite ended up making its way onto the market...?”

“Heads would roll before the day was done,” Sigvard said with a wince.

Yiiikes! Excuse me, Demiurge! Take it back, please! Actually, don’t give me crap like this in the first place! This is less a reward and more a weird, sadistic punishment! There’s no way in hell I could ever let this thing see the light of day, so into my Item Box’s eternal storage corner it goes!

Wait... Oh, no. The Philosopher’s Stone was *clearly* a first-class disaster of an item, and all of Ark’s members now knew all about it. *I-I think it’s time to bite the bullet and ask for a favor.*

“S-So, hey, guys? Do you think you could pretend you never saw this? No red stones came out of any treasure chests today! Never existed in the first place! Please, *please* just act like none of this ever happened, thanks!” I said as I bowed down so deeply, my forehead almost touched the sandy beach.

The faces of Ark’s members were almost as pallid as I assumed mine was.

“Ha ha! I didn’t see anything! Nope, not a thing!” Gaudino said.

“Ha ha ha, yup! I’ve never even *heard* of a Philosopher’s Stone!” Gideon agreed.

“A rock like that sounds like nothing but trouble, and I want no part of it! My lips are sealed!” Sigvard added.

“Nothing happened. I saw nothing,” Feodora said.

Gaudino, Gideon, Sigvard, Feodora... I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. You can blame Demiurge’s carelessness for this little tragedy.

Speaking of which, would you please think these things through a little more in the future, Demiuuurge?!

Chapter 5: A Lucky Hit

After our little...well, let's just call it an accident, we packed up and set out onto the open sea, leaving the island behind. Sui sailed along as we rode on its back, and all things considered, we were making good progress. Sure, we had to deal with another cetus attack, but we'd seen those before and they weren't as shocking the second time. The members of Ark had more or less torn them to pieces, with Sui gathering up all the drops that fell into the sea at my request.

The encounter was a reassuring reminder that Ark really *was* an A-ranked party, when all was said and done. That said, the cetuses had dropped a ton of hides, and apparently Feodora's Item Box had finally been filled to capacity as a result. Ark's members had come to the conclusion that, unfortunately, their only choice was to leave some of the loot behind, but I offered to carry it in my Item Box instead before they could throw the extras out. We were exploring this dungeon together, so it only seemed fair.

And so we pressed on into the deep blue sea. At some point, we passed into a region inhabited by sharks. Big ones too—I'm talking four or five meters long, and apparently technically classified as monsters—circling our party at a distance. They freaked me out at first, but Sui was all too happy to kill its boredom by spearing them with its tentacles, and after I watched a few sharks get jabbed out of existence, they sorta just faded into the background for me.

That said, Sui hunting them with brutal efficiency didn't stop the sharks from coming at us one after another, and as a result, I ended up with a big pile of the shark skin and meat that they dropped. The only use for shark skin I could think of offhand was a type of traditional wasabi grater, so I had a feeling it wouldn't have much in the way of utility. I just hoped that the Adventurer's guild would be willing to buy it. As for the meat, I had no idea if my familiars would find it palatable, but I figured that frying it—either in large chunks or pasted and formed into balls—would make for a snack that would pair fantastically with a nice glass of sake.

Anyway, to make a long story short, our journey across the sea that day was looking to be nice and peaceful. I mean, as peaceful as things can be when you've got five-meter-long sharks constantly surrounding you.



"Oh, huh. The sharks are all gone," I noted.

《Yeah! They all went away,》 Sui confirmed.

"Heh heh heh! And so, it will soon be my moment."

"I believe you mean *our* moment, Fel!"

Fel and Gon were in high spirits, and I had a *bad* feeling about what that meant. "Hey, what're you two talking about? What's coming at us next?" I asked.

"A sea serpent."

Bad feeling: justified!

《Wait, a sea serpent? I want in on this!》 Dora-chan chimed in.

《Sui too!》 Sui exclaimed.

The words "sea serpent" were all it took to instantly capture the attention of the other half of my familiar squad. *Seriously, guys, who perks up at the news that an S-ranked sea monster is coming their way? Pretty sure that's just you. Ha ha ha...*

"It comes," Fel said, barely an instant before the sea serpent burst from the ocean with a mighty splash. It lifted its long, snakelike body into the air, mouth wide open and fangs bared. It *definitely* wanted to eat us.

"Wha—*already*?! Somebody deal with that thing!" I yelped.

"Do not shout in my ear. Hmph!" Fel swung his foreleg with a grunt, unleashing his trademark Rending Claws attack. It tore through the air with a sharp whistling noise, slicing the sea serpent cleanly in half.

《Ah! No fair, Uncle Fel! You beat up the baddy before Sui could try *again*!》 Sui complained.

《Yeah, what Sui said! For cryin' out loud, Fel, can't you hold yourself back for

a friggin' *second* at least?!» Dora-chan huffed.

“There is no cause for concern,” Fel said.

“True indeed!” Gon agreed with a nod. “After all, there are *droves* of sea serpents inhabiting these waters.”

Wait. What? I’d love to pretend I didn’t hear that, but unfortunately, I don’t think that’s an option here! “I’m sorry, Gon, but did you just say there are *droves* of sea serpents out there? What exactly did you mean by that?”

Gon cocked his head. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, my liege. Was there more than one way to interpret my words?”

“Okay, so you really *do* mean there are, like, a bunch of other sea serpents nearby?”

“Yes.”

“Like the one Fel just killed?”

“Precisely.”

“Gaaaaaah! Y-You could’ve said something!”

The members of Ark, by the way, were standing just to the side of this whole conversation and seemed to have been struck dumb by Gon’s little reveal.

“There, see? Here they come now.”

Splaaash! Splaaash! Splaaash! Splaaash! Splaaash! Splaaash!

“Aaaaaaugh, it’s trueee!”

Six massive sea serpents had shot up from the water, one after another, spraying us with surf and entirely surrounding us.

“Hmm. Six of them, is it? Perfect. We shall each have our own target.”

“Indeed we shall!”

《Hell yeah, let’s do it!》

《Yaaay!》

“W-W-W-Wait! There’s six of them and *four* of you! What about the last two?!” I protested.

“The lot of you are more than capable of handling them. In fact, your level has risen to the point that you could defeat them on your own with little trouble,” Fel said, making it sound like he was stating the obvious.

“Me? On my own...? Oh, *hell* no! Nope nope *nope*! How am I supposed to take on monsters like *that*?!” *And what kind of monster are you to even suggest it?!*

“The others seem willing enough to make an attempt.”

Huh? I looked over to the side and found the members of Ark armed and waiting, their expressions grave. “G-Guys?” *Wha— No, I mean—* Seriously?

“If things keep going at the rate they have been, we’ll get to the bottom of this dungeon without ever proving that we can carry our weight. It’s time for us to take a stand,” Gaudino said as he shot a glance at Fel and Gon.

“Exactly,” Gideon agreed with a nod, confidently brandishing his prized spear. “This is our moment! Do or die!”

“We’ll be helpin’ ourselves to the glory of having slain a sea serpent, not to mention the fortune’s worth of spoils it leaves behind!” Sigvard said with a hearty laugh.

“I’ll bring something delicious back to my grandchild for us to eat together!” Feodora said. Even she seemed fired up this time.

Oh, god, they’re serious! Oh, no no no, this cannot be happening right now!

“Well said indeed. You ought to learn from their example and make at least a slight effort yourself,” Fel said, aiming a disdainful glance in my direction.

“Wha—?! A *slight effort*?! This is a little more than *slight*, if you ask me!”

“No need to worry, my liege. If you are in danger, rest assured that I will save you before you know it,” Gon said, patting my shoulder with one of his claws.

“Or you could, I don’t know, take care of it from the start so I don’t have to end up in danger to begin with?!” I snapped back.

“Enough of this feckless prattle. They come!”

The sea serpents had been biding their time, rocking their heads to and fro as

they observed us, but now, they attacked in unison.

“*Aaaaagh*, dammit all!” I wailed. Just as my familiars had predicted, I’d been put in a position where I *had* to fight, like it or not. I quickly pulled my mithril spear out from my Item Box and stuck a hand out at the same moment. “Eat fireball, dammit!”

One of the sea serpents had set its sights on me and was already moving to strike, mouth wide open. I decided to feed it a fireball in exchange, and miracle of miracles, I *actually* managed to land a hit directly inside the monster’s mouth. Less miraculously, it looked like my efforts had *mildly* annoyed it, at most. My one spell hadn’t done anywhere close to enough damage to deal a fatal wound.

Now it was the sea serpent’s turn, apparently. It struck at me with a powerful hiss, and I just barely managed to dodge out of the way of its gaping maw.

“That was *way* too close!” I said between gasping, heaving breaths. “I’m sorry, but there’s no way I can handle— *Agh*, not again!”

I’d *thought* I had managed to dodge my way to safety, but the sea serpent proved me wrong by striking again without wasting a moment. I desperately hurled myself out of the line of fire, only for it to make yet another attack. The whole process repeated itself over and over until I was a coughing, hyperventilating mess.

“D-Didn’t you say you were going to *help* if I ended up in trouble?!” I managed to spit out between hacking coughs.

Dodging all those attacks had reduced my legs to quivering jelly, but if I didn’t dredge up the stamina to keep moving, I was going to be snake feed. The sea serpent seemed to realize that I was on my last legs as well and redoubled its efforts without letting me catch a break.

“Agh, crap!” I yelped. This time, I was a bit too slow. I didn’t have fine enough control over my movements anymore; dodging the sea serpent’s attack was a lost cause. “See how you like thiiiis!” I screamed as I thrust my mithril spear out before me in pure desperation and turned away, unable to watch as the serpent bore down on me.

A moment later, I felt a heavy sensation on the spear. A horrible, earsplitting screech that seemed to come from *right* next to me came next, followed by a heavy *thud* as something landed on Sui's back. I timidly looked up...

"Wait. Seriously?"

...and saw my own spear, embedded deeply into the sea serpent's eyeball. I mean *deeply* in there. The force of the monster's charge and the force with which I'd thrust the spear out had apparently worked in conjunction, burying a full half of the spear into its eye socket.

I guess it must've pierced its brain, killing it instantly? Which means...

"Yes! Oh my god, yes! I seriously just beat a sea serpeeeeeent!"

Was it a fluke? Absolutely, but that didn't change the fact that I'd taken down a sea serpent—an S-ranked monster—single-handedly.



Gon hadn't been kidding about there being droves of sea serpents in this stretch of ocean. They attacked us several more times after the engagement that Ark and I had participated in, but past that point, I was too mentally exhausted to take to the front line. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, Sui, and Ark's members dealt with the remainder of the monsters on their own.

Team Familiar's overall combat style was to bring sea serpents down with big, instantly fatal single attacks, while Ark tackled their foes using teamwork, winning after a series of coordinated attacks. One way or another, though, both were dealing with S-ranked monsters, seemingly without a hint of trouble.

That was no surprise on my familiars' part, of course, but I was really impressed with the display that the members of Ark were putting on. They'd seemed like they were on the verge of losing all self-confidence after seeing my familiars fight, and they'd started to sound really discouraged for a while there, but defeating that first sea serpent had apparently helped them regain a little faith in their abilities. By now, they were full of confidence and fighting at their best.

And so my familiars and Ark's members alike rode their wave of success, crushing one group of monsters after another. Sui collected each and every

item the sea serpents dropped with its tentacles, and I stored them all in my Item Box on the spot. It felt like Sui barely had time to drop one item off before it found another to pick up, and I'd figured that if I didn't store them quickly, the resulting mountain would start slipping right back into the sea again before long. That would be a waste, so they could sit in my Item Box until we had the time to sort through them more carefully.

The one fly in the ointment was that very little in the way of meat dropped, much to the gluttonous quartet's disappointment. I had a feeling that the prospect of eating sea serpent meat was the whole reason they'd been so enthusiastic to go on the attack in the first place.

Long story short, my role on our voyage ended up becoming collecting and safekeeping all the sea serpent drops that Sui scooped up for us, and I spent most of the trip fully occupied by that task.



“Hmm. It seems we have left the sea serpents’ territory.”

《Tch, already? Whatever, I guess.》

“Don’t be like that, Dora. I think we’ve had our fun already.”

《We hunted lots and lots of them!》

“Phew! It’s finally over,” I sighed. “Can’t say I ever expected to see that many S-ranked monsters show up one after another.”

“Well, this *is* a dungeon, my liege,” Gon said. According to him, these things just happened every once in a while in places like this.

Meanwhile, as I was chatting with my familiars...

“We did it! Gods, we really did it!”

“Damn right we did! The four of us took down a sea serpent!”

“You mean *five* sea serpents! S-ranked monsters! Five of ‘em!”

“We’re still real adventurers after all!”

...the members of Ark had fully regained their self-confidence and were taking a moment to celebrate their success. They were tried-and-true A-ranked

adventurers, so their abilities had never really been in question, but watching my familiars fight had given them just a bit of an inferiority complex. That was their mistake, really. Comparing themselves to my outlandishly powerful squad of extreme outliers could never have ended well for them. In any case, I was glad to see them back in good spirits for a change.

“Hey, what do you think about stopping somewhere around here for the day?” I suggested.

“A sound decision! I’d like to sample some sea serpent soon, after all,” Gon said.

“Hold your horses!” I countered. “Ark did plenty of hunting today too, which means we have to split the spoils with them. We can’t claim *all* the meat for ourselves if they want some of it.”

“What?!” Fel barked. **“The meat is ours! I have laid claim to it!”**

“Moreover, we have no use for the skin, bones, and magic stones,” Gon noted. “I would far sooner take nourishing, delicious meat over such trifles.”

《Yeah, what they said! The meat’s ours! Hand it over!》

《Meeeat!》

The gluttonous quartet were once again throwing the sort of fit that would make any normal adventuring party cry tears of blood if they heard it. Though of course, since Fel and Gon were speaking out loud, Ark’s members really *did* hear their half of the exchange. Their smiles looked a little strained, to say the least.

“Okay, okay! I’ll talk to them and see what I can do, so just give me a minute,” I said, then turned around with a shake of my head to negotiate with Ark. “Sorry my familiars keep going off like this. They can’t help themselves when meat’s on the line.”

If only they knew how much trouble that habit of theirs put me through. My familiars will never let anything tasty escape their grasp, that’s for sure.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve been traveling with you long enough that we’re used to it by now,” Gaudino said.

“Yeah, we get it. Your familiars only care about food,” Gideon agreed.

“The skin, bones, and magic stones are ‘trifles,’ eh? Speakin’ as adventurers, materials like those are worth a hell of a lot more to us than the meat,” Sigvard noted. Gaudino and Gideon nodded in vigorous agreement, so apparently they were all on the same page about that one.

“I’d like the meat. I’ve always wanted to try sea serpent,” Feodora the gluttonous elf said, much to the horror of Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard, who all shot her looks that screamed, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh, no you don’t, Feodora!” Gaudino said. “What would you even do with meat like that?!”

“Right?! A bunch of meat’s not gonna get us anywhere!” Gaudino agreed.

“True, true! The only thing we could hope to get out of it is its sale price,” Sigvard added with a sigh that Gaudino and Gideon echoed.

Not that it’s any of my business, but do those three not consider eating the meat to be an option?

“We could eat it. Actually, I *want* to eat it,” Feodora insisted, standing firm in the face of her party members’ exasperation.

Gaudino let out another heavy sigh. “Look,” he said, “just because we get our hands on some good meat doesn’t mean we get to actually eat it. You’ve been in this business for long enough to know that.”

“The boss is right, Feodora. Not like any of us have any idea how to cook it anyway,” Gideon said.

“And don’t try tellin’ us you could do it. We all know you can’t cook worth a damn,” Sigvard added.

In the men’s minds, this was clearly an issue that had long since been settled. Judging by the way Feodora’s eyes widened, however, it came as much more of a surprise to her.

“You mean even if we eat it...it wouldn’t taste good?”

“Oh. Oh, gods, you’re serious...”

“How are you realizing this *now*?!”

“You didn’t join this party yesterday! You know full well that none of us know how to cook!”

I got the feeling that Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard’s exasperation with Feodora had finally peaked. I’d spent the whole exchange doing my best not to burst into laughter and took this as my chance to slide into the conversation and suggest that if I could take all of the sea serpent meat, I’d make them a nice meal with it in exchange. The members of Ark were all eager to agree to that proposal—especially Feodora, who I thought might never stop nodding for a minute there.

Our initial agreement was that Ark would receive three skins, three skulls with intact fangs, and six magic stones. They’d only asked for two skins, two skulls, and one stone at first, but since they’d taken down five sea serpents on their own, I thought that was just too small of a share and talked them up to a slightly larger pile of loot, and now that we knew my party would be getting everything we wanted, I reopened negotiations and convinced them to take more.

I mean, I guess it was more like I refused to let them say no than I negotiated them into it. My party could literally never have too much meat on hand, but all I could do with skins, skulls, and magic stones was sell them to the Adventurer’s guild. I mean, I guess I could’ve brought back a skin or two to give to Lambert as souvenirs, but that was really it, and since I already had more money than I knew what to do with thanks to my familiars, having to deal with excess materials was nothing more than a hassle.

Of course, even after I talked Ark’s people into taking more materials, I still had enough left over that I’d have to take care of them eventually, one way or the other. That wasn’t even starting on the other drops I’d picked up. Just considering how long it would take to sort through all of them once I got back home to Karelina was making me feel exhausted already.

And while I was fretting over logistics...

“It is settled, then! The meat shall be ours!”

《Great! Now get cookin’!》

“It’s been many a year since I last tasted sea serpent! I’m rather excited.”

《Meat, meat, meaty meaty meat!》

“I can’t wait to try sea serpent for the first time!”

...the gluttonous quartet and gluttonous elf’s excited mutterings carried on endlessly as we searched for an island to bed down on for the night.



The moment we made landfall, my familiars started kicking up a fuss about wanting to eat sea serpent *right now*.

“Oh, for the—*look*, guys, I need time to decide what I’m even going to make with it first! Stop rushing me!”

“What need is there for thought? There is only one dish suitable for sea serpent meat!”

《Right?! Goes without saying!》

Fel and Dora-chan gave each other a look, then smirked. Gon watched on, clearly confused.

“It goes without saying? What dish would that be?” he asked.

《Karaage!》 Sui squealed in reply.

“Precisely. Sea serpent karaage is delectable indeed.”

《You know it! That stuff was the best!》

I’d made sea serpent karaage for Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui back when we had been in the seaside town of Berléand, and it seemed it had left quite an impression on them.

“Oh? Well, if all of you claim it’s delicious, then it seems I have something to look forward to! In fact, I can hardly wait!” Gon said with a beaming grin.

I mean, yeah, sea serpent karaage’s great. But, y’know... “We just had karaage last night, didn’t we? Wouldn’t it be boring to have the same thing for dinner two nights in a row?” I know it was cockatrice karaage last night, but still.

“It will not! I could eat karaage *every* night and not tire of it in the least!”

《For sure! That stuff’s so tasty, I’d never get bored of it.》

《Sui would eat karaage every day too!》

“Every day?! Nope, not happening! Maybe you wouldn’t get sick of it, but I sure would,” I said with a strained laugh.

“Karaage made with a different meat will surely have an entirely different flavor! I *must* know what karaage made from sea serpent tastes like, especially since the others claim it’s so delicious! I beg of you, my liege!” Gon said, his expression deathly serious as he grabbed my shoulders firmly with his forelimbs.



Desperate much, Old Man Gon?! And wait... “O-Ouch! H-Hey, Gon, that hurts! You’re squeezing way too hard!”

“Oh! My apologies. It was but a lapse of control,” Gon said. “So, my liege, will you prepare the dish for me?”

“Yes! Fine! I get it! You want karaage, it’s all yours!”

I just couldn’t take the pressure of Gon’s expectations and finally folded. We’d be having karaage for dinner two nights in a row after all.



I brought my magic stove out from my Item Box and started preparing to cook. My usual karaage routine was to season some of the meat with a soy sauce base and the rest with plain salt, but since I’d made that sort of karaage the day before, I figured I’d at least shake things up a little in the seasoning department.

My familiars had made it clear that they’d never get tired of karaage, sure, but Ark would be eating with us too, and I would sure as heck get sick of it before long. I just wasn’t the sort of person who could eat the same thing night after night and not get bored. As such, I decided to make karaage flavored with the go-to seasonings as well as a curry-flavored batch, a yuzu chili batch, and a miso batch.

To start, I once again ducked down behind my magic stove so Ark’s members wouldn’t see me and opened up my Online Supermarket. I didn’t have curry powder or yuzu chili paste on hand, but after picking those up, I had everything I needed to get to work frying up a mountain of karaage!

First, of course, I had to prepare the sea serpent meat by chopping it up into roughly bite-sized pieces. I began working on the usual two flavors after that, which meant preparing two sauces, one with soy sauce as its base and the other salt, then poured the sauces into extra-large plastic bags along with the meat, where it would sit and marinate before I fried it. The curry-flavored karaage would actually use the same soy marinade as the soy sauce karaage—the only difference was that I would be mixing curry powder into the starch I’d coat it in before frying—so I made an extra batch of the soy marinated meat, flavored

slightly less strongly than the first one.

The yuzu chili karaage's seasoning mixture consisted of yuzu chili paste, granulated chicken bouillon, sake, grated garlic, and grated ginger. The miso karaage's mixture, meanwhile, had miso, sake, mirin, soy sauce, grated garlic, and grated ginger in it. I seasoned an equal amount of meat with those mixtures as I had with the usual flavors, of course, sealing so many of each kind in their own extra large plastic bags, I actually used up my whole remaining stock of them. *I'll have to buy some more of those soon.*

With all of that finished, I had reached the stage in the recipe where all I had to do was sit back and wait for the meat to marinate. I waited for some time...but eventually, I just couldn't take it anymore and had to say *something*.

"S-So, can I help you?" I asked my audience. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, Sui, and Feodora the gluttonous elf were all gathered up around my magic stove, watching my every movement with bated breath.

"Is it finished yet?"

"I'm terribly eager to try it!"

《Also, we're starving!》

《Sui's sooo hungry!》

Feodora didn't say a word, but the look of excitement on her face spoke volumes.

I sighed. "Listen, cooking is a process, okay? And part of the process for karaage is letting the meat sit and take on flavor for a while. That means you have to *wait*, or it doesn't turn out as tasty in the end."

Honestly, you're not helping anyone by being this impatient! Giving me that look isn't gonna make the sea serpent marinate any faster. What you are doing is making me feel really pressured, so give someone else that starving-puppy-dog stare, please!

The gluttonous quartet and gluttonous elf weren't going to have much of a show to watch, unfortunately. At this stage, all that I had to do was get the frying oil ready and prepare the starch I'd coat the meat in, with a separate

bowl of starch that had curry powder in it for the curry-flavored karaage. After that, it was just me, my audience, and all the pressure they were putting on me to hurry up and cook already.

