

Chapter 207 - Bake-Off

The first order of business was taking a proper inventory.

I worked my way slowly down Misha's counters, picking up each ingredient container in turn, examining the contents, and quietly running everything past [Cooking] to see what the Skill had to say.

Protein isolate. Mineral blend. The anabolic compound—which I set *firmly* to one side, along with the stimulant, in a mental category labeled “*absolutely not, until I figure out if Misha is going to get sued for it.*” Fruit powder. Salt derivative. A few unlabeled containers whose contents I genuinely could not begin to identify by sight or smell.

"Misha," I said, setting down something that looked like gray sand and smelled like batteries, "does Misha have any... *normal* ingredients? Sugar—or whatever passes for it? Flour? Butter, eggs, anything from the traditional baking family?"

Misha's ear tufts flattened in visible perturbation.

"Sugar," she repeated, as if I'd asked for a bag of *coarse gravel*. "Ela wants *sugar*."

"Ela wants sugar," I nodded.

"Sugar is empty. Sugar does *nothing*. There is no functional benefit to—"

"Sugar makes things *taste good*, Misha. That's the function. That's the entire function, and it's a load-bearing one we cannot do without, if customers are to enjoy these."

Misha stared at me for a long moment, all four eyes narrowed. Then she huffed, muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “*don't understand what sugar possibly has to do with cookies...*” and pattered off into the depths of the Emporium to go find some.

Which left me alone with the counter, the catastrophic array of ingredients, and my Skill.

'Alright, [Cooking]. It's you and me. Please tell me you can carry this...'

I'd never been great at cooking in my past life—from what fragments I could remember, at least. Baking even less so. But *cookies*, specifically? Cookies were the *one thing* even past-me had managed to get right somewhat consistently.

Cookies were the training wheels of the baking world, after all.

Flour, fat, sugar, binder, mix, bake, done.

Surely, with an actual System-granted Skill backing me up, I could assemble a recipe that wouldn't drive Misha's customers screaming into the thoroughfare... Or so the theory went.

The problem that had become apparent almost immediately when Misha had shown me what was in the cookies she'd fed me, however: Misha's ingredients were *so far* off the beaten path that [Cooking] had almost *nothing* to say about most of them.

I'd hold up a container, prod the Skill, and get back the informational equivalent of a shrug.

These things were clearly too high-Tier, too specialized, too *alien* for my meager three Levels to properly parse. The Skill knew what protein isolate was in the *abstract*. But it had absolutely no opinions about whatever the pearlescent blue powder in the fourth container was, beyond a vague, unhelpful impression of *probably not toxic*.

'Probably. Great... Love that for us.'

What the Skill *could* do—and this turned out to be the thing that saved the entire endeavor—was somehow extrapolate behavior. Given a taste, a smell, a texture between my fingers, it could produce a working estimate of what a given ingredient would *do* in a mixture.

Sweetness contribution. Moisture binding. Aroma profile.

Whether something would stay stable under heat or break down into something else.

It couldn't tell me what anything *was*, but it could tell me roughly how it would *act*—which, honestly, was maybe even more important for this particular use case.

It wasn't particularly much to work with, but it was going to *have* to be enough.

Misha returned a few minutes later, triumphantly carrying a large bottle of viscous green syrup and a hefty bag of fine, off-white powder.

"Sweetener," she announced, thumping the bottle down. "Kelp-derived. Very good, very clean. Far, far better than sugar. Trust Misha on this."

She hefted the bag. "And this—powdered chitin. *Far* superior to synthetic flour. Better structure, better minerals, better macros all around, and Misha will hear no arguments on this!"

'Chitin... We're making cookies out of damn bug shells and kelp juice as the foundational pieces... Sure. Why the fuck not, I guess?'

I took a deep breath, rolled up my sleeves, and got to work.

The next stretch of time dissolved into something that was half cooking, half alchemy, and half improvised theater—and yes, that was *three* halves, which was an accurate reflection of how much I was juggling.

'Maybe I'll even get some [Perform] experience out of this, for the juggling part, eh?'

I creamed the green syrup into a fat substitute Misha produced from cold storage—which I distinctly did *not* ask where it came from or what it was, as I had learned my lesson by now—sifted the chitin powder like it was flour and prayed the structural math transferred, worked in careful measures of protein isolate while [Cooking] flagged warnings about the mixture drying out, and compensated with extra binding moisture on instinct more than knowledge.

[Resourceful Chef] earned its keep almost immediately as well—though not quite in the way I'd initially expected it to.

The Perk didn't hand me knowledge of what it turned each ingredient into—which had been something I had quietly been banking on.

It didn't surface any instructions or