Okay, that's probably long enough! Time to get frying.

I brought the marinated sea serpent meat out in batches, coating it in starch and then frying it straightaway. The gluttonous quartet and elf watched on all the while, apparently beside themselves with anticipation. It wasn't long before the irresistible, hunger-inducing aroma of karaage began to waft across the campsite, and my spectators started drooling as they stared at the rapidly growing pile of freshly fried meat.

I held back a chuckle, then offered them a few pieces, just to start. "Careful! They're as fresh as they can get, so they're really hot," I cautioned. Hunger was clearly a bigger danger than heat as far as they were concerned, though, and they happily dug in without wasting a moment.

"Ah, yes! Delicious!"

"Oh, now this *is* something indeed! Exquisite!"

«Tastes kinda different than usual, but not in a bad way! This stuff's good as hell!»

«It's sooo yummy!»

"Mmph, mmnh," Feodora huffed, too busy trying to cool down food she'd already bitten into to give a coherent review.

Judging by the looks on their faces, all five of them were as happy as they could be to finally taste their long-awaited sea serpent karaage. The fact that a certain gluttonous elf was blending in so seamlessly with the gluttonous quartet was something I had slightly more mixed feelings about, of course.

"Here! I made some for you too," I said, bringing a helping over to Gaudino and the others as well.

"Oh, thank you," Gaudino said. "And while you're over here, let me say sorry Feodora keeps harassing you like this."

"Thanks, Mukohda! And yeah, she's a handful, all right," Gideon agreed.

“The food’s always appreciated. As for *her*, most elves tend to be pretty whimsical when it comes to food, but Feodora’s a cut above the rest of ’em. Sorry you have to deal with her.”

The three of them looked equal parts amused and horrified as they watched Feodora chowing down alongside my familiars, a fork in each hand.

“Well, it sounds like she really was just that excited to try sea serpent meat,” I replied. “Oh, and while we’re on the subject, sorry for serving the same dish two nights in a row! My familiars really wanted to have sea serpent karaage and strong-armed me into it.”

“Oh, no, don’t apologize! This fried stuff—‘karaage,’ you said?—is incredible! No complaints here,” Gaudino said.

“I’ll second that. It’s incredibly good,” Gideon agreed.

“True, true. And I could hardly imagine a food that pairs better with a stiff drink,” Sigvard added.

I see what you’re doing there, Sigvard, but no, we’re not drinking tonight!

“I require seconds! And with more of the usual flavors.”

“For me as well! Though I’ll have extra of the ones with a slight bit of spice to them.”

《Gimme extras of all the new ones!》

《Umm, umm, Sui wants lots more of all of them!》

“Coming right up!” I headed right back to the stove and started frying away, stealing a piece or two for myself here and there as I cooked. The yuzu chili and miso karaage were both fantastic, and while the curry ones were pretty good too, I realized I should’ve gone a bit harder on the curry powder.

“Can’t say I’ve ever eaten sea serpent meat before. It’s really tasty, no two ways about it,” Gaudino said off to the side.

“Well, of course it is. How could meat like this *not* be?” Gideon replied. “Not to mention the fact that Mukohda’s the one who cooked it! No way he’d serve us a meal that’s *not* good.”

“Fair point,” Sigvard said with a nod. “The ones with a spicy kick in particular are really something. I just *know* they’d be even better with a nice flagon of booze.”

“Oh, don’t you start. Are you forgetting that we’re in a dungeon?”

“Right? Be reasonable, Sigvard!”

The three of them kept stealing glances at me all throughout their exchange. I had to admit, the yuzu chili karaage really *was* delicious, and a beer would have made it even better, no doubt about it.

I’m not bringing any booze out tonight, though, no matter how many hints you drop! Pleading glances aren’t going to help either! We have a dungeon to crawl tomorrow, after all, and we can’t be doing it hungover.

Oh, and while I’m complaining... Could I please take a break, already? I’ve been frying this whole time! I wanna sit down and eat, already!

Chapter 6: The Members of Ark Look Like They Want to Join the Party!

“Urp!”

My stomach was *killing* me.

“Uggh... I knew I should’ve made something different for dinner, even if I was the only one who’d end up eating it,” I quietly muttered as I rubbed my midsection.

We had set off from the island we’d camped out on and were once again riding Sui across the deep blue sea. How everyone *other* than me seemed to be feeling just fine after two nights of karaage in a row was a mystery to me. The gluttonous quartet and elf had even had *more meat* for breakfast on top of it all!

Dora-chan had started talking about how he had a hankering for ginger-fried meat first thing in the morning, and Fel, Gon, and Sui had instantly jumped on the idea, so I’d made them ginger-fried meat bowls for breakfast. They’d even had me leave off the usual serving of cabbage, on the basis that it would be more satisfying to have just meat and rice.

My familiars eating hearty helpings of meat right after getting up was nothing new, of course, but then Feodora was lured over by the smell and started watching me prepare the bowls with rapt attention. I’d thought for sure that a light breakfast would be better for everyone after our second fried food banquet in as many days—especially from a health perspective—but then when I served my familiars their meat bowls, Feodora had given me a downright grief-stricken look that told me she really *had* been hoping I’d make one for her too, and I ended up giving in and obliging her. That got a really nice smile out of her, at least, so that was something.

I had already figured out how big of an eater Feodora was, and I knew that she’d eat pretty much anything as well, up to and including meat for breakfast.

Still, I was shocked that she could wolf down that heavy of a meat dish so soon after a series of meaty, greasy meals. She had a stomach of steel that seemed like it could rival even those of my familiars.

Anyway, while the gluttonous quartet and gluttonous elf were happily inhaling their ginger-fried meat bowls, Gaudino, Gideon, and Sigvard enjoyed a very light Western-style breakfast instead. I'd served consommé with plenty of Alban's veggies in it, scrambled eggs, and some pickles I'd made from Alban's veggies as well, along with some of Theresa's sourdough bread, which I had toasted.

I couldn't have imagined a tastier breakfast lineup, though it was only really light in theory, since the three of them asked for enough extra helpings to gorge themselves to near bursting. I could only assume their stomachs were made of tougher stuff than mine. I was still so stuffed from the night before that a can of vegetable juice I surreptitiously bought from my Online Supermarket was more than enough for me.

How is it that the divine blessings I've received nullify any status ailments I could possibly end up with, but do nothing to help with stomachaches?

Was the source of my queasiness psychological rather than physiological, maybe? I'd started trying to eat more healthily and avoid having fried foods multiple nights in a row after I turned twenty-five, so maybe it was just my worries catching up to me? Then again, multiple nights of karaage couldn't possibly be good for anyone, blessings or not. Doubly so since the yuzu chili and miso karaage had been *really* tasty, and I'd eaten a lot more than I'd intended to.

I've learned the value of moderation all over again, that's for sure, I thought as I gazed out at the sun-drenched, cobalt-blue seascape.

"Urp!"



Five days had passed since our battle with the sea serpents, and we were making steady progress across the ocean's expanse.

"Feels like I might forget we're in a dungeon, at this rate," I said to myself as I

stared into the boundless horizon before me.

《Look, Master! Fish!》Sui said as it reached up with a tentacle, offering me a piece of white fish that a monster had dropped. Those precleaned chunks of meat, at least, were an undeniable reminder that we were most certainly in a dungeon after all.

“Thanks, Sui.”

The monster in question was called a big needlefish and had looked, well, a lot like a really big needlefish. We’d been catching them every now and then for the past three or four days. I’d tried foil-grilling the first few we caught, and everyone had liked it so much that Sui had started going out of its way to chase the creatures down whenever it could.

We’d also encountered two krakens and three aspidochelones, all of which Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui had hunted down before I knew it. No real surprise my familiars had taken such an interest—they *were* both tasty monsters.

That meant I had a fair amount of squid and top-class white fish on hand, which I thought would make a great gift for everyone back in Karelina. My plan was to get everyone together for a seafood barbecue in the garden. The fact that Feodora was hoping the kraken and aspidochelone meat would make an appearance in our dinner that night didn’t escape me, but I pretended not to notice. *Sorry, but those are now designated as souvenirs! I’m not budging on that!*

That’s more or less how the journey went for quite some time. Monsters cropped up here and there, but thanks to my familiars, it was a very peaceful trip overall...until suddenly, it wasn’t.

“Hm? So they have arrived at last.”

“So it seems!”

《Oooh, dang, and that’s a lot of ’em!》

《Turtles!》

My familiars’ excited shouts drew my attention out to the sea, where I saw a huge cluster of shells floating in our direction.

“Are those what I think they are?!” Gaudino gasped.

“Ugh! Yeah, those are killer turtles, all right!” Gideon said.

“Murderous sea turtles, technically,” Sigvard noted.

“They’re dangerous, but their shells are valuable,” Feodora said.

Ark’s members were clearly acquainted with the monsters, and I could tell at a glance where they’d gotten the apparently colloquial name “killer turtles.” Their shells alone must have been about two meters long, for once thing, and when I got a glimpse at one of their faces, it looked downright nasty. They gave me serious snapping turtle vibes, all around.

“All right, let’s do this!” Gaudino said. “We’ve handled these things before, and if we just stay calm and stick to the plan, we can do it again! Don’t let them bite you, and we’ll make it through!”

“You got it! We’ve taken down sea serpents, for crying out loud. No way some B-ranked killer turtle would cause us any trouble!” Gideon said.

“That’s right! We’ll show these turtles what Ark’s made of!” Sigvard declared.

“And get their shells. Lots of them,” Feodora added.

Huh? Is it just me, or are those four raring for a fight this time?

“Very well, but their numbers are vast. We shall join the battle.”

“It’s only fair, after all!”

《Yeah, may as well lend a hand. Actually, wait, can you eat those things?》

《Sui’ll beat up all the turtles!》

My familiars were just as excited to throw down as the members of Ark were. Everyone was so battle-ready, in fact, that I ended up caving to the pressure and bringing out my own mithril spear as well.

“Here they come!” Gaudino shouted. And with that, the battle began.

Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui all laid into the monstrous turtles, butchering one after another with ease. Meanwhile, the members of Ark put on an outstanding show of teamwork, crushing turtle after turtle as well. I, on the other hand...

“Come on, stay away! Go after the others, please,” I prayed under my breath, knees shaking as I stared down at the turtles’ horrible, massive shells.

That prayer, unfortunately, was not answered. In fact, just moments later one of the turtles looked right at me, its gaze locking onto mine. The next thing I knew, it was climbing its way up Sui’s side, hoping to make a meal out of me.

“*Agh!* I said stay *away!*” I yelped as I jabbed at the turtle with my spear. It saw my attack coming a mile away, though, and retreated into its shell before I could do any damage. “Gah, dammit!”

It was time to change tactics. I switched from targeting its head to jabbing at its front legs instead. That did the trick, thankfully—the vicious turtle monster let out a deep moan of pain as crimson blood flowed from the puncture wounds I’d inflicted on it.

The downside, of course, was that I was never going to *kill* the turtle by poking its legs, and in the meantime I *had* succeeded in making it very, very angry. I wasn’t being attacked by a man-eating turtle monster anymore. I was being attacked by a *super pissed* man-eating turtle monster.

“What the— Oh, no no *no!*” I shrieked as the turtle advanced on me. I flailed my spear with all my might, and by pure dumb luck my wild swing actually connected, sending the turtle tumbling off Sui and into the ocean.

Suddenly, I had a new plan. Killing the turtles was a lost cause, but knocking them into the sea? That, I could do, and my familiars and Ark would be able to take care of the monsters while they were down there...probably. Hopefully!

And so, I focused single-mindedly on knocking any turtles that came at me right back into the ocean.

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“Ugh, I’m exhausted...”

“And why would that be? What reason would one who failed to slay a single beast have to be tired?”

“Ugh!” I grunted. Fel had really hit me where it hurt with that one. “W-Well, what was I supposed to do? I was too busy pushing them into the ocean to finish them off!”

Fel sighed heavily. **“When will you learn...?”** he muttered.

Why are you exasperated with me here? Why’re you shaking your head? I did what I could, okay?!

《This is the last one, Master!》

“Oh, thanks, Sui,” I said as Sui deposited a final shell atop the mountain of them it had assembled. Ark’s members looked happy as could be to see the spoils this time, which made sense, considering they’d mentioned those shells were quite valuable. There was also another pile of loot, which wasn’t all that much smaller than the shell mountain.

《So, the turtle meat. How is it? Good eatin’?》Dora-chan asked.

“I haven’t partaken of it myself, unfortunately,” Gon said. “What about you, Fel?”

“No, I have yet to consume it as well. That being said, they would not have dropped meat if that meat were not edible.”

“Yes, I suppose that is true!”

《Sui hopes it’s really yummy!》

“And so, my liege, we leave the meat’s preparation in your hands,” Gon said, turning to me.

《Yeah, he’ll find some sorta way to make it good!》Dora-chan said.

“Indeed. Prepare a dish that will bring out the best in it,” Fel commanded.

《Make it super tasty, please, Master!》Sui added.

“Oh, boy...” *I guess it’s all up to me, then. Is this stuff even edible, though?*

Unlike most dungeon drops, the turtle meat was a bunch of unskinned, uncleaned lumps of flesh and bone. It honestly looked pretty grotesque—I could even pick out a few whole limbs here and there in the pile.

W-Well, at least they’re not demanding that I cook with it right away this

time. I'll just pack it up and let it sit in cold storage until I figure out something to do with it! I've got plenty of meat in my Item Box that I know for sure is edible, after all, so no need to rush, I thought as I jammed the nasty lumps of meat into my Item Box, trying and failing to keep a straight face all the while.



We found an island to camp on overnight and made landfall. That meant I had to start preparing to make dinner for everyone, of course, but tonight, that process was held up by a deeply unfortunate complicating factor: the gluttonous quartet decided to insist that I make something with the killer turtles we'd fought earlier that day after all. I had *no* idea how you'd even try to eat that particular sort of turtle and suggested to my familiars that we could put it off till some other time, but they replied with a show of confidence in me, claiming that they were sure I'd figure something out.

"Seriously, where do I even start with this stuff...?" I groused as I looked over the horrifically unappealing chunks of turtle meat that hadn't even been skinned or deboned. I was at a loss, but there was no way around it at this point. I'd have to start by seeing how it tasted, then work forward from there.

I peeled the skin off a chunk of turtle meat, trying not to think about how disgusting the whole process was, then chopped the meat itself into pieces, lightly seasoned them with salt and pepper, and threw them into a frying pan to cook. Once the meat seemed to be finished, I snagged a piece with a pair of chopsticks and gave it a close inspection.

"It'll be fine. We've eaten dungeon-sourced soft-shelled turtle meat before, and that wasn't an issue! This is basically the same thing," I told myself. "No choice! I've just gotta man up and do it! Here goes nothing!"

I popped the chunk of killer turtle meat into my mouth before I had time to psych myself out any further. I gave it a few apprehensive chews...and found that it tasted a little like beef, a little like pork, and a little like poultry all at once, somehow. It had shades of the distinctive qualities of all three types of meat, but it wasn't *quite* close enough to any of them for me to really put my finger on what it tasted the most like.

Hmm... Oh, I know! If I had to pick the one kind of meat that's the closest to

this stuff, it'd probably be mutton, actually! It has a similar sort of gaminess.

It was rather remarkable how totally unlike the soft-shelled turtle meat—or, technically, big bite turtle meat—this meat was, even though they both came from turtle monsters. I had a feeling that this stuff would probably be pretty decent if I seasoned it with a salt and herb blend. That would hopefully keep its gamey flavor in the background, and I had plenty of herbs and spices that I'd collected in all the towns we'd visited in our travels to work with.

I decided to give it a try, cutting up the rest of the meat hunk I'd skinned earlier without even bothering to debone it, then sprinkling an herbal salt mixture all over it. I decided to use a salt blend that I'd obtained just a little while ago. It had a very powerful aroma, but in a way that came across as surprisingly refreshing in the end.

I heated some olive oil in a frying pan, then dumped in the seasoned killer turtle meat.

"Well, it smells good, anyway! The question is, how's it gonna taste?" I muttered apprehensively.

I gave a piece of the cooked and seasoned meat a try. The aroma of the herbs hit first, followed closely by a distinctly meaty umami. Most importantly, it was totally devoid of the gamey flavor that I'd been worried about.

"Nice! I think I can actually work with this!"

I got right to work cooking up a party's worth of seasoned killer turtle meat...and hated every moment of the nasty meat processing work that I had to take care of first in order to get it ready to go.



"This is not altogether unpleasant, though the turtle meat we had in a hot-pot before was far superior," Fel said as he chomped into his helping of seasoned killer turtle meat, slurping it down bones and all.

"True, true. This certainly isn't bad, but compared to the meat in those hot-pots, it really does seem lacking," Gon agreed.

《Okay, but it's ridiculous to compare this stuff to those turtle hot-pots

anyway,» Dora-chan said as he chomped into his own helping of meat. «That stuff was *too good*! Man, I'm starting to want some just thinking about it!»

«This is good, Master, but Sui thinks that the turtle we had in the hot-pot was waaay yummier too,» Sui said, echoing the popular sentiment.

Grrr... “Look, you guys are the ones who kept going on and on about how you wanted to try it, aren't you?! Do you realize how much of a pain it was to peel the turtle skin off all that meat? It was *disgusting*!”

Yes, the soft-shelled turtle meat had been better in basically every way. That, I would freely admit, but you couldn't just say it after all the work that went into putting this meal on the table! *Skinning all that turtle meat so you four could try it was a life-and-death battle! Have you ever tried prepping a whole-ass turtle leg? Or an unskinned chunk of a turtle's underbelly? I didn't go through all that work just to hear you guys complain about how it doesn't measure up to something that's obviously better!*

“W-Well, this *is* delicious in its own right.”

“Y-Yes, indeed! The herbs and the meat pair together remarkably well.”

«Y-Yeah, it's not bad! Like, seriously, it's totally decent!»

«It's, umm...it's yummy, Master?»

I was fuming, and even my familiars had realized it. All four of them gave rather panicked revisions of their opinions, though I did have to wonder why Sui's had sounded so much like a question.

Ugh... Whatever, I guess. “You guys asked for this, so no leaving leftovers, okay?” I cautioned.

My familiars replied with varying forms of “Of course we won't,” then went right back to eating. They'd been vocal about the dish's shortcomings, but it wasn't *bad*, it seemed.

Sheesh. They've been spoiled by all the good meat we've been eating, that's the problem. I still had plenty of that good meat in stock, but I shuddered to think what might happen the moment I ran out.

As I dug into my own helping of seasoned killer turtle, I happened to overhear

the conversation that the members of Ark were having off to the side.

“Frankly, the first thing I thought was ‘Are murderous sea turtles even edible?’” Gaudino said.

“Same,” Gideon agreed.

“Can’t deny it,” Sigvard said with a nod.

“Me too,” Feodora added.

Considering how nasty the meat looked? Can’t argue with that.

“And I know that Fel and the dragon were talking about big bite turtle being way better, but honestly? This stuff’s plenty tasty too.”

“Right? There’s nothing wrong with it at all. Hell, it’s better than the sort of food you get at high-class restaurants in the capital, even.”

“The big bite turtle dish from last time—‘hot-pot,’ was it?—was certainly a step above, but this meat’s good in its own way. I could see it pairin’ perfectly with a stiff drink, and that gets it a passing grade on its own as far as I’m concerned! Wish I could stuff myself to bursting with this meat and a nice flagon of ale!”

“It’s delicious. I could eat it every day.”

Oh? Now those are some rave reviews! Thanks, everyone! Maybe it was worth the trouble of dealing with all that prep work after all!

“Though there is just one thing I’ve gotta say ’bout it—not that it’s really a complaint,” Sigvard said.

“I know what you’re getting at,” Gideon said. “Everything Mukohda serves us is delicious...”

“And compared to that, our usual food’s, well...” Gaudino began, then trailed off.

“Please, don’t remind me, boss,” Gideon groaned.

“The food we ate in dungeons was the worst,” Feodora said.

“And the stuff we ate *outside* the dungeons couldn’t hold a candle to this either,” Sigvard added.

The members of Ark kept chatting away as they savored their killer turtle meat until, finally...

“Y’know, I had a thought,” Gideon said. “How confident are you guys that you’ll be able to go *back* to our old way of eating after an adventure like this?”

They all paused for a moment, then turned to face me in unison.

What’s this?! The members of Ark look over as if they want to join the party!

Allow the members of Ark to join your party?

→YES NO

For an instant, a distinctive text box flashed through my mind’s eye as a bead of cold sweat dripped down my forehead.

No, don’t! You can’t look them in the eye! There’d be no turning back!

I did my absolute best to pretend I hadn’t noticed anything as I dug into my own helping of turtle meat.

Also, for the record, your long-term meal situation’s not my problem, and I only promised to do all the cooking this time because I knew it’d be a one-dungeon deal! I’ll be feeding you until the end of the adventure, but you’re on your own as soon as we’re done with this dungeon! I have the gluttonous quartet to deal with already; I can’t add four more people’s worth of meals to my workload forever!

Chapter 7: Leviathan vs. Ancient Dragon

“So, I was wondering, just how much longer is this dungeon gonna go on for?”

“By that, do you mean ‘for how many more floors’?”

“That too, but I’d also love to know how much longer we’re gonna be stuck on *this* floor.”

We’d been in the dungeon for almost twenty days. I was feeling a serious hankering to get back to the surface, and recently, a secondary issue had been growing more and more pressing by the moment. That issue? The silent pressure I’d started feeling from the members of Ark ever since their discussion the night I’d served them turtle meat.

It’s not that I disliked any of them, to be clear. They were all nice people, but I still *really* didn’t like the idea that they might suggest we make our temporary party permanent. The brutally honest truth was that from my perspective, all that would mean was that I’d have more to worry about with no real benefit on my end. My hands were already full with the gluttonous quartet, and taking on more responsibilities was just beyond me. As such, the moment we got out of the dungeon I was planning on bringing us right back to Ronkainen and saying my goodbyes posthaste.

“As far as deeper floors are concerned, that’s simple enough: there aren’t any,” Gon replied.

“Indeed. This floor seems to be the final one,” Fel confirmed. Knowing how keen their senses were, I didn’t see any reason to doubt them.

《Oh, seriously? It’s over after this floor? That sucks! This was such a good one too!》said Dora-chan, who had been listening in.

《Sui wanted it to keep going for way, way longer!》Sui moaned in disappointment.

“It’s a shame, but I guess that’s that,” I said. Internally, of course, I was beside myself with relief.

We'd made it through the dungeon easily enough so far, but from an even remotely normal perspective, its design seemed to be about as brutal as a dungeon could get. The swamp on floor one was bad enough, but the ocean was a step above even that, and both of them had been outlandishly huge. We never would have made it this far without my familiars, and we never would have even made it past the first island on floor two without dragging a boat all the way down here—preferably a full-blown sailing ship.

All that being said, I had a terrible feeling about what I'd just heard. "So, wait. If this is the final floor, does that mean there's still a ways to go before we're done with it?"

"Heh heh heh heh heh! Worry not, the end will be upon us soon enough. There is not much farther to go now."

"Gra hah hah hah, indeed! And I must say, I'm rather excited at the prospect!"

Back up, what? What was that laughter supposed to mean? I'm definitely getting the feeling you two are gearing up for some sort of huge battle! You're making me worry again, so cut it out!



Three more days had passed since Fel and Gon had told me that this was the dungeon's final floor, and we'd spent the last two of those days sailing nonstop. Fel and Gon had informed us that there were no further islands beyond a certain point, the final island aside, so we hadn't had much of a choice in the matter.

That final island was where we'd find the boss of the floor—and, for that matter, the final boss of the whole dungeon. Dora-chan, Sui, and I had all asked Fel and Gon what that boss would be, but all they'd told us was to "look forward to it." That wouldn't have been reassuring even on a good day, and the suspicious grins they'd been wearing made it all the worse. I was getting more and more concerned by the day, and not just about the boss.

"How're you doing, Sui? You've been swimming without a break for ages! You sure you're all right?" I asked.

《Sui's fine, Master! Sui's doing super great!》 Sui replied.

“Oh? Well, just tell us if you’re getting tired!”

《Okaaay!》

There were no islands for Sui to rest on, so there wasn’t really any other choice than for it to keep swimming regardless, but I still felt bad for putting such a heavy burden on it. I *had* invoked my authority as the person making our food to give Sui extra large portions at meal and snack time, at least, under the justification that it had been working without rest for ages and deserved a little bonus. Sui had been ecstatic and made a big deal about how special it was that it got extra, but that didn’t stop me from feeling guilty... Oh, and needless to say, I couldn’t cook anything fresh while on the slime’s back, so we’d been eating nothing but premade food from my Item Box since the voyage began.

“Sorry about this,” I said to Sui. “It feels like you’re the one doing all the hard work for us! Hang in there, though. It’s almost over!”

《Okaaay,》 Sui replied.

“I promise that I’ll make you all your favorite foods when we get home too, all right?”

《Really?! Hurraaay!》 Sui squealed with an excited jiggle.

“Wh-Whoa, careful there! You’ll knock someone off if you keep wobbling like that!”

《Oops! Sui’s sorry,》 Sui said, then started singing a happy (but also very out of tune) little song about all its favorite foods, from karaage to hamburger steak.

“Hey! Why is Sui receiving such special treatment?!” Fel growled with an irritable scowl.

“Oh, can it, you!” I snapped back. “Sui gets special treatment because it’s been carrying us this whole time without a break! Are you telling me you don’t think that’s even a little noteworthy?!”

“No, that is not—”

“And besides, it’s all thanks to Sui that we managed to get this far to begin with!”

“That is, indeed, true.”

“And now you’re complaining about it getting special treatment?” I sighed.

Around that point, I noticed that my little lecture had an audience.

《Yiiikes! Glad I didn’t decide to complain.》

《Better indeed to keep your mouth firmly shut in times such as these, Dora. Words alone can spell disaster, after all. You should take this as a learning opportunity. Watch Fel’s example, and do better than him in the future.》

《Solid plan, yup.》

I know that I’m the one giving the lecture in the first place, so maybe I shouldn’t say this, but yeesh, Gon and Dora, you sure aren’t sparing your party member much sympathy! I guess they’re not wrong about keeping your mouth shut being a good idea, though.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the party...

“Damn, did you see that? He’s got the Fenrir completely tamed.”

“Right? ‘Can it,’ he said! And now he’s *scolding* it!”

“You could travel the whole wide world and not find another man who can talk that way to a Fenrir, that’s for sure.”

“Wow.”

...Ark’s members were whispering behind my back, though of course, I heard every word of it. *Look, even I have times when I have to speak my mind, okay? And besides, I’m an old hand at dealing with Fel’s attitude, given how long I’ve been traveling with him.*

Suddenly, Sui shuddered. “Whoa!” I yelped, just barely managing to keep my balance.

“The sea is growing rougher, it seems,” Fel observed.

“Now that you mention it, the weather *has* shifted quite a bit recently,” I noted. Before I knew it, the bright blue summer sky had grown dark and overcast. The sea had been calm for most of the trip, but now the waves were starting to pick up, and some of them were big enough to send a jolt through Sui.

《Hey, aren't there any monsters around? I haven't seen even one of 'em all day!》Dora-chan called out.

Now that he mentions it... “Yeah, you're right. I haven't seen any either.”

We'd been dealing with monster after monster for days on end, but suddenly, that well had run dry.

“That would be because we are now quite close indeed,” Gon said.

“Precisely. It will not be long at all. We will likely reach our destination tomorrow.”

“‘Our destination,’ meaning the last island?” I asked. Fel and Gon nodded in unison.

I guess that must mean the final boss is right around the corner as well.

“Okay, so out with it: what *is* the boss gonna be?” I asked once again...and got nothing but a pair of smirks in response.

Gaaah! Would you two jerks just tell me, already?!



“H-Hey! How long is it gonna stay like this?” I shouted, doing my best to be audible over the roar of the raging winds. Rain fell in torrents, and massive waves rolled across the surface of the sea.

Our party had sailed its way straight into a brutally powerful storm. The weather had been getting worse and worse as we approached the final island, until it eventually devolved into an outright tempest. Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan seemed unperturbed by the weather—though Dora-chan was hanging on to Gon—and Sui was having a blast riding the waves, but Ark's members and I were forced to cling to Sui's back for dear life, and it took all of our strength to do so.

“Not long at all! We have nearly reached our quarry!” Fel shouted back.

“Yes, indeed! It is almost time!” Gon shouted as well. The two of them sounded as excited as could be.

“It'd better be, because at this rate, the weather's gonna kill us before the

final boss gets the chance!” *If any of us falls into the ocean in a storm like this, we’re doomed, no two ways about it!* “Just do something about this, please! I don’t even care what!”

“Humans truly are feeble creatures. Why not enjoy the rare chance to experience such a storm?” Fel said with a fed up shake of his head as he looked at me and the members of Ark.

“Enjoy it?! What’s there to enjoy about a raging typhoon, you moron?!” I screamed. In my defense, I think anyone would’ve snapped if they were put into a situation like that.

“M-Moron?!” Fel huffed indignantly. **“I was about to raise a barrier, but on second thought, I have reconsidered!”**

“Oh, calm yourself, Fel,” Gon sighed. “Humans really *are* fragile, you know? They’re liable to be swept away if we don’t protect them—my liege in particular.”

“P-Perhaps so, but calling me a *moron* of all things was a step too far!”

“There, there,” Gon said as he patted Fel’s shoulder. “What’s most important is that he remains safe, is it not? We need him if we want *its* meat to be prepared in the most delectable manner possible, don’t we?”

“Ugh! Perhaps, yes...”

“It’s been a long, long time since I’ve had the chance to taste meat of its kind. I’m sure the same is true of you, no?”

“It is indeed.”

“And you know how delectable it is, even uncooked. Just imagine the sort of dish he could make of it! Don’t you want to try that?”

“I do,” Fel said with a heavy sigh. **“I shall raise a barrier, much as it galls me to do so. I trust you will help, Gon.”**

“Of course! With both of our barriers in place, no storm could ever be strong enough to move even a hair on their heads.”

Fel and Gon quickly made good on their word, putting up a barrier around us. There was nothing they could do about the motion of the waves, of course, but

the howling winds and pounding rains came to a stop in an instant. Ark's members and I could finally breathe easy again.

"Ahh," I sighed with relief. "It's finally over..."

"I wasn't sure we'd make it through that one," Gaudino said.

"I thought we were *already* dead for a minute there," Gideon groaned.

"I've never seen a worse storm, that's for certain," Sigvard said.

"I could see my departed first husband, beckoning me to the other side..." Feodora added.

Unfortunately, our moment of rest wasn't to last.

《Hey, hey, Master, something really, really big just showed up!》 Sui said.

《Hot *damn*! That's a biggun, all right!》 Dora-chan exclaimed.

"At long last!" Fel shouted.

"It's finally shown itself, then," Gon said.

I looked up to see what everyone was talking about...and what I saw left me utterly speechless. My jaw dropped, and for a moment, all I could do was stand there and gape at the monster that had appeared. Its long, narrow body was wound around an island that lay before us, almost as if to protect it, and its gaze was pointed directly at us.

"A leviathan," Fel said.

"Some call them the sovereign lords of the sea," Gon noted.

"Dora, Sui, do not interfere. This is a foe the two of you may not yet be prepared to face."



《Tch! I don't like it, but fine.》

《Awww, Sui wanted to pew-pew the big fishy!》

《C'mon, Sui. I hate to admit it, but he's right. The two of us probably couldn't beat that thing yet. You gotta know when you're not up to a task.》

《Booo!》

N-Noooope, nope nope nope! Sui, there is absolutely no way I'm letting you fight that thing! And while we're on the subject, what the hell is that thing?! Has my sense of scale completely broken down?! It's wrapped around an island, and from the looks of it, it's not even a particularly small one!

And don't think I'm giving you a sanity pass here either, Dora-chan! Sure, you admitted that you couldn't beat it, but you also made it sound like you would take it on if you thought there was even a chance you could win! That's nuts, and Fel and Gon are even crazier for actually going for it! Why would seeing a monster like that make them look excited, of all things?! You're all insane!

“Now, it is time. Move us toward the beast, Sui.”

《Okaaay!》

That brief exchange snapped me back to my senses. “Wha— No, *stooooooooop!* Nope, nope, *absolutely not!* Why would you bring *us* closer to that thing?! Are you *trying* to get us killed?!”

“Why would you ever assume such a thing? You are still under the protection of my barrier, as well as Gon's, are you not? There is not the slightest chance that you will perish here!”

“Maybe it'll block its attacks *physically*, sure, but the *psychological* damage is gonna be critical! If you bring us close to that thing, we'll all be dead of heart attacks before you know it! Literally!”

My heart's already trying to pound its way out of my chest, for your information! And you want me to get even closer?! That's a surefire recipe for cardiac arrest!

“Enough of your gutless ramblings! Would that you could correct this flaw in your character,” Fel grumbled.

“It’s not *just* me this time, thank you very much! Ark’s here too, and they’re in the same boat as me! Isn’t that right, Gaudino...? Agh!” I yelped as I turned around and found all four members of Ark in a daze, their faces white as sheets. *Oh, god, they look like they’ve already dropped dead!* “Gaudino?! Gideon?! Sigvard?! Feodora?! Talk to me, guys!”

I crawled over to Ark’s members, calling their names and shaking them by the shoulders, but none of them said a word. For a second, I thought they might *actually* be dead and fearfully checked for a pulse...

“Oh, *phew!* Still alive after all. We’re all good,” I said with relief. They were definitely alive and breathing, just pallid and entirely immobile. “Did they...pass out with their eyes open?!”

“Ugh. One look at a leviathan was all it took to render them unconscious? Pathetic,” Fel grumbled with a roll of his eyes.

“Pathetic yourself! There’s nothing pathetic about that! I wish *I’d* passed out right along with them!”

“My liege, Fel, I hate to interrupt, but it seems our foe has no intention of waiting for you to finish,” Gon said. The leviathan had opened its mouth wide, and a white light was beginning to build up inside it.

“Aaaaaaugh! I-It’s got a breath weapon?!”

“Hmph! This would not have been an issue if you had not insisted upon complaining!”

Don’t try blaming this on me, Fel!

“It seems there’s no choice but for me to handle this. Send a dragon to fight a dragon, as they say! I shall teach it which species is the *true* pinnacle of all dragonkind,” Gon said before spreading his wings and lifting off from Sui’s back.

“What?! How dare you, Gon!”

“My liege is floundering and helpless! Someone has to take care of him! And besides, this is a rare opportunity for me to show him my worth. I *am* the newcomer to our party, after all. Try to understand and grant me this one round, Fel.”

Fel clicked his tongue. **“Fine, but do not forget you owe me for this!”**

Gon soared up into the stormy sky. Then, when he was a safe distance away from us, he returned to his true form in all its massive glory: an ancient black dragon so enormous, its sheer scale rivaled that of the leviathan’s. It was the sort of image you’d expect to hear described in ancient legends.

“Hmph! Insolent whelp,” Gon muttered.

The leviathan was still charging up its attack, but before it could unleash it, Gon interrupted the process with a powerful uppercut, slamming the monster’s jaw closed. I could hear its massive teeth gnashing together all the way from my perch aboard Sui. The leviathan toppled backward, slamming into the surface of the sea...and raising a roaring tidal wave that swept right into us.

“Whoa!” I yelped, crouching down and clinging to Sui.

“Our barriers are still in effect. You will not fall into the sea,” Fel said. He didn’t even look at me, though. His eyes were glued to Gon’s battle with the leviathan.

《Hell yeah! You got this, Gon!》Dora-chan shouted.

《You’re sooo strong, Old Man Gon!》Sui cheered as well. The two of them were perfectly content to sit back and enjoy the show.

I, on the other hand, was more or less a babbling wreck. A scene straight out of a kaiju movie was playing out before my eyes, and I had no clue what I was supposed to do about any of it. The leviathan, meanwhile, had hoisted itself upright again and unleashed a furious, bellowing roar at Gon.

“Hmph! You may be the sovereign of the sea, but *I* reign over *all* domains, land, sea, and air!” Gon shouted.

He reached out in a swift, powerful motion, taking hold of the leviathan’s body directly beneath its head, then leaning in and biting down. He held fast for just a moment, then wrenched his head backward, tearing out a massive chunk of the beast’s flesh. The leviathan let loose another earsplitting wail, this time laced with equal parts fury, horror, and pain. Blue blood flowed down its long, snakelike body, and it looked like it had *barely* escaped decapitation by the skin of its teeth...in the sense that its head was only hanging on by a flap of skin.

“Your meat is delicious indeed...but I’m sure it will be much better cooked than it is raw,” Gon casually observed as he chewed on the chunk of leviathan flesh, blood dripping down his chin.

“**Hmph,**” Fel huffed. “**I could have defeated it just as easily. Also, *who* reigns over all domains? Say that when you have bested me in strength!**”

《Wooo! You rule, Gon!》Dora-chan cheered.

《That was amaaazing!》Sui squealed.

While Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were all celebrating—or critiquing—Gon’s battle, I was busy trying to escape from reality entirely. “Ha ha ha! This is a dream! Yup! Totally dreaming right now,” I babbled.

The very small part of my mind still capable of rational thought was fixated on the fact that even though the leviathan’s blood was blue, it smelled just like the ordinary, red blood that people had. Well, that and the fact that I was *deeply* jealous of Ark’s members, who had spent that entire traumatizing spectacle blissfully unconscious.



Gon’s battle with the leviathan had ended in the ancient dragon’s crushing victory. Much to my surprise, however...

“That thing’s corpse isn’t disappearing, huh?”

《Sure isn’t,》Dora-chan said.

《That’s so weeeird!》Sui piped up.

The storm had abruptly died down—possibly because the leviathan had been killed—and we were left floating peacefully in a calm, quiet ocean. Gon was still holding the creature’s corpse aloft, but no matter how much time passed, it didn’t disappear and leave behind its drop items like dungeon monsters usually did.

“**Perhaps it is the body itself?**” Fel suggested.

“Perhaps *what* is the body itself?” I asked.

“**I mean, perhaps the body itself is the creature’s drop,**” Fel continued,

gesturing at the gargantuan corpse before us.

I took a *very* long moment to ponder the possibility. “You mean...the *whole* thing? No, no, that can’t be it. There’s just *no* way,” I finally said. *That’s not how dungeon drops are supposed to work! And we know this dungeon isn’t an exception since all the monsters we’ve beaten on the way here have disappeared and left stuff behind, the same as always!*

“Fel may be correct, my liege,” Gon chimed in. “There is precedent. Long, long ago, when I was young...”

Gon launched into a story about how in his younger days, he’d decided to explore a dungeon to stave off his boredom. Apparently, the same thing had happened to him back then. All the monsters he’d beaten along the way to the final boss had dropped chunks of meat and other assorted items, but the final boss itself (which was a giant bull monster called a kujata, incidentally) hadn’t disappeared at all.

“What?! A kujata?!” Fel bellowed, springing to his feet for some reason I couldn’t fathom. **“What dungeon was this?!”** he demanded, his eyes wide with keen interest.

“Oh, where *was* it...?” Gon said, then paused for a *loooooong* time to think. “I’ve forgotten,” he finally concluded.

Really, Gon? You remembered all those details, but that’s the one thing you ended up forgetting?

Fel clicked his tongue irritably. **“It seems age has stricken you with senility, old one,”** he grumbled.

“Wha—?! It most certainly has not!” Gon snapped back.

“It has clouded your mind, at the very least. Why else would you lose such a pertinent piece of information?”

“I already told you, I forgot! That’s all!”

“I am far from certain of that.”

Fel and Gon were glaring daggers at each other. Clearly, someone had to intervene. “Come on, guys, calm down!” I scolded.

We just got done witnessing a leviathan vs. ancient dragon battle, and frankly, I've had my fill of ridiculous kaiju showdowns for one day, thank you very much! I'm not even slightly interested in following it up with a Fenrir vs. ancient dragon match!

"My liege, I know for a fact that Fel is simply lashing out since he knows how delicious a kujata's meat is," Gon said.

"I figured it'd be something along those lines," I sighed. I turned to give Fel a look.

"Th-Those bull creatures *are* delicious indeed. Is it so wrong for me to wish to partake of them again?" Fel grumbled. He couldn't deny the accusation, so he'd decided to get defensive about it instead.

I decided not to pursue that whole matter any further, instead turning my gaze back toward the leviathan corpse that Gon was holding.

"Yeah, it really doesn't look like it's going to drop anything," I muttered. We'd gone on quite the lengthy digression, and it had shown no sign of disappearing over the course of our chat.

I guess that means Fel and Gon are right, and the corpse is its own drop? But that would mean...

"Are we supposed to bring it back with us?" I asked.

"Of course we are," Fel said. **"A leviathan's meat is delicious indeed. Why would we choose to leave it?"**

"Quite, quite," Gon agreed. "Moreover, this leviathan was remarkably large, even compared to the rest of its kind. That means there will be plenty of meat available for the taking!"

《Never gotten a chance to eat leviathan yet, and there's no way in hell I'm letting this one slip by!》Dora-chan said.

《Sui wants to eat it too!》Sui added.

My familiars made it sound like hauling the leviathan home was the most obvious thing in the world, but I had a funny feeling none of them were thinking about its *size*. It was in a completely different dimension than the other

monsters we'd fought, in terms of scale. It dwarfed an *island*, for crying out loud!

"Would that thing even fit in my Item Box?" I muttered skeptically. The Item Boxes granted to heroes—or, well, to people who had been summoned to this world—were supposed to be pretty darn big, but *that* big? I wasn't so sure. "Guess there's no harm in giving it a shot. Can you bring it over here, Gon?"

"Certainly!" Gon said, then flapped his massive wings and lugged the corpse toward me.

"Okay, now bring its head around to face me!"

Ugggh, gross! I thought as, with Gon's help, I attempted to shove the leviathan's barely attached head into my Item Box. And then, lo and behold...

"It fit."

"It certainly did!"

《All *right*! Leviathan meat's on the table for sure now!》

《Yippee!》

The entire massive leviathan had sort of *slid* its way into my Item Box, just like that. I was starting to feel a little terrified by the thought of how large my storage capacity apparently was.

"Very good. Now, let us make landfall!"

《Hell yeah!》

《Landfaaall!》

"Just a minute!" I shouted. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were all ready to head for the island, but *I* sure wasn't. "How exactly are you planning on 'making landfall' *there*, anyway?"

The "shore" in front of us wasn't so much a peaceful beach as it was a sheer rocky cliffside. There was nowhere to make landfall on in the first place.

"We will climb, of course," Fel said in a tone that made it clear he really *did* think that was obvious.

"You want us to climb up *there*?! That's not the sort of climb a normal human

can pull off!” I protested. *I sure as hell can’t manage it, and I’m not even the biggest problem this time.* “Look, we’ll talk about this, but only *after* everyone from Ark is awake again!”

“Oh, yes. Them.”

What, did you actually forget about the other party that’s traveling with us? I went over to the members of Ark, who were all still entirely unconscious, and started shaking their shoulders, calling out to each of them in turn.

“Gaudino! Gideon! Sigvard! Feodora! Wake up!” I said, but not even one of them moved a muscle or attempted to reply. “Huh. They’re really down for the count, I guess. Sorry about this...”

I resorted to giving them each a gentle slap on the cheek. That finally got a response, and the light of consciousness slowly returned to their eyes.

“Gah! What was I just doing...?” Gaudino muttered.

“I-It feels like I saw something completely unbelievable,” Gideon said.

“A-A leviathan! A *leviathan*!” Sigvard wailed.

“*Aaahhhhhh...*” Feodora quietly moaned.

Ark’s members were awake again, technically, but they were still ashen-faced and just as panicked as they’d been before they checked out.

“It’s okay, everyone! Calm down!” I said. The four of them turned to face me. “It’s over already! Nothing left to worry about, honestly.”

The expressions of Ark’s members took a turn for the incredulous.

“It’s *over*?” Gaudino said.

“Yup,” I replied.

“So, it’s dead?” Gideon asked.

“Right. We handled it.”

“You handled a godsdamned *leviathan*?” Sigvard said.

“Well, we had an ancient dragon on our side, so...”

“R-Really?” Feodora asked.

“Yes, really.”

That finally convinced them. Relief spread across their faces.

“So, long story short, we’re about to make landfall on that island over there. It’s supposed to be the end of the dungeon, so we’ll finally be able to go back to the surface.”

“We’re going home? Really...?”

“At long last...”

“Thank the gods we made it out alive...”

“The surface...”

“Right? Let’s get out of here!” I said. “And I think I know how we can get there. Can you carry all of us up onto that island, Gon?”

“Certainly!” Gon replied, then stooped down in front of us, bringing his back nearly down to sea level.

Fel jumped onto Gon’s back first. Dora-chan would be flying on his own, apparently, so Ark’s members and I crawled up his hind legs to get aboard next. Then, last of all...

“Okay, everyone’s on board! Come on up, Sui!”

《Okaaay!》

...Sui returned to its usual size and quickly climbed up to the rest of us.

“Okay, Gon, take it away!”

“Very well!”

Gon soared into the air, carrying us up above the island in what felt like a single bound. Its terrain was rocky and rugged, without any vegetation to speak of, but I could see what looked like the entrance to a cave right around its midpoint.

“That must be the place,” Gon said. He landed before the cave entrance, and we all climbed down from his back before he shrunk down once more.

“All right, let’s head in!” I said.

Our party made its way into the cave. It wasn't long before the passageway opened up into a small, dome-shaped room, at the center of which lay...

"A treasure chest," I muttered, then gulped, loudly. It was an undecorated wooden box, but it was also oddly wide and looked like no treasure chest I'd encountered so far. "Is it trapped?"

"I do not know, and I do not care to check. I will open it," Fel said. Before I could stop him, he dexterously unlatched the box with his forelimb and pushed it right open.

Fshhh!

And, just like that, a cloud of black gas surged from the box, engulfing Fel entirely.

"Whoa! Fel?!" I shouted.

"There is no cause for concern. It is poisonous gas, nothing more," Fel replied.

"I think poisonous gas is a pretty big cause for concern, actually!"

"My liege, poison has no effect upon him," Gon reminded me as I started to panic.

《Right? He's got a blessing, so he'll be fine. Same for me, not to mention *you*,》 Dora-chan added.

That helped me regain a little of my composure. *O-Oh, right, I forgot.* The visual spectacle of the poison cloud had freaked me out for a moment, but there was no way it had any chance of doing any serious harm to Fel.

《Master, look! It's full of shinies!》 said Sui, who'd paid no attention to my panic and instead moved up next to Fel to peer into the chest as the cloud dispersed.

"Looks like everything's fine after all," I said. "Should we take a look too?"

The members of Ark looked *slightly* horrified, but they nodded in agreement and followed after me.

"An unremarkable reward."

“Yes, agreed. Hardly a fitting prize for felling a leviathan.”

《Right? I mean, *another* box of nothing but gold? Come on!》

Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan were being as unreasonably judgmental as ever. I did have to admit, though, that when I looked into the chest myself, my first impression was that it *was* pretty heavy on the gold and light on everything else. There was more than just gold coins too—I could see a golden bracelet, golden rings, a golden crown, a golden goblet, and even more gold knickknacks packed into the chest from end to end. There were two exceptions, however: a distinctive two-pointed spear and what looked like a worn-out piece of fabric, both half buried in gold.

“Whoa...” Gaudino said with a gulp.

“God *damn*,” Gideon muttered.

“Never seen that much gold in my life before,” Sigvard remarked.

“It’s overflowing...” Feodora added.

Seeing the contents of the chest had all four of them trembling with shock.

“So, uhh, how ’bout we split it five ways?” I suggested.

“What are you *talking* about, Mukohda?! This is the reward for beating the leviathan, and that was all you! We had nothing to do with it, and we have no right to take any of this!” Gaudino protested. He seemed pretty flustered, which was a rarity for him, but on the other hand, Gideon, Sigvard, and Feodora were all nodding in vigorous agreement.

Huh. Is that really how it works? I already have more gold than I know what to do with, though—not to brag or anything—and I don’t have any use for the golden accessories and stuff other than selling them. It’d actually spare me a lot of trouble if they’d take some of it off my hands. Anyway, as for that spear and the fabric...

I decided to give the two unusual elements in the chest a surreptitious appraisal, starting with the spear.

【Magic Spear Bident】

A scarletite spear capable of slaying any foe in a single thrust when imbued with magic.

“Pfff!”

I choked on nothing. *What? Huh? Seriously?! I thought it was just swords! They make spears like this too?! Magic spears are a thing?!*

“Oh? A magic spear, is it? It has been some time since I last saw a magic weapon of this kind,” Fel said.

“A rare find indeed! This alone is a worthy prize in and of itself. You’d do well to wield it, my liege,” Gon added.

I really wish you two hadn’t said that! They’d said it out loud too, meaning that all of Ark’s members had heard every word of it. See? They’re gaping at us all over again!

“So, um...think you could use this, Gideon?” I asked, hopeful that I’d be able to shove the problem off on Ark’s resident spearman.

“Please don’t even *joke* about that, Mukohda,” Gideon replied, politely but firmly shutting that idea down straightaway.

I wasn’t kidding, though! This thing belongs in the hands of an actual expert, not some fair-weather spearman like me. I guess there’s no point trying to force the issue, though.

Next up, I appraised the piece of fabric.

【Magic Bag (Large)】

A magic bag with the carrying capacity of one hundred large nonmagical bags. Has no effect on the passage of time within.

Oh! I guess it was a magic bag, not some old rag. It was roughly bag-shaped, on closer inspection. It lacked any sort of strap, but that certainly wouldn’t make it unusable, and I figured it would be easy enough to add one later. That being said, I had my Item Box (which apparently still had free space even after

taking in a whole leviathan), and I also already owned several magic bags on top of it, so I figured there'd be no harm in letting Ark have that one.

I'll ask my familiars about it. Can't imagine they'll complain about giving it away, seeing as it's not meat. «Hey, guys,» I said telepathically, «looks like this is a magic bag! Would anyone mind if I offered it to Ark's people?»

It came as no surprise that my familiars couldn't have cared less. Fel replied with a disinterested «**Do as you will,**» and that was the end of that.

With my familiars' permission given, I held the bag out toward Ark's members. "So, looks like this is a magic bag! It's all yours, if you want it," I said.

The four of them stiffened up in an instant, then informed me that they could not, under any circumstances, accept something that valuable. I just didn't get it. I had more than enough carrying capacity to work with already, so I had no reason to want yet another bag for myself.

Well, we're scheduled to go back to Ronkainen together after this, so I guess I can bring it up with them again after we arrive. We should probably get moving now, though.

We exited the chamber with the chest in it and soon arrived in yet another dome-shaped room, this one with a magic circle scrawled on its floor. My familiars, the members of Ark, and I all stepped onto it.

"All right! Next stop: topside!" I said.

"This was an amusing dungeon indeed. Perhaps I shall return someday," Fel said casually.

"Huh? You have got to be kidding, Fel! Like hell am I ever setting foot in this stupid—"

Before I could finish putting Fel's idea down for good, a bright light began to spill from the magic circle and we were whisked away.



At long last, our party stepped out into the sunlit brilliance of the surface world once more.

"Ahh, *finally!*" I exclaimed. "Man, there's *nothing* like natural sunlight, I

swear!”

“Oh, how you exaggerate,” Fel grumbled.

“Not even a little! I think anyone would be relieved to see the real sun after going through a hellish dungeon like that one!”

“Was it truly so severe?” Gon asked.

《Nah, no way! It was fun, no ifs, ands, or buts about it!》Dora-chan said.

《Yeah! Sui had tons of fun!》Sui squealed.

Well, sure, it was probably fun for you four. You guys got to have your fill of dungeon crawling, after all. We, on the other hand...

“We’re alive. We actually made it back alive...”

“We really did. I can’t believe it, but we got out of there in one piece. And thank the gods for that...”

“Never heard of a dungeon like that before, and I hope I never do again.”

“It’s a wonderful thing to be alive.”

Ark’s members—all of whom, again, were veteran adventurers—were moved to tears by the sheer joy of being back on the surface, alive and well. I knew exactly how they felt. Like, I *really* got them.

That dungeon had been too cruel for humankind, plain and simple. We’d only made it through thanks to Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui. We would’ve been toast without them, and any ordinary party of adventurers would have found themselves up against an impassable roadblock practically the moment they stepped inside. Getting through the absurdly huge marshland of the first floor alone would take a ridiculous amount of time and effort, and it was terrifyingly easy to imagine someone carelessly advancing past the point they could actually get back from and winding up stuck.

Even if a party did luck out and make it past the first floor, they’d still have the *second* floor waiting for them, and *that* was even worse. The sort of despair an adventurer would feel after finally conquering the first floor only to be greeted by an ocean seemed liable to drive them to crazed, cackling madness.

In short, unless some party out there had members as tough as the gluttonous quartet, I couldn't see how anyone else would have even the slightest chance of making it through this dungeon. "Savage" felt like the only word that could do it justice...but anyway, all that could wait until some other time.

"Let's head back to Ronkainen, okay?" I suggested. The members of Ark needed no convincing, and while my familiars looked a little sad to say goodbye to the dungeon, I was so ready to get the hell out of there as fast as possible that their wistful gazes didn't affect me one bit.

And so we climbed aboard Gon's back and set off, making our way back to Ronkainen in the same way we'd traveled to the dungeon in the first place.



The trip to Ronkainen went by without a hitch, and Gon touched down in the same region outside the city where we'd taken off from before. The one change was that when we climbed off his back this time around, Gideon and Sigvard were totally calm and composed. In Gideon's words, "Just about everything we found in that dungeon was way scarier than flying could ever be." Sigvard expressed a similar sentiment, telling me that "After all the nightmares I saw down there, something like *this* couldn't make me bat an eyelash." Both of them looked, in a word, traumatized.

"Well, should we head into town?" I suggested.

"It matters not to me, so long as we eat before embarking upon any other task," Fel said.

"Indeed! I'm famished," Gon agreed.

《Tell me about it,》 Dora-chan grouched.

《Sui's super hungry too!》 Sui added.

"Oh, is it that late already? In that case, I guess we should head straight back to the house we rented... Oh, wait, I forgot that I gave back the keys before leaving for the dungeon. Renting another place seems like it'd be a pain, though..." *Especially considering I've already finished everything I wanted to do in that city.*

“Oh? Then why not have our meal here and now?”

“That’s actually not a bad idea, Fel. And once we’re finished eating, we can head home to Karelina right away. Yeah, I like this plan! Let’s do it!”

My half of the party was in agreement, but the *other* half had something to say about our plan of action.

“What? No, no way! That’s not an option, Mukohda!” Gideon said. “You can’t leave before you report to the Adventurer’s guild and tell them about the dungeon! Right, boss?”

“Right,” Gaudino said. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“But, wait, that dungeon’s not even in this country!” I protested. “I have to tell the Ronkainen branch about it, even though it’s not under their jurisdiction?”

“Yes, you do,” Gaudino said.

According to him, any adventurer who discovered a new dungeon was obligated by guild charter to report back about it. That said, this dungeon was located within the cluster of small nations across the border, and the mercenaries operating in the area apparently knew it was there, so calling it *completely* undiscovered was a bit of a stretch. In fact, Gaudino speculated that the guild was likely already aware of its existence and just hadn’t made a move on it on account of the Mercenary’s guild having the greater authority in the region. Still, the fact that we’d *cleared* the dungeon meant that we were absolutely obligated to tell the guild.

My shoulders slumped as I listened to Gaudino’s explanation. *Ugh. I guess I’m gonna have to rent a place in Ronkainen again after all, huh?* Having to make a report would be a real nuisance, and I wanted nothing more than to blow it off and go home to Karelina without saying a word to the guild. We’d cleared dungeons in Dolan, Aveling, and Brix before, and all three times when I’d gone in to report our success, the conversation had turned into an exhausting and time-consuming interrogation. Worse still, they’d expected answers as detailed as I could possibly make them.

I’d really had no choice but to report about the dungeons I’d cleared before

since they'd all been located in dungeon cities. This time, however, it had not only not been in a city but had also been across a border in a region where nobody even lived. I'd thought that I'd finally be spared the hassle this time around...but I knew that Gideon was right, and clearing the dungeon meant I didn't have any excuses that could get me out of it.

Oh...but, wait a minute. It's not like we cleared the dungeon on our own, did we? Ark was right there with us the whole time!

"Hey, Gaudino," I said. "About that report...does it, you know, have to come from *me* specifically?"

"What do you mean?" Gaudino asked.

"Well, the thought occurred to me that you guys cleared the dungeon just as much as we did, that's all."

"Oh. I guess we technically did, when you put it that way."

"Right?! So the thing is, I was kinda hoping that you and your party would be willing to handle that whole report for us..."

Gaudino paused for a moment to think through my proposal. And, ultimately...

"All right. We can do that," he said.

"Really?! Thank you so much! Oh, and in that case," I said, then started bringing out the sea serpent drops I'd been holding on to for Ark and shoving them into the magic bag that we'd found in the treasure chest from before. "I'll put all your drops into the bag, and you can keep it as fair trade for taking care of the report! Hopefully you'll get some use out of it!"

"Are you kidding me?!" Gaudino said. "That's an *insane* reward for handling a dungeon report!"

"Oh, but I *insist*!"

"That's not how this works, Mukohda!"

"Oh, but it *is*, Gaudino!"

Our back-and-forth went on for some time past that point, but in the end, I

managed to convince—or rather, strong-arm—Gaudino into accepting the magic bag.

“All right, then. I’m sure we’ll see you again sometime!” Gaudino said.

“Been great working with you, Mukohda!” Gideon called out.

“Split a bottle of your good stuff with me again sometime, eh?” Sigvard said.

“And your food too,” Feodora added.

With those final shouts, the four adventurers set off on their way back to Ronkainen.

“Sounds good! I’ll have plenty of good food and drink waiting for you next time we meet, so be sure to come visit me in Karelina sometime!” I shouted, waving as they strode off into the distance.

“And so, we part ways,” Fel said.

“Yeah, looks like.”

“And now, we eat.”

“Oh, for the... Couldn’t you have waited at least, I dunno, a *minute*, Fel? I was having a moment!”

“Your moment can wait until my hunger is sated.”

“I have to say, my liege, I *am* famished as well.”

《Hard same.》

《Sui too!》

“There you have it. All of us are hungry, so prepare a meal at once.”

“Okay, okay, I get it!”

At my familiars’ incessant urging, I pulled some premade steak sandwiches out of my Item Box. We enjoyed a hearty, filling meal, then finally set off ourselves, making our way back toward Karelina.

Gossip: The Stairway to Hell

The A-ranked adventuring party Ark made their way into the Ronkainen branch of the Adventurer's guild. They'd made a name for themselves in the region as of late, and the other adventurers present in the guild cleared a path as they stepped up to the counter, their exhaustion plain to see upon their faces.

"A-ranked party Ark, reporting in," said Gaudino, the group's leader. "Sorry for the hassle, but could you call the guildmaster over? We need to talk."

"Of course," said the receptionist, who recognized the party immediately and set out to find the guildmaster.

"Course, whether or not he'll *believe* the story's a whole different question," Gideon muttered tiredly under his breath.

"Doesn't matter one way or the other for us. We just have to tell him what we saw, and that'll be the end of it," Sigvard said. He was usually the party's heartiest member, but even he sounded haggard and worn out.

"Sigvard's right. We're here to report what we saw and experienced down there, and nothing more. Oh—and also that Mukohda and his familiars were there with us. Hopefully that'll make us sound at least a little more credible," Gaudino quietly replied. He'd endured more anxiety than anyone over the course of Ark's recent endeavor, and you could hear it in his voice.

"The guild already knows that we're acquainted with him," Feodora noted. Normally, she would have made for the dining hall the instant she set foot in the guild. On any other day, her appetite would've won out above all else, but her expression was deeply colored by fatigue as well, and this time, she refrained.

While Ark's members chatted with one another, the guildmaster, Orson, stepped into the room. "Well, if it isn't the good people of Ark!" he said. "I'm told you have something to speak with me about?"

“That’s right,” Gaudino said.

“Well then, right this way,” Orson said, noting how bedraggled Ark’s members looked as he led them into his office.



The air in the guildmaster’s office was heavy. Orson sat in an elegant, curved-legged chair, with Gaudino and Sigvard sitting in similar chairs opposite from him. Gideon and Feodora were sitting beside them in simpler wooden chairs that the guild’s staff had hauled in for them. The staff had also brought tea, which everyone present sipped in a moment of calm and silence before Orson kicked off the conversation.

“So then,” he said. “What did you want to talk with me about?”

Ark’s members paused, unsure of where to start. Eventually, Gaudino stepped up as their leader and began to explain, his tone grave.

“We’ve cleared a dungeon located in the border states,” he said.

“You’ve... *Huh?*” Orson grunted with less dignity than he would’ve preferred to present. He was simply too taken aback by the sudden claim to help himself.

“I imagine you were already aware that there’s a dungeon in the wilds to the northwest of this city, across the border?” Gaudino asked.

Orson plumbed the depths of his memory. Finally, he managed to grasp something: a conversation he’d had only in passing about a dungeon that fit that description, all the way back when he’d first assumed his position as the head of the branch.

“That does ring a bell, yes,” Orson said. “I was under the impression that it was mostly untouched, given where it’s located.”

“That’s the one, and you’re right about it being almost untouched. We managed to clear it, though, and this should be enough to prove it,” Gaudino said before bringing out the magic bag he’d received from Mukohda and presenting a number of the drops they’d obtained in the dungeon, while Feodora supplemented the haul with drops she’d been keeping in her Item Box. They brought out a red-tailed caiman skin, a blue otter pelt, neon budgie

feathers, a cetus skin, and their party's greatest spoils from the whole venture (excepting the magic bag itself): a sea serpent's fangs and magic stone.

Orson found himself unable to hide his shock as Gaudino and Feodora produced item after item. "G-Goodness!" he exclaimed.

Each and every one of the items they'd presented was precious and valuable in its own right. Moreover, they were items that would normally be impossible to acquire anywhere near Ronkainen...and yet there they were, right in front of him, with more to be found in the dungeon they came from. It might have been located across a border, but it was by no means unreachable from Ronkainen.

In the best case, Orson knew this could mean that his city had just found a new source of high-quality materials. Images of how his branch could expand and develop thanks to this newfound windfall flashed through his mind, and he began growing more and more excited...but the faces of Ark's members, in contrast, were grim. They knew painfully well that it wouldn't be as simple, or as pleasant, as Orson was hoping.

"If materials like these can be gathered in that dungeon, we need to issue an announcement about it at once!" Orson exclaimed.

"Just a minute," Gaudino said, raising a hand to quell Orson's excitement. "Yes, that dungeon's full of monsters that drop valuable items. Even knowing that, though, there's no chance in hell that I'll ever be setting foot in that place again."

"I'm with the boss on that," Gideon said. "Doesn't matter how profitable a dungeon is if you don't live to come back and spend the spoils."

"I can't imagine us goin' through that pit and coming back alive and well," Sigvard added.

"We'd just die," Feodora concluded.

Those words carried great weight coming from a party of A-ranked adventurers. Orson stiffened up as the fact that he wasn't in for the windfall he'd been hoping for sank in.

"The fact of the matter is that we were only able to clear the dungeon at all because Mukohda was there with us," Gaudino explained. His party members

noded in agreement.

“Mukohda the S-ranker, yes?” Orson said. “Come to think of it, I do remember hearing that you were friends of his.”

“Right. That’s how we ended up going into the dungeon with him, and I can say for a fact that if we’d tried it on our own, we wouldn’t have lived to tell the tale.”

With that preamble out of the way, Ark’s members began to describe the dungeon. They told Orson about the nature of its floors, the monsters they’d encountered, and how they’d dealt with its various challenges, sparing no details.

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Orson let out a long, heavy sigh. “A vast marshland followed by a boundless ocean? Really?” he groaned.

“An S-ranked adventurer *might* stand a chance of getting through the first floor, though it’d take an age for them to do it,” Gaudino said. “But then they’d hit the second floor and run straight into the ocean. You’d need a ship capable of sailing the high seas to get through there, no two ways about it.”

“And even if you managed to pull that off, the floor’s still lousy with monsters. Most likely, you’d be shipwrecked before you knew it,” Gideon added.

“Hah! If you’re lucky,” Sigvard said. “More likely, you’d take one look at that ocean and pass out from shock. And your only choices are carrying on in spite of everything, or turning ’round and heading back to the surface, which means going all the way back through that damn first floor swamp. You’d be in for a literal hell, whether you go forward or back.”

“Guess we do have a real stairway to hell on our hands, when you put it that way! Ha ha ha!” Gideon chuckled.

“That’s too true for me to laugh about it,” Sigvard said with a scowl.

“Calling it hell is no exaggeration. An average adventurer stands no chance in

that dungeon. They'd die for nothing," Feodora added. There was a sense of urgency in her tone that was very rare for her.

"If I'm gonna be completely honest, I think that Mukohda's gang might just be the only party out there that stands a chance in that place. Well, unless there's some other adventurer running around with a Fenrir and an ancient dragon at their beck and call, or some familiar that's at least as strong as those," Gaudino said with a sigh. Once again, his whole party nodded in agreement.

"How else would you deal with the likes of charybdises and leviathans?"

"You're forgetting 'bout the assassin jaguars on the first floor, Gideon. Most parties would be brought down then and there."

"Sigvard's right. They'd die before they reached the ocean," Feodora pointed out.

"Right...?" Sigvard and Gideon sighed in unison.

Meanwhile, Orson's eye had taken on a noticeable twitch. Most of the monster names Ark's members had been throwing around were the stuff of fairy tales. "A-Are you really telling me that you saw a charybdis and a leviathan?" he asked.

"I mean, I understand why you'd feel the need to question that, but it really is true," Gaudino said.

"What would we even get out of lying about it?" Gideon added.

"Goes without saying that Mukohda and his crew were the ones that beat 'em, of course," Sigvard noted.

"They got the drops too," Feodora concluded.

"I-I see," Orson said.

"If you need to verify any of this, Mukohda said he'd be heading back to Karelina, where he lives. Why not ask the guild over there to handle the confirmation?" Gaudino suggested.

"I'll do just that," Orson replied.

"While we're on the subject, I should note that I'm telling you about all of this

out of obligation,” Gaudino continued. “If you want my personal opinion, I don’t think that any information about that dungeon should be publicized.”

“Same,” Gideon said.

“Agreed,” Sigvard added.

“Me too.” And Feodora made it unanimous.

Having experienced the dungeon, Ark’s members were of one mind when it came to the idea of sending any other hapless adventurers into it.

“Though of course, that’s the guild’s call to make,” Gaudino said. “Can’t imagine one party’s opinion is going to do much to change their minds. If you do put word out about that dungeon, though, you’d better be ready for none of the parties who try to explore it to ever come back again.”

With those parting words, Gaudino and his party members left the room, then departed from the Adventurer’s guild as well. As they walked away, Gideon struck up a conversation. “Think they’ll release the info anyway?” he asked.

“Hard to say,” Gaudino said. “We did what we could to stop them, at the very least.”

“True. It’s out of our hands now,” Sigvard stated.

“That leviathan at the end, though? Nearly scared the life outta me, I swear. I hate to admit it, but I passed out on the spot,” Gideon said.

“Same,” Gaudino agreed.

“That makes three of us. Never thought a leviathan would be *that* big,” Sigvard added.

“I passed out too...but I don’t think anyone would blame us for that,” Feodora said.

The party glanced at each other and exchanged understanding nods.

“Y’know, for a while there, I was actually thinking that it might be fun to stick with Mukohda for a little longer. Felt like we’d reap some serious profits, at least,” Gideon said.

“I can’t say I didn’t have the same thought,” Gaudino admitted.

“Me as well,” Sigvard said.

“And me. We’d get to keep eating great food, above all else,” Feodora noted.

“But boy, did I ever give up on *that* idea the moment I saw the leviathan,” Gideon continued.

“Again, me as well,” Sigvard said. “Doesn’t matter how much we might profit; if sticking with him means taking on beasts like *that*, I’ll take what we have now any day of the week.”

“And I don’t think the Fenrir or the ancient dragon would save us if we ended up in danger,” Feodora added.

“It really didn’t seem like those two care about anyone other than Mukohda. Felt like they saw us as insects, at most,” Gaudino said.

His insight, in this case, was right on the mark. When all was said and done, Fel and Gon had no interest in any humans other than Mukohda.

“Guess we’re back to scraping and saving like we always have, then. Can’t complain. Feels like this is just the way to do it,” Gideon said.

“Certainly suits us the best,” Sigvard agreed.

“It’s hard to give up all that good food, but nothing beats staying safe. I’d never see my grandchild again if I died, so I can’t let that happen,” Feodora added.

“Heh! Yeah... True enough,” Gaudino finished.

Just a few days later, the Adventurer’s guild formally decided to refrain from publicizing the existence of the dungeon across the border.

Chapter 8: A Grumpy Guildmaster

«I just really don't think this is going to work, okay?»

«**Hmph! How could you know that before even asking?**»

«I mean, isn't it obvious? They turned us down when we brought in an earth dragon, remember?»

«**Grrr...**» Fel growled, scowling distastefully as he remembered the earth dragon incident.

«I think the only person we could take this to who'd actually do it would be Elrand... And, I mean, I'd rather not,» I said. Elrand was the world's biggest dragon lover and would almost certainly be ecstatic to tackle the project we were trying to get done, but that would involve *talking* to him, and *that*, I wasn't so enthusiastic about.

«**Elrand? That would be the obnoxious elf, would it not?**» Fel said.

The instant the words left his mouth, Gon and Dora-chan both grimaced.

«I would greatly prefer that you not inflict his presence on us, my liege. I find that elf deeply unsettling,» Gon said.

«Yeah, that gets a solid *hell* no from me. Vetoed!» Dora-chan agreed. Their reaction was no real surprise, considering how our party's dragons had historically borne the brunt of Elrand's eccentricity.

«Well, if Elrand's not an option, then I think it's gonna have to sit in my Item Box for the time being,» I said.

We were talking telepathically as we strolled through the city streets. We'd made it back to Karelina the day before, just barely getting into town before the gates closed for the evening thanks to Gon's remarkable mobility. We were exhausted from the trip (well, I was, anyway), so I decided to simply tell everyone at home we were back, feed the gluttonous quartet their dinner, take a bath, and then go straight to bed, in an *actual* bed. It felt like heaven after so

many days on the road, and I was out like a light within seconds of lying down.

I fed my familiars breakfast and spent some time taking it easy the next morning, then decided to pay a visit to the local Adventurer's guild. I was supposed to let them know I was back, technically, but it wasn't like it was a huge priority in my mind, and I briefly considered waiting until the afternoon...but then my familiars started kicking up a fuss about the leviathan, and I got hassled into heading over there right away. That's how we'd ended up on the subject of whether the guild would be able to process the dungeon's boss in the first place.

《Are you saying, my liege, that we will be unable to eat the leviathan?》Gon asked.

《Not until we can get it butchered, anyway,》I replied.

《Are you kidding me?! I was so hyped to try that thing!》Dora-chan groaned.

《Sui really wanted to eat the leviathan too!》Sui whined.

《I know, I know, but what am I supposed to do about it?》I said.

《W-Well, you should inquire about the matter, to start! Perhaps they will be capable of fulfilling our needs after all.》

《I mean, I'll *talk* to them, sure. Just don't get your hopes up.》

It wasn't long before we arrived at the now very familiar Karelina Adventurer's guild. I stepped inside, my familiars following right behind me...

"Well, well. You're *finally* here."

...and was immediately greeted by Willem the Guildmaster, who was standing in wait right by the entrance, arms crossed and stance as imposing as could be.

"H-Hey. What's wrong?" I asked.

"As if you don't know! Follow me!" the guildmaster shouted, a vein bulging conspicuously in his forehead. I caved under the pressure instantly and followed along in silence as he led me to the good old guild warehouse, where Johan was hard at work.

"What the *hell* have you done this time?!" Willem bellowed the moment we

stepped inside.

“U-Umm,” I stammered. There were, unfortunately, any number of things he could have been talking about.

“You said you were going to Ronkainen, didn’t you?” Willem continued.

Eep. “W-Well, yeah,” I said. I-I mean, I did go to Ronkainen too! That definitely happened!

“Well then, care to explain the dozens of reports I’ve received about a black dragon flying off toward the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov? *Hmm?*”

Well, y’know, I did say I’d be going to Ronkainen “plus a few other places!”

“Do you know how many towns were thrown into a panic because of that?! I’ve had a *mountain* of complaints and inquiries to deal with!”

O-Okay, that’s my bad...

“Oh, and then there was the bit where a *Fenrir* and an *ancient dragon* just *happened* to level the Church of Rubanov’s main temple,” Willem added.

“O-O-Oh, really?” I said as a puddle of cold sweat began to form beneath me.

“Yes, really, and we both know damn well that was you! Who else would be running around raising hell with a Fenrir and an ancient dragon?! Bit of a giveaway, wouldn’t you say?!”

《Hey, wait a minute! I was there too!》

《Yeah! And Sui helped!》

Dora-chan, Sui, I know that the guildmaster can’t hear you, but please be quiet anyway, okay?

“Well, umm, the thing is, there, uhh... I mean, there *might* be someone else with a party like mine, right?” I said out of pure desperation.

If looks could kill, Willem would have stricken me dead on the spot. “No! No, there *isn’t*!” he snapped.

I felt myself flinch away from the guildmaster involuntarily. Fel and Gon, meanwhile—the actual culprits—were acting like they had nothing to do with any of this, as usual. *Quit scratching your head, Fel! And don’t yawn, Gon! I*

thought as I shot them a glare of bitter resentment.

“Now, look,” Willem said, “I know as well as anyone that the Church of Rubanov had it coming. Serves the bastards right, as far as I’m concerned. You won’t hear any complaints from me on that front.”

Phew!

“*But*, care to explain why the Ronkainen Adventurer’s guild sent me an inquiry asking for confirmation that you cleared a dungeon in the border nations?”

They whaaaaaat?! Excuse me, Ark! You were supposed to explain all that business away for me, weren’t you?! I think that was very clearly implied when we talked this through, wasn’t it?! What exactly did you tell them, Gaudino?!

“It’s time for you to explain yourself, Mukohda—and don’t even *think* about leaving out even a single detail!”

“O-Okaaaaaay!”



By the time I finished my story, Willem looked so tired you’d think he hadn’t slept a wink in days. Johan, who Willem had told to listen in as well, didn’t look much better. I was afraid they might crumble to ash if I breathed too hard in their direction.

“What is *wrong* with you and your familiars?” Willem muttered.

“Hey, *I’m* not the problem here! I tried to stop them, but there’s just no reasoning with them sometimes!”

“What are you *talking* about?! They’re your familiars, aren’t they?!”

“Well, yes, but it’s not that easy! You have no idea how much those four love dungeons.” *This is the one area where nothing I can say could ever possibly dissuade them.*

《I mean, ’course we do! Dungeons rule!》

《They’re sooo much fun!》

Yup. Pretty clear that if Dora-chan and Sui get their way, we’ll be going into even more of them from now on.

“What issue could there be with us exploring dungeons? I do not believe we have caused *you* harm in doing so,” Fel said.

“Indeed! Far from it, in fact. You will profit greatly from the materials we bring to you, will you not?” Gon spoke up as well.

“That’s not—well, I suppose that *is* true, yes,” Willem admitted. “It’s just that when you pull stunts like this, it stirs the pot in all sorts of ways that are hard to follow up on.”

I could certainly imagine that it was hard for the guild to clean up after our exploits, but I also couldn’t see myself managing to curb my familiars’ dungeon obsession anytime soon. *In fact, I’d say I’m the one who has the hardest time because of it!*

“Oh, speaking of, are you interested in buying the drops we got this time?” I asked.

“That depends on what you found. Let’s have a look,” Willem said.

“Sure. One sec...”

I hadn’t had time to sort through all of my acquisitions yet, so for the time being I just pulled everything out in the order we’d obtained it—minus the meat, of course. I also omitted the potentially dangerous stuff like the charybdis’s treasure chest (on account of the tiara it contained that featured way too many pearls for a world where pearls were way too valuable), the Philosopher’s Stone, and the Bident.

The first items to come out were a ton of red-tailed caiman skins and fangs. The emperor dorado’s magic stone came next, as well as the golden scales, emerald, and ruby we’d found in the treasure chest it dropped. Then I brought out the green hunter anaconda skin, a bunch of killer termite mandibles, the white opals I’d found in the killer termites’ nest, a ton of big bite turtle and giant bite turtle shells, and finally the pelts and magic stones from the assassin jaguars, plus a bunch of other random assorted knickknacks I’d snagged along the way.

“All right! That’s everything from the first floor,” I said.

“From *the first floor?!* ” Willem and Johan—who’d finally recovered enough

from his shock to rejoin the conversation—exclaimed in unison.

“You mean this isn’t even all of it?” Willem muttered. He seemed downright dazed, and Johan’s jaw was hanging wide open.

“This is about half of it all, yeah. Oh, there was a bunch of meat too, but we’ll be eating all of that ourselves,” I explained. Also, technically speaking, the loot I had shown them so far was half of what we’d picked up only in terms of quantity, not volume. We’d gotten a *lot* of big drops on the second floor, after all. “Okay, I’ll bring out the rest of it now.”

The first of the second-floor drops I brought out was a cetus skin. Just thinking about how creepy those things had been made me want to never touch their skins ever again, but there wasn’t much of a way around that. The other major drops I presented were the teeth and gargantuan magic stone from the charybdis, the teeth and reasonably huge magic stone from the giant shark, the gem-studded mithril short sword and ten diamonds that my familiars had obtained from a chest in that one cave, and a bunch of shark and sea serpent skins, plus some sea serpent fangs.

“Enough,” Willem said.

“Huh?” I grunted.

“I said that’s enough! Are you *trying* to bury our whole storehouse in monster drops?!”

“No, but— I mean— *You’re* the one who asked me to show them to you, weren’t you?”

“I was assuming you’d have *common sense* about it! There are *limits* to this sort of thing!”

“But I still have so much more stuff,” I muttered. I hadn’t even gotten to the kraken and aspidochelone’s magic stones, or the murderous sea turtles’ shells, and that was only the start of it.

“Well, there’s no point bringing any of it out, because we can’t buy it all! I’m half convinced you’re trying to bankrupt this guild,” Willem grumbled. That really wasn’t my intention, for the record. I just didn’t have any need for the drops and would’ve been happy to have them taken off my hands. “As for the

ones we actually *want*...”

In the end, Willem agreed to buy the red-tailed caiman skins and fangs, the emperor dorado’s magic stone, the killer termite mandibles, the big bite turtle and giant bite turtle shells, the cetus skins, the giant shark teeth, the sharkskins, and one third of the sea serpent fangs and skins. In Willem’s words, “I don’t know if this is your influence at work or if it’s just a coincidence, but ever since you showed up, we’ve had a lot of up-and-coming adventurers climbing the ranks in our guild all of a sudden. That’s meant a steep rise in demand for materials to make weapons and armor out of,” apparently.

“All right! It’ll take about three days for us to get the funds prepared for the purchase,” he told me when we were finally done.

“Understood. I’ll be back in three days to pick that up, then,” I said. I figured that would be the end of our exchange with the guildmaster, but before I could say my goodbyes, Fel nudged me. “What?”

“Are you not going to ask him about *that*?”

“About what?”

“About the leviathan! Surely you have not forgotten?”

“Oh, right. So, uhh,” I began, turning back around to face Willem and Johan...who I found petrified, the looks on their faces as strained as I’d ever seen them.

“Y-You aren’t about to ask if you can sell a leviathan corpse. *Surely*,” Willem said, beating me to the punch.

“N-No, I sort of figured that wasn’t happening,” I admitted. *No, I’m after something slightly different...*

“What’re you looking at me for?!” Johan yelled. “No, I can’t butcher a leviathan! You’d have to be crazy to think I could!”

Yeaah, figures. “You heard the man, guys. No can do,” I said to the gluttonous quartet, much to their dismay.

“But leviathans are such delicacies...”

“How could we accept not getting to eat it...?”

“You were going to *eat* it?!” Willem and Johan shouted, once again in perfect sync.

“Well, uhh, they’re supposed to taste really good! Fel and Gon have been insisting on it, anyway,” I explained.

The two guild employees both sighed. “Anyway,” Willem said, “this would *definitely* be the right time for you to send some sort of gift to the king, don’t you think?”

Willem explained to me that the odds were extremely high that the Holy Kingdom of Rubanov would lodge a formal complaint with the Kingdom of Leonhardt over the destruction of their temple. The chances of the king taking them seriously were minuscule, considering his low opinion of the Church, but it would certainly prove to be a major hassle for him. As such, now would be the perfect time for me to hedge my bets and send a gift in advance.

I guess that does make a lot of sense, actually. Hopefully he’ll interpret me sending him a gift now as a thank-you for dealing with the fallout of that whole affair.

“When you put it that way, this really *does* feel like a good moment for it. Can you take care of delivering something for me?” I asked.

“Well, I’ll go if you want me to,” Willem said, “but if your goal’s to smooth things over, don’t you think that getting an audience with the king yourself for once would be the better way to do it?”

“Seriously...?” *I really don’t want to meet with any bigwigs!*

“Think about it this way: would you prefer to get a message like this from a third party, or hear it straight from the horse’s mouth?”

I mean, fair enough... And I guess meeting with him at least once should hopefully make these things easier in the future?

“Oh, and then there’s the leviathan issue. If you pay a visit to the Adventurer’s guild branch in the capital, there’s at least a chance that they might be able to butcher the thing for you,” Willem added.

“Very well, then. We shall make for the capital.”

“Indeed! We are capital-bound!”

《The capital it is!》

《Capitaaal!》

“Oh, come *on*, you guys!” I groaned.

“For the time being, you should just plan on coming back here three days from now. You can think it over and figure out what you want to do until then,” Willem said.

“I’ll do that, thanks,” I replied.

I could tell that this was already a done deal in my familiars’ minds, and I knew that there was a lot of sound logic in what the guildmaster had told me, as well. It seemed there’d be no escaping a trip to the capital this time.

Ugggh... I still just can’t stand meeting bigwigs, though.



I let out a drawn-out yawn as I settled into my chair in the living room.

Ahh, there’s nothing better than whiling away the hours doing nothing whatsoever! Oh, blissful indulgence!

It was a day off, and I was making the most of my first period of peace and quiet in what felt like a very long time. The day before, I’d gone to the Adventurer’s guild in the morning, then thrown a banquet for my *employees* back home as thanks for watching over the house while I was out.

The main course: karaage, at the gluttonous quartet’s request. Part of me had wanted to demand that they explain why they liked the stuff *that* much, but on the other hand, it paired wonderfully with alcohol and was a favorite of the kids as well. That made it more or less the perfect banquet food, and I’d acquiesced without much protest.

And so, I’d cooked a truckton of karaage made from big bite turtle meat and sea serpent meat that I’d obtained during our recent dungeon venture. Needless to say, I also brought out plenty of beer and whiskey for the adults to enjoy. Aija and Theresa contributed their own dishes to the event as well, and in the end, the banquet turned into quite a lavish affair.

Of course, when everyone learned that the karaage was made from a turtle monster, they got a little freaked out, but they came around quickly enough after giving it a try and realizing just how umami-rich the meat really was. They ended up wolfing it down so enthusiastically, it was hard to believe they'd been apprehensive in the first place.

Sea serpent, on the other hand, was apparently well-known for being a top-class delicacy. The former adventurers kicked up a fuss about how absurd it was to serve something like that to slaves, but I countered by explaining that I had more of the stuff than I knew what to do with, and they eventually gave up and ate...though not without throwing in a few sighs and comments along the lines of "Only you, Mukohda."

Come on, guys, rude! I know perfectly well when something crosses the line into inedible territory; I just don't bring that stuff out in the first place!

To make a long story short, it ended up being a nice, peaceful dinner party all around. I asked about how things had gone while I was away and learned that generally speaking, there hadn't been any huge issues. There was one slight problem, however, relating to the merchandise we were selling to Lambert's shop.

The stock that I'd left behind had proved to be sufficient, it seemed, but my workers had found themselves short on hands when it came to actually transporting that stock to Lambert's store. They'd had to dedicate so much time to it that their work around the house had started to fall behind, but in the end, Kosti had made contact with Lambert and negotiated a deal that got them the help they needed. *Nice work, Kosti!*

That small hiccup aside, everything seemed to be going swimmingly, and the banquet drew to a close without incident...though apparently, a few of the adults actually stayed up well into the night after I made my exit, drinking the hours away and having a ball.

I yawned once more as I thought through everything I'd learned. *Maybe I really do need some more employees around after all?* I'd asked Bruno, the construction worker who'd helped expand my bathroom, to look into building more houses on my property for that purpose. The one problem was that his

schedule was packed, and it would be a little while longer before construction could begin. *I guess I can't exactly bring in anyone new if I don't have somewhere for them to live, so I'll have to put that idea on hold for the time being. As for today...*

"I think I'll go pay Lambert a visit."

"Hm? You will be going to his store, then? I shall accompany you," Fel said.

"Then I'll come along as well, my liege! I've nothing better to do, after all," Gon said.

《I'm in too, then!》 Dora-chan piped up.

《Sui'll go too!》 Sui squealed.

All four of them seemed eager as could be to come along...and I could tell from the look in their eyes that they were up to something.

"Let me guess: you're hoping to talk me into stopping by the food stalls on the way, aren't you?" I probed. Fel, Gon, and Dora-chan all looked away guiltily, though Sui at least responded with an honest 《Sui'll eat tons of food!》 and a happy bounce. I heaved a sigh, but honestly, it was nothing new at this point and I got over it pretty quickly. "Okay, then. Let's head on out!"

And so my familiars and I set out for Lambert's shop.



Luckily enough, when I arrived at Lambert's place, he and his wife Marie just happened to be standing outside and were quick to greet us.

"My, Mister Mukohda! You've finally returned! Please, come in, come in!" Marie said with a broad smile as she ushered me inside—and by ushered I mean pushed, and with surprising strength at that. I was so bewildered that I just went along with it, much to Lambert's amusement, and I soon found myself in the back of the shop.

I'd been in the back room so many times now that I'd grown quite familiar with it. I sat down on one side of the table, while Lambert and Marie seated themselves across from me. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui, by the way, were waiting for me outside.

“The soap and shampoo that you’ve been kind enough to provide to us has been selling like nothing else! The word of mouth about them has been unbelievable, really!” Marie said, still grinning as brightly as could be. The throngs of women who’d been browsing the store as I passed through told me that she really wasn’t exaggerating. “And while we’re on the topic, there’s a small favor I was hoping to ask of you...”

“If it’s increasing the size of your orders, then sorry, but we’re already giving you everything we can possibly manage,” I said. I could more or less imagine what she was going to ask me for and headed her off before she could broach the subject. We just didn’t have the staff to provide them with any more merchandise, and I wasn’t about to start running my estate like some sort of sweatshop.

“Oh, no, that’s not it at all!” Marie said. “Though of course, we’d be more than happy to increase the size of our orders once you’ve raised your capacity.”

Huh! I guess that means that Marie’s already been filled in about Kosti’s negotiations, then.

“What I was actually hoping to speak with you about...” Marie said, laying her hand on a small, intricately decorated box that was sitting on the table. I’d been rather curious about it from the moment I sat down. “...is this!”

Marie opened up the box, pulling out a rather familiar-looking bottle.

“Is that...?”

“It is indeed: the facial cream that you gave to me some time ago!” Marie proclaimed, her smile broader and the light in her eyes brighter than ever before, to an almost distressing extent. “I’ve never seen such a wonderful product! I’ve been applying it every morning after I wash my face, like you told me to, and...well, just look at me!” she said, pressing a hand to her cheek out of sheer delight.

Lambert, meanwhile, was shaking his head off to the side. He looked resigned, somehow.

“I haven’t had a complexion like *this* since I was in my teens! In fact, I think my skin may be even smoother than it was back then! All those little wrinkles that

bothered me so have vanished like they were never there to begin with, as well! I don't think I can live without this cream anymore!" Marie gushed.

I felt a little weird about inspecting another man's wife, but I had to admit, her skin *did* look notably nicer than it had the last time we'd met.

"And so, in short, I am asking—no, *begging* you to allow me to sell this cream in our store!" Marie concluded.

Ugh! M-Marie, I hope you know how much pressure the look you're giving me right now is exuding! It's telling me that you're not going to let this chance slip past you, come hell or high water!

"Please consider that a request from me as well, Mukohda," Lambert said, looking more than a little dejected. "You wouldn't believe how many merchants' wives have come asking for Marie's secret after seeing her skin lately... And it seems that the nobles have been catching word of it, as well. The earl's wife and daughter have been particularly zealous about probing for information."

I got the feeling that when he said "probing for information," he meant something a little more aggressive than what I'd usually assume. I certainly understood where he was coming from on *that* front.

Hmm... I wouldn't mind selling the stuff to them, but we're already doing as much as we can, and I can't dump more work on everyone out of the blue. Then again, I have a feeling that Marie's not going to take no for an answer... Let's start things out by selling them a really limited quantity and see how it goes from there.

"Well, as I'm sure you can imagine, that cream isn't easy to source," I said. "I won't be able to provide very much of it, but if you'd be all right with a hundred bottles, to start—"

Marie let out a delighted shriek. "Truly, Mister Mukohda?! Oh, thank you so, so much! Thank you! So! So! Much!"

Oh. I think I broke her. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd started literally jumping for joy on the spot.

"Thank you, Mukohda. It's greatly appreciated."

Lambert...you should probably wipe those tears that're pooling in your eyes. I did my best to keep a straight face as I explained my plans for the near future to the two of them.

“S-So, it’s not like I won’t be able to get you *any* more of the cream in the future,” I said. “It’s just going to be in very limited quantities, that’s all. I’ll sell you what I can.”

The joyous shout that Marie let out this time was even louder than the last one had been. The thought that this was just a little favor and we still had to discuss my *actual* business with them had me feeling more than a little exhausted...



I sipped the glass of tea that Lambert and Marie had served me, using it as an excuse to take a break and compose myself after the onslaught of Marie’s sheer enthusiasm. *Oh! The tea those two keep in stock is as good as ever,* I noted. I could feel my fatigue fading away as I drained the cup, and once I was done, I was finally ready to get to the real reason I came here.

“So, I brought something back for you from my recent trip, Lambert! I was also hoping you could do me a little favor,” I said as I brought a bright green animal skin out from my Item Box. “This is, uh...a green hunter anaconda skin, I think?”

It was one of the drops I’d picked up in the dungeon of doom. I’d never seen any sort of leather with such bright coloration before, not even in Lambert’s shop, so I thought it would make a nice souvenir to bring back for him. I was also hoping to have him use some of it to make little accessories for my employees.

“M-M-Mukohdaaa!” Lambert wailed. He had a frantic look on his face all of a sudden that I couldn’t even begin to explain.

“Oh, my,” said Marie, who was smiling awkwardly. “I do believe I’m needed to help with the customers out front, Mister Mukohda, so if you’ll excuse me,” she continued.

“Ah, yeah, sure! Nice talking with you,” I replied.

Her cosmetics corner was flooded with customers, so fair enough. Those customers seemed to take their shopping very seriously too, always asking all sorts of questions as they picked their purchases. The employees on that side of the business (who were women as well, by the way) seemed to always be incredibly busy.

I was fine with her making her exit, in any case, but for some reason when Marie stood up...

“Marieeee!”

...Lambert started clinging to her and holding her back.

Oof, careful about that, Lambert. She’s not gonna like it if you’re that desperately clingy...so, actually, go ahead and keep it up. Perish, normie!

“Do be a good host for Mister Mukohda, won’t you, dear?” Marie said, smiling brightly as she physically and figuratively brushed Lambert off, then left the room.

I stared at the plump, kind-faced merchant as he watched her go. *Huh. I know he’s a famous merchant, but I’ve always wondered how a guy who looks so decidedly middle-aged managed to find a young, beautiful wife like her. Is it because he’s rich? It’s gotta be the money, right? But then again, if that’s all it takes, why haven’t I met anyone? It’s not like I don’t have plenty of gold to spare. Anyway, I was single for my whole life before getting brought over to this world, so it’s only fair that I’d meet someone here eventually, right?*



“What am I supposed to do about this?” Lambert muttered under his breath. “How could I possibly drill it into this man’s thick skull that this isn’t how the world works?”

“Huh? Sorry, didn’t catch that,” I said. I was too busy stewing to register what he was saying.

“Oh, nothing at all! Ugh...”

If it was nothing at all, then where’d that sigh come from?! I think I’m the one who should be sighing here, actually!

“Mukohda,” Lambert said.

“Yes?” I replied.

“I cannot, under any circumstances, accept this hide.”

“Huh? Why not? I brought it back just for you! And I was hoping to ask you for a favor that has something to do with it too.”

Lambert looked me in the eye, his expression as serious as could be. “Listen to me, Mukohda. A green hunter anaconda skin is *not* something you can give away as a casual gift. It is an *extremely* valuable material. Last year, I saw one go up for auction in the capital, where it sold for nearly a thousand gold coins.”

“A *thousand* gold? Really?”

“Yes, and that’s in spite of the fact that it was in rather poor condition. I participated in that auction myself, so I had the chance to inspect it in person.”

“That much for a damaged skin?”

I took a close look at the snakeskin that I’d brought out. *This...looks practically flawless, doesn’t it?*

“You can tell at a glance, can’t you?” Lambert remarked. “That skin is utterly unblemished. I can guarantee that it’s worth more than a thousand gold, at a bare minimum.”

“Well, I, umm...”

Okay, so I get where you’re coming from. The thing is, in terms of actual utility, this thing is worthless to me! My only choice would be to sell it

somewhere, and since my familiars keep bringing in more money than I could ever spend, I don't need more gold to begin with! I just thought it had a really nice color and would make a perfect gift for someone like you...

"I hope you understand, Mukohda, that I'm not so shameless as to accept a gift like *that* without batting an eyelash," Lambert said.

"Okay, but I was going to ask you for a favor too," I began, glancing awkwardly up at him. I couldn't just lie down and take that lecture without saying *anything* in my defense.

Lambert heaved a sigh. "Would that favor be something significant enough to offset the cost of that snakeskin?"

"It, err..."

"Mukohda."

"W-Well, the thing is, I was hoping to use some of the skin to make little trinkets as souvenirs for everyone back home, and I thought you could help me with that..."

"Ugggh..."

Excuse me, Lambert?! Isn't sighing and shaking your head a little gratuitous?!

"When you say 'everyone back home,' I assume you're talking about your slaves?" Lambert asked.

"Right, my *employees*," I said. "I really owe them, after all."

It was all thanks to their efforts that I could go off on trips like this without having to worry about what might be going on back home. I couldn't keep this lifestyle up if it weren't for them, so in a very literal sense, I couldn't get by without them anymore.

"You must be the only person in the whole wide world who'd ever consider giving his slaves accessories made from green hunter anaconda skin... Ha ha ha!"

Please at least try to make your laugh sound a little less tired, Lambert!

"Well, anyway, I'd really appreciate it if you could help me out with the

leatherworking part of that idea,” I said.

Lambert let out one final sigh. “All right, all right,” he said. “I’ll take the job, and I’ll buy whatever snakeskin is left over after it’s finished. Green hunter anaconda skin is a truly rare material, after all. If I don’t get a hold of it now, who knows when I’ll have another chance? Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Are you, uhh, doing okay, Lambert? It seems like you’re kinda losing it!

In the end, Lambert offered me one thousand two hundred gold coins for the green hunter anaconda skin. I countered by saying it should be way cheaper since he’d be using it to make those accessories for me, and after much bargaining, I’d worked the price down to six hundred coins. Lambert, however, still didn’t seem totally satisfied with that.

“How could a price that low possibly be fair?”

“I’m the one making the sale, so if I say it’s fair, then it is! It’s *fine*!”

I’m not budging on this, trust me! Please look at this from my perspective. I brought it to you as a gift, and now I’m getting paid for it instead! Stop putting on a show of how honest a businessman you are and move along to the accessories, please!

“So, as for what you’ll be making for me, I was thinking that coin purses would be nice! The thing is...”

I went on to describe my idea to Lambert. In this world, only rich people could afford to buy the sort of leather coin purses that they sold in shops like Lambert’s. Ordinary adventurers or townspeople walked around with their money in cloth sacks instead. Even keeping it in a drawstring bag was considered to be sort of fancy. Most people simply folded or knotted their coin bags shut, and that was true of my employees as well.

In my view, that just didn’t feel right. That was why I thought that coin purses would be a great gift for everyone, and if I was going to get them coin purses, I figured I should get them the best sort I could get my hands on. That said, the nice coin purses in this world tended to be held shut with buttons or buckles, which made getting coins in and out of them a bit of a pain. I knew I’d probably get used to it quickly enough if I tried, but I’d actually bought one for myself

from Lambert before and ended up barely ever using it because it was such a hassle.

But then I'd had a thought: wouldn't those coin purses with metal clasps that snapped shut be perfect for this world's coinage? All it took was a quick little click to open and close them, and I couldn't think of any modern purse or wallet styles that would be more well suited to carrying coins. Unfortunately, though, when I tried to explain to Lambert how a clasped coin purse worked, I found that I wasn't really up to the task of getting the idea across in words.

"Hmm... Oh, I know! I'll just draw a picture," I eventually said, then brought out the paper, inkwell, and quill pen that I'd bought some time ago, mostly because they seemed so uncommon in this world. I quickly sketched out a very rough image of the wallet I had in mind on the rough, poorly crafted paper. "So, these little metal bits on top link together, which lets you open and close it nice and quickly!"

"Hmm, hmm. And the fact that those little metal prongs are circular at the ends is what allows them to clasp together? I see... Yes, having a visual aid has made it all make sense now. I think we should be able to produce this without too much difficulty," Lambert said.

Oh, nice! Sounds like I'll be getting my coin purses after all!

Lambert explained to me that given the time it would take to have the metal fittings for the coin purses made, he would have them all finished in about three days. I was impressed by his efficiency all over again. *I knew he was the right person to ask about this.*

"And while we're on the subject," Lambert said as we were wrapping up, "I was hoping to ask if you'd be willing to let me sell these 'clasped coin purses' in my store, as well."

"Oh, sure. That's fine," I said.

"Thank you so much! If I haven't terribly misjudged this product, it's sure to sell!"

"O-Oh?"

"And needless to say, I'll be sure to compensate you for their invention if they

do!”

“Huh?”

“Now then, I should be getting back to work! These next few days are gonna be busy!”

“Umm, Lambert?”

Aaand, there he goes.

“Wait! It’s just a coin purse, for crying out loud! But...well, whatever. Guess I’ll head home.”

I’m sure my familiars are bored stiff waiting for me, after all.

Chapter 9: A Long-Overdue Status Check

The day after I went to Lambert's shop, I found myself in my kitchen, bulking up my stock of premade meals.

"I'm sure there'll be plenty of decent restaurants and food stalls in the capital, but when it all comes down to it, nothing beats the seasonings I can get from my Online Supermarket," I said to myself as I cooked.

Our trip to the capital was, at that point, set in stone. There was simply no way I could back out of it, what with how excited my familiars were. The very first thing that Fel had said to me when we got back home the day before was **"So, when shall we depart for the capital?"** and Gon had piped up next to suggest, "Why not go tomorrow? If I carry you, we'll be there before you know it!" Dora-chan had then joined the conversation to gush about how excited he was to see a big city, and Sui started theorizing that there'd be tons of tasty meat to be found there, as well. They were acting like we'd be going on vacation.

I, of course, hadn't been nearly as enthused by all those plans and asked if there was any chance we could *not* go to the capital after all...to which Fel had given me a blunt and definitive **"No."** So, that settled that, especially after Gon reminded everyone that there was a chance we could get the leviathan properly butchered there. That wasn't our only goal in the capital, of course, but you'd never know it from how my familiars talked about the trip.

My familiars were all about the potential for leviathan meat, but *I* would be going to the capital because that was, naturally, where the king lived. Willem had made it *very* clear to me that if I paid the capital a visit, I *had* to request an audience with the king no matter what as well.

"Ugggh. I bet there's all sorts of etiquette stuff that I'll have to get right. This is the worst," I groaned. I was worried enough about my own odds of not offending royalty, but that wasn't my biggest concern by a long shot. "I wonder if those four will get through the meeting okay? I really hope they don't cause

some sort of horrible faux pas in front of the king.”

Dora-chan and Sui couldn't speak with most humans, so they wouldn't be an issue. Fel and Gon, on the other hand... Well, let's just say that not only *could* they speak, they also both had attitudes that gave me great cause for concern. They could be downright pompous sometimes, and the mere thought of them giving a king lip felt like it was going to give *me* an ulcer.

I was beside myself with worry, though I knew that getting too preoccupied with all that stuff wouldn't get me anywhere. “I should be focusing on my cooking instead! Let's do this!”

It felt like I was cranking out one dish after another, perhaps since my current circumstances were bringing out the full power of my Solitary Chef title. I made a whole assortment of fried foods (including the gluttonous quartet's ever-beloved karaage), steaks, ginger-fried meat bowls, beef bowls, beef and tofu bowls, meat and potato stew, beef stew, soup with meatballs, foil-steamed parcels full of meat and veggies, and on and on.

“Phew! Okay, that should last us a while. I've gotta say, even I'm impressed by how many meals I just made,” I muttered. I'd stored everything in my Item Box the moment I finished it, so I didn't have a visual of my full output, but thinking back, I realized that I'd made an incredible number of dishes.

“Guess that's what happens when I can really concentrate with the Solitary Chef title on my side. Ha ha ha... Ugh. Okay, better make dinner while I'm at it,” I said to myself. Having already decided what our meal was going to be a while ago, I brought out a tray filled with oblong patties of ground meat that I'd prepared in advance from my Item Box. “Not sure why, but I have the weirdest craving for stewed hamburger steak today!”

To start, I heated some oil in a frying pan, threw in the hamburger steaks, and gave them a nice sear. Since I'd be stewing them later on in the recipe, there was no need to cook them all the way through, so I took them off the heat as soon as they were browned to my liking. I then removed them from the pan and replaced them with some butter, letting it melt and combine with the leftover meat juices from the hamburger steaks. Next, I tossed in some sliced onions, button mushrooms, and shimeji mushrooms, stir-fried them until they

were soft, and then added a can of tomatoes, some water, and a bouillon cube. Finally, I gave it a little ketchup and Worcestershire sauce, mixed it all together, and let it simmer.

I gave the sauce a taste and decided to season it with a little extra salt and pepper. I sometimes threw in a pinch of sugar as well if it ended up being too acidic, but that wasn't an issue this time, so I slid the hamburger steaks right on into the sauce. I covered the pan with a lid, let them stew for five minutes, flipped them over, and gave them another five minutes on the second side. Finally, I threw a slice of cheese onto each hamburger steak and let them stew just long enough for it to melt.

“And it's done! Better bring this out to the starving beasts before they start eating the furniture.”

My familiars had already tried to barge into the kitchen while I was cooking, but I'd chased them out this time. One thing was for sure: the gluttonous quartet hungered.



As it turned out, my familiars had been even more famished than I'd expected. They scarfed down the stewed hamburger steaks so single-mindedly, they made it look like they hadn't eaten in weeks.

“Whoa, guys! What's the rush?” I asked.

“Hmph! *You* are to blame for it,” Fel said.

“True indeed!” Gon agreed. “My liege, delicious smells have been permeating this entire house *all day!*”

《Right?! We've spent the whole day smelling awesome food we can't eat! Of course we're hungry!》Dora-chan said.

《Sui finally got to eat!》Sui added.

That *did* explain it. When they'd barged into the kitchen earlier that day, like they always did, I'd told them that I was cooking for our trip to the capital and that they were free to steal samples, *if* they wouldn't mind all of our meals being disappointing while we were there. That had been a truly grave prospect

as far as they were concerned, bad enough to get them to leave the kitchen, though not without grumbling about it as they went. However, the smells wafting from the kitchen had been unavoidable, and I'd apparently accidentally stoked their appetites into a quartet of raging infernos.

That's weird, though. It's not like I forgot to feed them lunch, or anything!

As I watched the four of them chow down out of the corner of my eye, I gave one of the stewed hamburger steaks a taste as well. "Oh, yeah, these are good! Definitely needs some rice to go with it, though," I said to myself. Something about that kind of seasoning just screamed "goes well with rice" to me.

"Seconds! Now!"

"For me as well, my liege!"

《Same!》

《Sui too!》

"Wha— Already?! Seriously?!"

I took one bite, for crying out loud! I thought to myself, but the famished stares that the four of them were giving me made it really hard to say it out loud, so I quickly served them the second helpings they wanted. Once again, the gluttonous quartet inhaled their food and asked for more, and it wasn't until several courses later that I finally managed to catch a break.

We finished our meal, and while Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui enjoyed glasses of after-dinner soda, I sipped my usual black coffee and rubbed my stomach. *Oof, think I might've eaten a little too much in the end.*

"So then, what will we be doing tomorrow?" Fel asked.

"Tomorrow? I was planning on putting together my offerings to the gods," I said.

It wasn't like I was behind on my offerings, but it *was* coming up on the usual time for me to send them out. My plan was to ask the gods for their requests tonight before bed, then handle all the purchasing tomorrow.

"Oh? That is indeed a task that cannot be neglected. I had intended to suggest that we should proceed to the capital if you had no plans, but alas..."

“Like I’ve told you a *thousand* times, I still need to pick up our payment from the Adventurer’s guild first, and I still have to go back to Lambert’s place too! We can’t leave for the capital until all of that’s done!”

I already had my employees working on the repackaging for the all-in-one skin lotion I’d discussed with Marie yesterday, and I’d told them that they could prioritize it over the shampoo, conditioner, and hair-growth medicine processing. The look in Marie’s eyes had made it *extremely* clear to me that this was one delivery date I did *not* want to miss, so I was hoping to get them ready nice and early to put my mind at ease.

“I had hoped that we would be able to eat the leviathan today,” Fel added.

Just how obsessed with leviathan meat are you, and why? “Well, it’s not gonna be that much longer, regardless. I figure we’ll leave within a week or so. Just behave until then, okay?”

“Hmph! What a bore.”

I happen to like it when you’re bored, thanks. After all, when you’re not bored, it usually means that I’m in huge trouble! Honestly...

I sighed as I slurped my coffee. Suddenly, it struck me that it had been quite some time since I’d checked everyone’s status. We’d just gotten back from a dungeon, so this seemed as good a time as any, and I appraised everyone in turn, starting with Fel.

【Name】 Fel

【Age】 1,014

【Race】 Fenrir

【Level】 950

【HP】 10,181

【MP】 9,810

【Attack】 9,469

【Defense】 10,201

【Agility】 10,024

【Skills】 Wind magic, Fire magic, Water magic, Earth magic, Ice magic, Lightning magic, Holy magic, Barrier magic, Rending Claws, Body Reinforcement, Physical attack resistance, Magic attack resistance, MP Efficiency, Appraisal, Battle Boost

【Blessings】 Blessing of the Goddess of Wind, Ninrir; Blessing of the God of War, Vahagn

Ha ha ha... Yup. All I can do is laugh. He'd leveled up, again, and his already outrageously high stats had continued to climb upward little by little. Just how high of a level are you planning on reaching...?

Next up was Gon, who had also had genuinely monstrous stats from the very get-go.

【Name】 Old Man Gon

【Age】 3,024

【Race】 Ancient Dragon

【Level】 1,335

【HP】 10,109

【MP】 14,911

【Attack】 9,990

【Defense】 1,0376

【Agility】 5,479

【Skills】 Wind magic, Fire magic, Water magic, Earth magic, Ice magic, Lightning magic, Holy magic, Barrier magic, Ultimate Dragon's Breath, Breath of the Ancient Dragon, Body Reinforcement, Physical attack resistance, Magic attack resistance, MP Efficiency, Appraisal

【Ultimate Magic】 Soul of the Ancient Dragon

Honestly, at this point, I don't even know anymore. All I could think was "Boy, dragons sure are amazing!" That said, as far as dragons went, I was more into cute ones like Dora-chan if I had to choose.

【Name】 Dora-chan

【Age】 116

【Race】 Pixie Dragon

【Level】 208

【HP】 1,319

【MP】 3,510

【Attack】 3,330

【Defense】 1,208

【Agility】 4,070

【Skills】 Fire magic, Water magic, Wind magic, Earth magic, Ice magic, Lightning magic, Healing magic, Bombardment, Battle Boost

【Blessings】 Blessing of the God of War, Vahagn

I take it back. There's nothing cute about that stat block! Dora-chan, too, had leveled up and grown even more powerful. It was easy to overlook with Fel's and Gon's outrageous numbers as my immediate point of comparison, but Dora-chan's stats were nothing to sneeze at either. C-Come to think of it, he was taking down S-ranked monsters in that dungeon like they were nothing... B-But, does that mean that Sui's in the same boat as those three?

【Name】 Sui

【Age】 10 months

【Race】 Huge Slime

【Level】 63

【HP】 2,028

【MP】 1,812

【Attack】 2,003

【Defense】 1,946

【Agility】 2,001

【Skills】 Acid Bullet, Potion Creation, Cloning, Water magic, Smithing, Giganticize

【Blessings】 Blessing of the Goddess of Water, Rusalka; Blessing of the God of Blacksmithing, Hephaestos

“Pfff!”

《Agh, gross! What’s wrong with you?!》

“**What are you *doing*?**”

“My liege...”

I was so caught off guard that I’d choked on my coffee and spewed it all over the place—and, for that matter, so caught off guard that I didn’t even care about the fed-up looks that Dora-chan, Fel, and Gon were giving me.

Sui...you’ve been alive for ten months, and your stats look like that? Isn’t that, you know, kind of insane?

《Are you okay, Master?》 Sui asked, hopping over to my side and gazing up at me.

“Oh, Suiii! You’ll always be my adorable little slime, won’t you?” I cooed as I scooped Sui up into my arms and gave it a big hug.

《Okay, seriously, what *is* he doing?》

“**Better to ignore him.**”

“My liege...”



“Okay, I’m ready! You there, everyone?”

My familiars had already gone to bed, but instead of following along after them, I stayed out in the living room and called out to the gods, who I knew for a fact were anxiously awaiting my summons.

<Yesss! I’ve been waiting for so, so long!>

<Far too long, truly.>

<All right, finally!>

<We’ve been waiting.>

<It’s finally time for more whiskey!>

<Whiskey! At long, long last!>

A boisterous sequence of shouts immediately answered my call. *All right, let’s wrap this up nice and quick!*

“Okay, I’ll start sending over everything you requested last night! We’ll start with Ninrir’s package, as usual,” I said. I’d gotten quite used to the whole process, by that point. Speaking of things I was used to, Ninrir’s request consisted of an enormous number of sweets, and nothing else.

<Finally! Cake and dorayaki! I couldn’t live on without your otherworldly sweets anymore!> Ninrir shouted with glee.

Wait, wait, I need you to think that statement through again! Yes, Demiurge’s blessing means my lifespan’s a lot longer than it used to be, but you’re a goddess! My extended lifespan is still just a drop in the bucket compared to yours, right? What exactly are you planning on doing after I’m dead and gone?

<Gaaah, don’t remind me! I’ve suffered enough racking my mind over that problem already, and in the end, I decided that there’s no point worrying about it now! I’ll think about it more when the time comes!>

So, you’re just kicking the issue down the road? Suit yourself, I guess. I’ll be dead by then, so it’s certainly not my problem. “Anyway, here are the cakes and dorayaki you asked for. Fumiya has a strawberry fair going on right now with a

bunch of special cakes, so I got you all of those, plus a few random ones from the normal listings. Oh, and some of them are whole cakes, of course! Aside from that, I also got you your usual gigantic pile of dorayaki, so no surprises there.”

<Oooh! New seasonal cakes! I have to try them! Now! Right now!>

The cardboard box I brought out from my Item Box for Ninrir was only on the table for a split second before it disappeared in a flash of light. I heard a faint *<Thank youuu!>* accompanied by the thudding of footsteps, which told me that Ninrir had grabbed her box and sprinted out of the room without wasting a moment.

Just how obsessed with seasonal cakes are you, Ninrir...? I chuckled at the divine disappointment’s antics as I prepared to move on to the second package.

“Okay, Kisharle, you’re next!”

Kisharle had requested cosmetics, to no one’s surprise, and she’d specifically asked for more of the ST-III series, which she seemed to be downright obsessed with. I’d even caught her muttering about how she couldn’t live without it anymore, and I was starting to worry that she might be just as bad as Ninrir. *I refuse to be held responsible for what happens after I die, for the record!*

Anyway, I’d gotten her packages of ST-III toner, body lotion, foundation, and cotton pads. That alone had used up her whole budget. The ST-III line really was *that* pricey.

“Here you go, Kisharle,” I said as I set the box down. It vanished just a moment later.

<Ahhh, finally! I’ve been on pins and needles worrying that I might run out before the next time you got in touch. This is such a relief!>

So she’s stocking up to make sure she doesn’t run out? When my older sister had started buying ST-III products, she’d quickly lost all interest in using any other sort of cosmetics. She had, in her words, “been sucked into a bottomless ST-III swamp,” and while my sister had been joking, I had a feeling that Kisharle was so deep in that swamp, there was no saving her anymore. In a certain sense, I had to applaud her sheer dedication to her own beauty.

“And, you’re up next, Agni!”

Agni, of course, had asked for beer. She’d turned into a downright connoisseur of the stuff and had once again left it up to me to pick out an assortment of cases to send her. I had a fairly solid grasp on her taste, so I went with the usual two cases of premium beer, Y-bisu’s beer and S-company’s black beer to start, then filled the rest of the box with sampler assortments. She’d mentioned enjoying trying out all sorts of beer recently, so I figured that would be the best option.

“Here you go! I got you more of the sampling sets than usual this time. Hope you enjoy them.”

<Oh, nice! That’s something to look forward to. Thanks!> Agni said as her rather hefty boxes vanished. *<All right! I’m gonna go to town on these tonight! It’s been way too long!>* she cheered immediately afterward.

Just don’t drink yourself under the table, okay? “You’re next, Ruka!”

Ruka had asked for cake and ice cream once again. She’d wanted the strawberry fair’s seasonal cakes, just like Ninrir, plus a selection of ice cream from both Fumiya and my basic Online Supermarket centered around flavors that I had yet to send her. I could hardly believe how many flavors they stocked when I really looked at the selection. A few new ones seemed to have sprung up while I wasn’t paying attention as well. I had quite the assortment by the time I was done, and I hoped that Ruka would be satisfied with it.

“Okay, it’s all yours,” I said.

I heard a *<Thanks,>* as the box disappeared, followed by a cute little *<So much ice cream. This is perfect,>* a moment later. It was actually a little heartwarming.

“And, next—”

<Is us!>

Hephaestos and Vahagn, the booze hound combo, didn’t need me to tell them that they were up last. It seemed they’d been putting all the manpower (godpower?) they could muster into researching the different types of booze they could try, and once again, they’d asked for high-grade whiskey as well as a

variety of drinks favored by connoisseurs. I wasn't really that much of a whiskey person myself, so finding everything they wanted had been a real trial. Their box alone had taken an hour to put together.

As for what they'd actually requested, first I'd gotten them a supposedly superpremium bourbon that was notable for its distinctive bottle cap, which was shaped like a horse. They'd picked it because it was said to be incredibly tasty when drunk straight. They'd also asked for a Taiwanese whiskey that had apparently been garnering a lot of attention lately. It was supposed to be both tropical and very smooth, and it seemed that the gods had started wanting to try it themselves after seeing so many people talk about it.

Next, they asked for a premium blended whiskey with a striking blue label that was supposed to bring out the best traits of all five of the whiskeys that were used to create it. According to Hephaestus and Vahagn, the idea of blending together distinctive whiskeys to create something totally new was too compelling to pass up. Finally, they'd requested a whiskey with a wildcat on its label that was well-regarded by experts in the field. It was apparently very popular with whiskey lovers, and the gods claimed that that meant they *had* to give it a try.

Hephaestos and Vahagn had clearly planned out their budget carefully this time. They knew that if they only picked high-class whiskeys they'd end up with only a few bottles to go around, so they settled on those four for the fancy stuff and had me pick out an assortment of relatively cheap but highly recommended brands for the rest. I went straight to Liquor Shop Tanaka's ranking for that and chose a few reasonably priced but well-rated bottles to send them.

I ended up with a box packed tight with nothing but whiskey bottles, which I carefully set down on the table, making sure I didn't break any of them. "All right, this one's yours! Go ahead and take it!" I called out.

<Hah hah, whiskey! Oh, how we've waited for this! Thanks a million!>

<Yes, thank you, as always! I hope you're ready, Blacksmithing God! We're drinking the night away!>

With those spirited cries and a series of thudding footsteps, Hephaestos and Vahagn went on their way. That just left Demiurge's offering...or so I thought,

but as I brought out his cardboard box, I heard an unexpected voice in my mind.

<So...>

Hm? Who is that...? Ruka?

<I've heard there are ice cream stores that have all sorts of flavors.>

Oooh, yeah, those are a thing. You see dedicated ice cream or gelato shops every once in a while, out and about.

<Go for it.>

Riiight... That means you want a new Tenant, doesn't it? "L-Look, the thing is, I'm still a good long ways away from the level where I'll unlock the next one," I said. I'd checked my own status before, and it had looked something like this:

【Name】 Mukohda (Tsuyoshi Mukouda)

【Age】 27

【Race】 Kind of Human

【Title】The Solitary Chef

【Job】 Cook, Adventurer (Alleged), Victim from Another World

【Level】 114

【HP】 569

【MP】 546

【Attack】 541

【Defense】 529

【Agility】 442

【Skills】 Appraisal, Item Box, Fire magic, Earth magic, Perfect Defense, Double Experience Gain, Familiars (Contracted Magic Beasts): Fenrir, Huge Slime, Pixie Dragon, Ancient Dragon (300-Year Limited Contract)

【Unique Skill】 Online Supermarket

《Tenants》 Fumiya, Liquor Shop Tanaka, Matsumura Kiyomi

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

If I'm remembering this right, I won't unlock my next Tenant until I hit level 160! It's gonna take me a good long while to gain that many levels, I'm afraid.

<That's no problem. All you have to do is go on a two-or three-stop dungeon tour...or maybe four. Easy.>

Not easy at all, actually. And I am not going on a dungeon tour, period!

<Anyway, just go for it. I'm counting on you.>

Ruka... If there's anything you can count on, it's the fact that it'll be a long time before you get your way on this.

<Now, now, Ruka, you mustn't pressure him! I've warned you before, haven't I?>

<The God of All Creation...>

<And you're usually so well behaved! This is odd for you.>

<The ice cream was just so tasty.>

<I see, I see. Nevertheless, pressuring him is not allowed. I'll be forced to punish you if I catch you trying it again!>

<Mmph. Fine.>

Once again, I heard the pitter-patter of footsteps as someone sped out of the room.

<I'm terribly sorry about that! It really is odd for her to be so willful.>

"Trust me, Demiurge, that was nothing compared to the stunts some of the other gods have tried to pull," I replied. *Now they know how to lay on the pressure like nothing else!*



“Anyway, I’m sorry it’s been so long since my last offering to you,” I continued. I usually made a point of sending Demiurge gifts once a week, but since I had spent so long trapped in that dungeon, the gap since my last opportunity to do so had been much longer than usual.

<Oh, no need to worry about that whatsoever!> Demiurge replied.

“I appreciate that,” I said. “I’m still later than usual, though, so I put in a little extra to make up for it.”

<Oh, did you, now? This is certainly a treat!>

I’d bought Demiurge several sampler sets of sake from Liquor Shop Tanaka’s carefully curated selection, as usual. This time, I picked out a set of five bottles from famous breweries in Akita, a set of seven bottles from brands popular all across the Tohoku region of Japan, two sets of sakes that had won gold medals in well-established competitions (each of which contained five bottles), a set of five bottles that were popular in Kyoto, and a set of five bottles that were popular in the Shinshu region.

I had also picked up some umeshu for him, of course—seven bottles of it, which I chose from the liquor shop’s rankings, as usual. I picked a bottle of umeshu made from sweet potato shochu brewed with carefully selected spring water; a bottle of very fruity unfiltered umeshu with actual plum pulp mixed into it; a bottle of umeshu brewed using spring water from a holy mountain called Mount Haku; a bottle of especially sour umeshu made using unripe plums (sometimes referred to as “green diamonds”); a bottle of fruity umeshu that was supposed to smell like peaches and pears; a thick, indulgent umeshu made from fully ripened plums that was supposed to be full of umami; and a rather strange umeshu that was apparently flavored with black tea. Last but not least, I threw in an ample quantity of the usual premium canned foods.

I heaved several boxes full of sake, umeshu, and canned food onto the table. “All right, Demiurge! Whenever you’re ready!” I said.

<Ho ho ho! Many thanks,> Demiurge replied as the boxes vanished.

“Oh, and while I have you here, one quick question. You know that Philosopher’s Stone you gave to Fel and Gon as a reward? What was *that*?”

<What was it? Why, it was a *Philosopher's Stone*, of course! What seems to be the problem?>

"I think that's pretty obvious, actually! You way overdid it! What am I even supposed to *do* with that thing?!"

A stone that can change iron into mithril, orichalcum, or scarletite if you just give it a little magic? If word gets out about this, we're gonna have wars breaking out over it left, right, and center!

<Oh! Well, I simply assumed that you would surely find a good use for it. I thought it would be a nice gift.>

"It's not! Not at *all*! I'm way too terrified to even think about using it!"

<Now, now, there's no harm in just having it, is there? If you don't want to use it, then you can feel free to simply keep it in storage where it can't cause any issues!>

"That's not really the problem, Demiurge! I'm trying to say that if want to reward us, you should pick something other than these ridiculous—"

<Whoops! I'm afraid I'm needed elsewhere. Fare thee well!>

"What?! Wait a second! Demiuuuuuurge!"

Chapter 10: Capital Ho!

The day came for me to pick up my payment from Willem, which he handed over in platinum coins once again. I chucked them right into my Item Box, idly wondering if I'd ever have the chance to make a dent in the pile of platinum that had been accumulating in there.

"So, what's your plan? Are you going to the capital, or not?" Willem asked after we'd finished our exchange.

"Of course we are going," Fel—who had accompanied me inside—cut in before I could answer.

"There's a chance they may be able to butcher the leviathan, so we've no other choice!" declared Gon, who'd followed along as well.

"Well, there you have it," I said.

"Oh? Good to know," Willem said.

"You'll be coming with us, right?" I asked.

"Of course I will. How would you ever get into the royal palace without me?"

"That's what I was thinking, yeah. Thank you in advance."

"Course. You're in good hands."

That was a relief. Having the guildmaster with me would certainly take a load off my mind.

《The capital, eh? This is gonna be great!》Dora-chan piped up.

《Sui hopes there'll be lots and lots of yummy food!》Sui added.

"I'm certain there will be!" Gon said. "The capital is full of humans, meaning delicious stall food is all but guaranteed!"

"Exactly. We shall tour them all and eat our fill," Fel proclaimed.

It was readily apparent that the gluttonous quartet were already firmly in tourism mode. I would've been right there with them, to be fair, if it weren't for

the part where I had to visit the royal palace.

“So, when will you be ready to leave?” I asked Willem.

“I’ve got plenty of work on my plate, and I’ll need some time to get that done first. How’s five days from now work for you?”

“That sounds great.”

“**Hmph. Five full days?**” Fel grumbled.

“We were ready to depart as soon as tomorrow,” Gon added.

《C’mon, why not leave right now?》Dora-chan whined.

《Masteeer, we’re not leaving for the capital yet?》Sui asked.

Okay, Dora-chan and Sui are one thing, but Fel, Gon, you really can’t keep saying these things out loud! “Don’t be unreasonable, guys! It’s just five days! A wait like that’s not going to kill you,” I scolded. “Sorry about those two,” I added to Willem, who flashed me a slightly awkward smile.

“Well, just be here five days from now, okay?”

“Will do. Oh, and we’ll be riding Gon to the capital, so please be ready for that,” I added.

“R-Riding him, huh? Seriously?”

“Seriously. It’s not every day you get the chance to ride an ancient dragon, right? Look forward to it!” I said.

Willem’s smile twitched conspicuously.



We still had a few days left before we were scheduled to head to the capital. I had spent the entirety of the day before yesterday in the kitchen, building up my stockpile of premade foods even further. I’d only just resupplied shortly beforehand, but the way I saw it, I could never have too much ready-to-eat food in stock.

Yesterday, meanwhile, my familiars had insisted on going out hunting, and I’d accompanied them. I was running low on chicken-like monster meat, so I’d requested that they focus on that sort of prey, and they’d hunted down plenty

of cockatrices, rockbirds, and giant dodos. I stashed away three of the cockatrice corpses to practice my butchering skills on later, then brought the rest to the Adventurer's guild to get them handled professionally.

Johan had rolled his eyes and grumbled about how I'd "just dropped off a mountain of work the other day," but that was all dungeon loot that didn't need butchering, so in my book, this new haul was a completely separate thing in terms of workload. Anyway, I'd be going by the guild to pick up Willem when I went to the capital, so I arranged to collect the meat when I stopped by then.

As for today...

"All right! Time for my first shopping trip in ages!"

"A trip that I, of course, will be accompanying you on."

"And I as well!"

《Same, naturally!》

《Sui too!》

"Don't even try to pretend you guys aren't just after the street food...not that that's a problem, I guess."

I'd realized it'd been a long time since I'd last gone out shopping, and I hadn't had anything planned for the day, so I decided to strike while the iron was hot and do a trip around Karelina's stores. My little party still stuck out like a sore thumb walking through the city, but we didn't cause the sort of panic that we had back when we first arrived in town anymore. Some people still crossed the street to avoid us or hustled into their houses when we walked past them, but overall, it seemed the locals had done what people did best and adapted to our presence.

As I mulled over the town's gradual acceptance of my familiars, I arrived at the first store on my itinerary: a specialist shop that sold dried herbs. I'd been there a few times before, and I'd found that they had a remarkable variety in stock and sold excellent seasoning mixes as well. They had a particularly wide selection of products that were great for seasoning meat, a few of which I'd picked up in the past.

Fel's remarkable sense of smell acted against him when it came to that shop, so he chose to find a spot nearby to lie down and take a nap in, acting like he owned the place. Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui didn't have any issues with the smell, but also weren't interested in the store at all, so they decided to join him, leaving me to head inside on my own.

"Welcome," said the shopkeeper, a slender man who looked like he was in his forties.

I spent a moment looking around, eventually settling on one dried herb that smelled a little like rosemary, one that smelled a little like sage, and one that smelled a little like oregano, all of which I'd bought and enjoyed before. Then, after I'd picked those out...

"Excuse me," I said. "Have you put any new herb mixes up for sale recently? I'm looking for something that will go well with meat."

This world was somewhat lacking when it came to seasonings, on the whole, and dried herbs played an essential role in what little seasoning was typical for food. Plenty of families grew and dried their own herbs at home, and some of those herb gardens had developed over time into stores like this one, each of which had their own secret methods and ratios for putting together their herb mixes. That meant that there were a countless number of mixes out there for me to try.

The herbal salts that I could buy from my Online Supermarket were nice and all, but cooking with ingredients from this world meant that I'd occasionally stumble across a pleasant surprise or two. The herb mixes that this shop's owner made, for instance, had all been fantastic, and I knew that I could count on him to deliver new and interesting experiences.

"I'm glad you asked, pal. I've got just the mix for you, and I'm pretty proud of myself for coming up with it," the shopkeeper said as he brought out the dried herb mix in question.

I gave it a sniff. The first aroma that hit me was intensely rosemary-like, but when I focused, I could pick out a whole variety of other herbal aromas intermingled with it. I could tell right away that it would be perfect for meat dishes.

“Oh, yeah, I really do like that! I’ll have some of it as well, thanks,” I said.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” the shopkeeper replied as he handed over my purchases.

I left the dried herb store very satisfied and led my familiars straight to the next shop on my list: a place specialized in salt. I’d picked up a block of rock salt from a town called Mercadante in the past, which had been fantastic, and I was hoping to purchase a few more while I had the chance. Salt like that wasn’t cheap, but it was good enough that I had no buyer’s remorse at all about it, and this time I ended up buying so much rock salt that the store’s owner personally saw me off at the door afterward.

“Are you not finished yet?” Fel grumbled as I stepped outside.

“I’m terribly hungry, my liege,” Gon added.

《Yeah, same! Let’s hit the stalls and eat some meat already!》Dora-chan said.

《Sui’s super hungry too!》Sui whined.

“Okay, okay, I get it! There’s just one more store left that I want to stop at, though, so hold your horses for a little while longer,” I said.

The gluttonous quartet had gotten bored in an awful hurry this time—or, rather, had been entranced by the allure of the food stalls. I had one last store that I needed to visit, though, and it was the one I was most excited to visit of all: a specialty tea store that I’d been to a few times previously.

“Excuse me! Do you have any Selian tea in stock?” I asked as I stepped inside.

“Oh, as a matter of fact, an order of it just came in!” the shopkeeper said.

Selia was a town known for producing a distinctive type of tea that Lambert had served me a few times in the past. It had a wonderfully dignified, roselike fragrance that I was very fond of. I’d been wanting to buy some myself for a long time, but things had repeatedly not worked out for one reason or another until today, when my luck finally changed for the better.

“I was hoping to pick up a few other nice teas as well, while I’m at it. Do you have any recommendations?” I asked. In my view, trusting the shopkeeper’s opinion was always a good idea at times like these.

“Hmm, let me see here,” the shopkeeper said before selecting three different teas to show me.

To start, the shopkeeper introduced me to a specialty tea from a town called Granados, which was located in the Kingdom of Erman. I gave the tea a sniff and found that it had dried fruits in it that gave it a sweet, almost peach-like aroma.

Next up was a tea from a place called Selatie, in the Geisler Empire. This one was apparently produced in extremely small quantities and was very valuable as a result. It smelled a little like oolong tea and, more specifically, like a very rare variety of Huangjin Gui—a Chinese oolong tea—that I’d had the chance to try once back in my old world. Its scent also contained an ever so slight hint of something that reminded me of sweet osmanthus.

The last tea I was recommended was from a town called Brunelles, right here in the Kingdom of Leonhardt. It was a black tea that smelled refreshingly minty and seemed like it’d be a great choice for when I wanted to shake up my routine or have some tea with dinner.

The shopkeeper apparently had other teas to point out to me, but those were the top three picks that the store currently had in stock and were all apparently highly recommended. Needless to say, I bought some of each of them. I’d very much enjoyed how they smelled, and I was looking forward to sampling them in the future.

With that, I’d finished up my shopping list. I stepped outside to meet up with Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui...

“Now then, your shopping is finished, is it not?”

“Then next, it’s our turn!”

《Let’s do this! I’mma start with those skewers right over there!》

《Ooh, Sui thinks the store over there looks really yummy!》

...who instantly scattered, each heading for a stall that they’d set their sights on independently.

“Wha— No, wait a second, guys! We have to stick together!”

In the end, the gluttonous quartet dragged me to stall after stall, devouring

the entire inventories of a few of them in the process.

Welp, now I'm exhausted...



One day, I left the house to pay a visit to Lambert's store and pick up the clasped coin purses that I'd asked him to make for me. Fel, Gon, Dora-chan, and Sui were all bored enough to follow along, and they ended up waiting around outside while I was ushered into the back room, like usual. There, Lambert showed me the finished coin purses.

"Ooh, these turned out great! I knew you could pull it off!" I said as I inspected one of them.

It was exactly as big as I'd asked him to make them—just right to fit in the palm of my hand—and the metal clasp opened with a smooth and satisfying snap. The green hunter anaconda leather had been very cleanly processed too, and it was now an even more vivid shade of green than I remembered.

"This is perfect—actually, it's even better than I imagined it would be!" I exclaimed.

"I'm glad to hear it," Lambert said. "To the craftsmen in my employ, nothing could be more exciting than using such a spectacular material to make a completely new kind of coin purse. They put their everything into making them!"

I had to hand it to Lambert's people; they *really* knew what they were doing. The coin purses were incredible pieces of work.

"Oh, and while I have you here, Mukohda, a little bird told me that you'd be making your way to the capital soon?" Lambert added.

Not sure if word travels fast, or if Lambert's just that deeply in the loop.
"That's right," I confirmed.

"In that case, it might be a good idea for you to seek an audience with Earl Langridge while you're there. It just so happens that he and his family are sojourning in the capital at this very moment."

Ahh, yeah, that figures. That thought had already occurred to me as well. If

the earl was in the capital, then it really did seem advisable for me to pay him a visit. He'd helped me out quite a bit when it came to my hair-growth medicine business, and it would definitely seem like I'd snubbed him if I met with the king and went home right away.

"I've been thinking about that, actually. The master of the Adventurer's guild will be traveling with us, so I'll ask him to set it up for me," I explained.

"I'd greatly appreciate it if you would," Lambert said. The earl had a lot of influence over the hair-growth medicine's sales, so it made sense that Lambert would be invested in my relationship with him.

"Oh! Now that I think about it, what sort of gift do you suppose I should bring for the earl?" I asked. "I'm thinking of giving him some of our hair-growth medicine, like usual, and I also thought that some shampoo, hair treatment, and maybe hair packs for his wife and daughters might be a good idea?"

"Yes, I'd agree with that! Maybe some high-quality soap as well."

"The only problem is, that'd mean I'd just be giving him the same stuff I always do. Since I'll be going all the way to the capital for this trip, I thought that maybe something a little more impressive might be better?"

"A fair point. In that case..."

Lambert's suggestion: to give the earl some of the all-in-one lotion that I'd started selling to Marie. The earl's wife and daughters were already aware of its existence, and they seemed to have put the pieces together about me being the source as well. *No surprise that an earl's family would have all sorts of ways to come across that info, I guess.*

"All right, I'll do that," I said. "What about something that I got from a dungeon? Would that be a good idea?"

"Oh, that's right...you've conquered a number of dungeons, haven't you?"

Lambert? What's with that look in your eyes? Why are you gazing out into the middle distance like that?

"I think items like that would be more suited to present to the king, wouldn't you say?"

“I definitely have some dungeon items that I was planning on giving him, yeah, but I also have an awful lot of random jewels and stuff, so...”

“Random jewels...and stuff...”

And now he looks almost aghast! What's the deal?!

“Jewels are all well and good, but if by any chance you happen to have found any high-ranking potions in those dungeons, I believe they would please him considerably more,” said Lambert. According to him, having potions in one’s possession in case of an emergency was considered to be both a noble’s duty and a status symbol among the upper crust.

“Oh! In that case,” I said as I pulled out a few of Sui’s special-made potions from my Item Box. “I happen to have a supply of low-grade, mid-grade, *and* high-grade potions! They’re not dungeon-made, but I have a source for them, so they’re actually pretty easy for me to get a hold of.” *Sui’s the one who’s been making them, after all!* “Do you think five of each would be good?”

“Five of each? Meaning, five high-grade potions?”

“Right.”

Lambert’s expression spasmed. *Is he feeling all right?*

“Ugggh... Why are you *always* like this...?” he sighed. “Five high-grade potions is *far* too much. Three low-grades, one mid-grade, and one high-grade would be more than sufficient, in my opinion.”

“Got it. I’ll go with that, then,” I agreed without protest. I had total faith in Lambert’s judgment on this matter and knew I’d be better off doing exactly as he said.

After that, I asked Lambert to let Marie know that I’d have her all-in-one lotion delivered the day after tomorrow or so, and that I’d have Kosti work out the details with her, as usual. We spent a little while chatting, and eventually, I made my way out of his shop...at which point the gluttonous quartet, who’d been lying in wait, immediately apprehended me and forced me into taking them on another eating tour of the city’s food stalls, just like they’d done the day before.



When I got home later that day, Theresa and the other women in my employ had just finished cleaning my estate's main building. Since they were conveniently free, I decided to ask them to help me gather up all my employees for a talk, and a short time later, everyone was ready and waiting. The living room was currently occupied by the gluttonous quartet, who were taking a midday nap after stuffing themselves in town, so I staged my meeting in the entrance hall instead.

"So, remember how I didn't end up bringing back any souvenirs from the trip before last? I made sure to get you all something this time to make up for it," I said as I passed out the clasped coin purses I'd received from Lambert earlier that day. "These are coin purses made out of a material I got from a dungeon. I got the sense that none of you had a decent way to carry your money, so I thought you'd hopefully get some use out of them. They're a really pretty shade of green, see?"

Tony's and Alban's families gratefully accepted the coin purses, their eyes shining with excitement. The former adventurer crew, however, looked oddly perturbed.

"Sooo, just out of curiosity, *which* dungeon did you find this material in?" Luke asked.

"You said you were going to Ronkainen, right? Assuming I'm remembering right, there aren't any dungeons in that area at all," Irvine followed up.

I thought you two were supposed to be the team airheads! Since when did you start picking up on details like that? "It, uhh, was a dungeon right across the border that not many people know about," I explained.

The former adventurers started whispering furiously to each other. I caught a "Have *you* heard about anything like that?" and a "That means it must've been basically untouched, right?" among other snippets.

Finally, Tabatha stepped up to question me further. "So, did you *clear* the dungeon?" she asked.

"Do you think there's any chance Fel and Gon would've let me get away with

not clearing it?” I countered. The former adventurers nodded in unison—no further explanation needed, apparently.

“So, what sort of leather *is* this? I’ve only seen a snake monster with skin like this once, and if *that’s* what these things are made out of, then you shouldn’t be tossing ’em out to *slaves* like they’re some cheap party favors,” Barthel said while shooting me a very pointed look.

“I had a feeling the second I saw them,” said Tabatha, who was giving me the same sort of stare as Barthel. “The color was a dead giveaway, but I still couldn’t believe it was possible. There’s no way you’d give us something like *that*, is there?”

“A green snake monster? They can’t be talking about one of *those*, right?” Luke said.

“You mean like the one that was presented at that auction last year...?” Irvine added.

Agh! Don’t tell me those two are in the know too?

“It sold for nearly a thousand gold coins. I doubt there’s even a single adventurer who *doesn’t* know about it. Even I heard the rumors,” Peter noted.

Even Peter knows? Seriously? “U-Umm,” I stammered. *This is weird. Since when was giving a gift the sort of thing that made you break out in a cold sweat?*

“So, let me ask again: what sort of leather is this?” Barthel pressed, dealing the finishing blow to my will to resist. I paused, worked up my nerve, and...

“It’s...green hunter anaconda skin,” I muttered.

A chorus of “I knew it”s, sighs, and winces ensued from the adventurer crew.

“Look, Mukohda,” Barthel said, “you’ve *gotta* understand that even if you turn it into trinkets, no sane person would ever consider giving out *anything* made from green hunter anaconda skin to slaves.”

An extended lecture courtesy of the whole former adventurer contingent followed. They questioned me on why I’d give them something worth *that* much money, pointed out that carrying a luxury good like that around was

liable to get them assaulted, and on and on. I had to admit I hadn't considered that the coin purses could peg them as targets for robbers, but still...

"Look, they're my gifts to give, and I'm telling you they're yours now! If carrying them around in town's too dangerous, then you can just keep them here in the house and use them as accessory cases, or something!"

Clasped coin purses are really good for that sort of thing too! Also, this lecture's dragged on for way too long! You're just going over the same points again and again now! Also, look at Tony's and Alban's families—they're horrified! Even the kids are in a panic, except for Lotte, and I'm pretty sure that's only because she doesn't understand what we're talking about!

"Oh, and you're free to sell them if you can't find any use for them or really need the money! The point is, they're yours now, and I'm not taking them back no matter what you say!" I concluded, then shooed everyone out the door and back toward their own homes.

It was only when they were gone that something struck me. "Come to think of it, the whole point of this was that they didn't have decent coin purses, but if they can't walk around with the wallets I gave them in public, that defeats the purpose of the gift, doesn't it? Maybe I should have new ones made out of something more normal to give to them, like red boar leather," I muttered to myself.



Tomorrow would finally be the day of our trip to the capital. Before we left, though, I had some preparations to handle that demanded my full attention: putting together my gifts for the earl and the king.

"No point even asking my familiars for help with this one. There's *no* way they'd have any useful advice in this field," I sighed. As such, I waited until the four of them had gone to sleep to brew myself a cup of the tea I'd bought the other day, and then I got to work. I'd gone with the tea from Granados, the city in the Kingdom of Erman, by the way. The fruity aroma I'd noticed from the dry tea really came through, and its sweet, peach-like flavor was deeply soothing.

Actually... "This stuff's *really* good," I said to myself after my first sip, then let out a relaxed sigh. "Okay! Let's put together the earl's gift first."

I'd already picked out the items that I'd be giving the earl and his family, which were more or less exactly what Lambert had recommended to me. I included the usual three bottles of hair-growth formula and hair-growth shampoo, plus three sets of normal shampoo, conditioner, and hair masks for his wife and daughter as well. Then I threw in six bars of high-class rose-scented soap and four bottles of the all-important all-in-one lotion. Finally, I included five of Sui's potions: three low-grade, one mid-grade, and one high-grade.

As for the packaging... "I guess I can use this treasure chest I had lying around in my Item Box?"

I was *pretty* sure that the chest in question was one I'd found in the Dolan dungeon. I had vague memories of it getting dropped by a mimic...or something along those lines, anyway. It was decorated with a nice assortment of gems, in any case, and looked quite impressive, so I chose it as my gift box and arranged the items I'd be giving the earl neatly within.

"Okay! I think that should do it!"

With that, my gift for the earl was all squared away. Next up would be my offering to the king, in theory, but...

"I really should've talked with the guildmaster about this in advance, huh?" I regretfully mused. *Too late now, though. I'll just have to play this by ear.*

I had a vague idea that gems of some sort would be a good gift, though that was more my instincts talking than any concrete knowledge I actually had about this kind of thing. I decided to pull out my stockpile of dungeon gems—which had all been sitting around untouched since I obtained them—and see what I had to work with.

"Hmm. I sure have a lot of them," I said to myself. I was actually a little shocked by how much they'd piled up. "This is for a king, so I think I can rule out the small and midsize ones straight out of the gate..."

I took a moment to sort through my stock, removing anything that wasn't large enough from the running, including pieces of jewelry with gems worked into them.

"Okay, that narrowed things down a bit! But, hmm...how to choose?"

The gems that I'd gotten from my most recent venture had been quite showy, so I decided to include something from that selection. In the end, I settled on the tiara that the charybdis had dropped. It was decorated with an incredible number of sapphires, diamonds, and pearls, making it a jaw-droppingly showy piece of work.

I'd heard that it was the kind of accessory that upper-class women would fight tooth and nail to obtain, so I had to assume it was quite valuable. Sigvard had talked about it being the sort of item that wars could be fought over, and I'd initially been planning on keeping it in Item Box deep freeze for eternity, but at least my appraisal hadn't informed me of any sordid history associated with it.

He must've been exaggerating, right? And giving it to a king seems like a great way to get this ticking time bomb out of my— Ahem, ahem!

Thinking along those lines, there was one other piece in my collection that I really would've liked to make someone else's problem. I plucked it out of the pile, appreciating just how hefty it felt in my hand.

"Now *this* one *definitely* has a sordid history," I muttered.

The item in question was called an azure diamond, and I'd found it in the Brixton dungeon. When I'd appraised it, my skill had been kind enough to inform me that legends told of a small country that had once been razed solely for the sake of obtaining one of them. That was just a legend, sure, but people would've still been all "What are you *doing* with that thing?!" if I'd ever shown it to anyone, so I'd decided to keep it safe and secure in my Item Box instead of dealing with that hassle. That applied to the king as well, unfortunately, so I reluctantly returned it to its former and forever resting place.

Let's see, what else is there...? "Oh, this might be good!"

I picked up the short sword that my familiars had brought back from a cave in the last dungeon we'd explored. It was an incredibly extravagant weapon all around, lavishly decorated with gems. I had my doubts about whether it would stand up to any practical use, but as a display piece, its merits were hard to question. I also picked out the treasure chest that my familiars had found in the same cave, along with the hefty diamonds that had been inside it, as well as a relatively nice ruby ring, a gem-studded bracelet, and a golden goblet, none of

which I could even remember where I'd obtained them from.

"I think that should just about do it," I said to myself. It was an opulent assortment, but considering I was meeting the king in person, I figured that would probably be appropriate. "Ugggh... I can't believe I'm really going to the capital after all, though."

I just knew it was going to be a pain, and I'd been putting it off for ages, but it was too late to backpedal on the decision now. I told myself that once the uncomfortable portion of the trip was over with, I'd take the chance to enjoy some big-city sightseeing. Then I finished off my delicious cup of tea and headed to bed, hoping that I'd be able to see the bright side of things tomorrow morning.



And so, the day of our trip arrived. I found myself at the now very familiar Karelina Adventurer's guild, where the very first thing I did was visit Johan to pick up the meat I'd asked him to butcher for me.

"Hello!" I called out as I stepped into the storehouse. "I'm here for that meat I dropped off a few days ago!"

"Oh, there you are! It's all ready for you," Johan said before bringing out one parcel of cleaned meat after another, starting with the cockatrice. As I shoved them into my Item Box, the two of us ended up chatting.

"So, you still gonna go hunting while you're in the capital?" Johan asked.

"Well, I—"

"Yes, we will."

"Indeed!"

《Hanging around the city the whole time would be way too boring.》

《Hunting, yaaay!》

"...I guess we will, yeah."

I had to assume that there would be plenty of adventurers working around the capital, and I doubted they'd have any long-standing unaccepted jobs for

me this time, so I'd been hoping that this was finally going to be my chance to take a trip where I'd be able to have some leisure time after I cleared all of the annoying tasks off my plate. Apparently, I'd set my expectations too high. *Woe is me...*

"I don't think you'll find that much in the way of big game around the capital, but if you do catch anything, be sure to bring some back for me to handle," Johan said.

"Ha ha! Sure, but don't get your hopes up," I replied. It stood to reason that the capital's adventurers would have already hunted everything worth hunting anywhere near the city.

"On the contrary, you would do well to 'get your hopes up.' Claiming prey that will satisfy you will be the simplest of tasks, should we apply ourselves in the slightest."

Fel, why are you boasting to him? What do you have to prove here? "We're not going on any overnight trips, for the record!"

"Now, now, that will hardly be necessary! With my mobility, we can take lengthy excursions in a single day with ease. There's no need to worry, my liege."

Oh, not you too, Gon! "That's not what I was worried about at all, actually! We're going to the *capital*! Why should we have to fly out into the middle of nowhere and go hunting during a trip like *that*?!"

"Hah! You've got it pretty rough, huh?" Johan said. "Well, I'll be waiting with my hopes up nice and high, then!"

Don't, please! Honestly!

《So, we're gonna make hunting around the capital into a whole trip, eh? I wonder what we'll find there. This is gonna be great!》

《Sui hopes we get some yummy meat!》

Dora-chan, Sui, no! Don't join in on this! We are not taking a whole hunting trip! And please, Johan, stop egging them on! If you tell them you have your hopes up, they're liable to hunt down something completely insane for you!

Restraint is a foreign concept to them! For crying out loud... Looks like I'm gonna have to give them a very clear warning before I turn them loose to hunt around the capital.

I said my goodbyes to Johan, then headed to the guild's reception desk where I asked to speak with the guildmaster. Willem arrived before I knew it.

"Sorry for the wait," Willem said.

"Oh, no, it's fine! We just got here," I replied as I noticed how lightly he was traveling. His only bag was an old, worn-out satchel slung over his shoulder. "Is that a magic bag?"

"That's right. I've been using it ever since my adventuring days," Willem told me. Apparently, he'd found it in a dungeon in the Kingdom of Marveil. It was old and kind of shabby, but a lot sturdier than it looked, it seemed.

Magic bags really come in all shapes and sizes, don't they? I bet my familiars would have an easier time carrying that kind of bag than they do with the ones I have now. It'd be nice to get my hands on something similar.

"All right, then! Ready to go?" I asked.

"Ready when you are," Willem said.

My familiars, the guildmaster, and I all headed out of town and proceeded to the empty stretch of land I had ended up using as my usual departure site. It was an ideal location for Gon to take off from.

"Okay, Gon, it's time!" I said.

"Very well, my liege," Gon said, then proceeded to enlarge himself.

I heard Willem gulp beside me. "H-Hey, are we *really* flying there? On an ancient dragon?"

"You came all the way out here thinking we *wouldn't*?" I countered. "And wait, didn't you have to tell the guild to inform all the towns in our flight path about this?"

"Well, yes. A dragon showing up out of nowhere would cause a panic, so I did put the word out, of course..."

“Then what’s the problem? Come on, climb up.”

“W-W-Wait a minute!”

“Oh, what is it *now*?”

“Hey! What are the two of you dawdling for?”

“See? Fel’s getting impatient!” I sighed. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui had all long since climbed onto Gon’s back.

“I just, you know...need a moment to prepare myself for this,” Willem said.

You know, seeing someone say something that timid while they’re scowling like a seasoned warrior is pretty unsettling, Willem. “It’ll be fine, honestly! I was scared too, at first, but if you sit right in the middle of his back and avoid looking down, you won’t have a problem.”

I’d ridden Gon enough times to have the technique down to a science. It was only scary when you let yourself register just how high up in the sky you were. As long as you could keep yourself from doing that, it would all work out easily enough.

“Okay, up you go!” I said as I pushed Willem’s back, herding him up onto Gon. When we were safely seated, I gave Gon a pat and called out, “All right, Gon, everyone’s ready!”

“Very good. In that case, we depart!”

Gon spread his wings and lifted off in a calm, controlled manner, soaring higher and higher with each passing moment. And as he did so...

“Eeeeeek! I-I’m getting off! I’m getting off right now, you hear me?!”

...the color drained from Willem’s face as the sense of weightlessness that accompanied our ascent took hold.

“Wha— Willem, no! Stop flailing, please!” I yelled. He was struggling like a madman, but I grabbed him and held on like his life depended on it. All he had to do was stay seated, so of *course* his first impulse was to stand up, and as he grappled with me, he happened to inadvertently take a good look at the ground far, far below us.

“Eeeeeek...”

Thwump!

“Ah. He’s out like a light.”

“Hmph! Pathetic.”

“Well, everyone’s like that their first time. It took me a while to get used to it too, remember?”

Gon soared his way through the clear, blue sky, carrying me, Fel, Dora-chan, Sui, and the deeply unconscious guildmaster off toward the capital.

Extra: Snacking Cabbage

Cabbage, cabbage, cabbage, and more cabbage. My entrance hall was full of more sacks than I could count at a glance, each of them stuffed to the point of bursting with cabbages. My house was *lousy* with cabbage.

They were, as usual, gifts from Alban's garden. He'd been all smiles when he told me that he'd had a bumper crop as he dropped them off, but...

"This's just *way* too much to deal with," I sighed.

But then again, Alban's veggies are all incredibly tasty, and it's not like I hate cabbage or anything. It's the volume that's a problem! There are way too many of them!

"If I can't figure out some way to get my familiars to eat these, my Item Box is gonna be overflowing with cabbage forever."

Unfortunately, the four of them were borderline carnivores who would almost certainly give any cabbage-heavy dishes the stink eye. Fel was particularly insistent about his eating habits, and I could already hear him giving me the third degree about it.

I guess I can always serve it as a side when I make fried cutlets or ginger-fried meat bowls, or put some into stir-fries and stuff. That would let me gradually whittle down the pile, but even then, I would still have enough cabbage to last me a year, if not longer. *A-At least they won't go bad in my Item Box! I'm sure it'll work itself out in the long run.* Probably, I thought as I moved the cabbage bags into my Item Box, freeing up my entry hall in the process.

"All right, that's the last of 'em! Gotta say, I'm sure Alban's techniques have something to do with it, but I'm starting to think there's something *weird* about that field as well. When he only plants one type of veggie, his harvests get completely out of control. I should try to talk him into growing a wider variety of crops in smaller quantities, or something."

Alban always made a point of sharing his harvests with me, and when he

decided to focus on a single crop, working my way through it all tended to be a significant challenge. I was supposed to supply him with more seeds sometime soon, and I decided to have a firm chat with him about it when that time came.

“For now, though, I’ve gotta find something to do with all this cabbage,” I muttered as my legs carried me toward the kitchen. “At times like these, you’ve gotta go with a recipe that’ll make for good snacking food!”

I took a firm, shiny, round, and vividly green cabbage out of my item box...and nearly dropped it.

“Whoa, that’s heavy!”

The cabbage’s leaves were tightly packed, and the thing had an unexpected heft to it.

“And if I’m gonna make snacking cabbage, I’ll need a few things from my Online Supermarket.” I opened up my skill’s menu and scrolled to the ingredients I wanted. “Okay, that should do it!”

There were all sorts of cabbage dishes that made for good snacking food, but this time, I’d be making a stir-fried cabbage recipe involving dried shrimp. Dried shrimp were an aromatic ingredient packed with tons of umami, and they paired perfectly with cabbage’s natural sweetness. The dish went great with a bowl of rice and was even better to snack on with a beer. It *did* involve cooking on a stovetop, which made it slightly more elaborate than the ideal snacking recipe, but it was still super simple overall.

To start, I shredded the cabbage into half-centimeter strips. Next, I heated some sesame oil in a frying pan, threw in the dried shrimp, stir-fried them until they started smelling really nice, and then added the cabbage as well. Once the cabbage was soft, I tossed in some sake, mirin, and soy sauce. The final step was to stir-fry everything for a little longer, and just like that, it was done!

The sake, mirin, and soy sauce mixture wasn’t the only way to flavor this dish. I’d made it with sake, salt, and pepper in the past as well, which was simple, but delicious in its own right. I’d gone with the soy sauce variant this time since it complemented rice better, but making it with salt helped the dried shrimp’s flavor and aroma take center stage. It just came down to preference, ultimately.

I gave the cabbage a taste test to see how it had turned out. “Ooh, that’s nice! The dried shrimp’s really coming through, and the cabbage isn’t overcooked, so it still has a nice crunch to it. Perfect!”

I took another bite, and then another, without even realizing what I was doing. But right when I found myself muttering, “Ahh, I could really go for a beer right now...”

“My liege?”

...Gon poked his head into the kitchen.

“Hm? What is it, Gon?” I asked.

“I smelled something delicious and came to see what it was.”

“What about Fel and the others?”

“They are currently napping in the garden.”

“Ah, figures.”

“So then, would that dish be the source of this smell?”

“Oh! Well, yeah, it is,” I admitted. He’d been lured in by the smell of the shrimp, most likely.

“It seems to me that a dish with that aroma would go most well with beer,” Gon said, his eyes sparkling with a fervent light.

Ugh! Has Gon’s affection for alcohol led to him developing a nose for good beer snacks too? “Wh-Whaaat? No way, that’d be crazy!” I said.

“Oh? How very strange indeed! I heard you say ‘I could really go for a beer right now’ with perfect clarity, after all,” Gon said with a smirk that showed off his razor-sharp teeth as he ambled his way into the kitchen.

Gah, he heard that?! I’m in it deep now! I feel a cold sweat coming on for sure!

“You mustn’t try to deceive me, my liege,” Gon said as he stepped *right* up in front of me, then rested a clawed forelimb on my shoulder. “I trust you see that now?”

“Ahh, fine, I get it! Yes, this stuff goes really well with beer!” I confessed.

“Greh heh heh heh heh! Yes, of course it does!”

What sort of laugh was that, Gon? You’re starting to sound weirdly crude all of a sudden!

“I trust, then, you know what time it is?” he asked.

“No. What?” I replied.

“Time for beer, of course!”

“Huh? It’s just past noon! No way! Fel and the others would chew us out if they caught us!” And even if that weren’t the problem, I know for a fact that you’re a terrible drunk!

“Oh, come now! They’re fast asleep! There’s no chance we’ll be caught!” Gon said.

“But, uhh, the thing is—”

“**You,**” a voice rang out from the doorway. Gon jumped with shock, then spun around.

“Yeah, uhh, turns out they’re awake after all,” I said. Fel, Dora-chan, and Sui were indeed all standing in the doorway.

“You would demand to indulge in spirits midway through the day? How the mighty have fallen.”

《You’re an ancient dragon, man! Have some self-respect! What a disgrace.》

《That was really bad, Old Man Gon.》

“Wha?!” Gon yelped. His social status among my other familiars had just fallen by several notches...but really, he’d brought it upon himself. “So I like a drink now and then! What’s so wrong with indulging in the daytime?!”



Afterword

Hello! This is the author, Ren Eguchi. I'm very pleased that you decided to pick up *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill Volume 15: Chilled Scallop Pasta and the Philosopher's Stone*! Really, thank you so much!

This series has finally reached its fifteenth volume. I say finally, but really, it feels like it happened in the blink of an eye! It received an anime adaptation last year as well, which was truly moving for me. I never imagined that this story would be put out in print when I first started writing it, much less adapted into a manga or an anime, but here we are! It really goes to show that you never know what life will throw at you next. It's all thanks to my readers that this series has lasted long enough to receive an anime of its own, and I'm truly grateful for all your support.

In this fifteenth volume, Mukohda's party finally makes it through their latest dungeon! For him—or, really, for the gluttonous quartet—that's just business as usual, but to Ark's members, it's a truly horrifying and befuddling situation to get wrapped up in. I hope you found that contrast entertaining! On a personal level, I found the scene where the gluttonous quartet went off to have fun (read: clear out a cave in the dungeon) very entertaining to write, so I hope that all of you enjoyed it as well.

Next up, I have a very exciting announcement: a second season of the anime has been greenlit! This is all thanks to my readers turning up and watching the anime, so once again, thank you all so very much. Studio MAPPA will be handling the production once again, and the thought that I'll get to watch even more cooking scenes with god-tier animation fills my heart with joy. I'm really looking forward to it!

To Masa-sensei, who did the illustrations for this volume, Akagishi K-sensei, who's drawing the main comic adaptation; Momo Futaba-sensei, who's handling the spin-off comic; everyone involved in the production of the anime; my editor "I"; and all the other good people at Overlap: I can't thank you

enough for all your help and support!

Finally, I hope you'll continue enjoying the laid-back, heartwarming adventures of *Campfire Cooking in Another World with My Absurd Skill* in all the formats it's available in! I look forward to seeing you again in volume 16!









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by Ren Eguchi

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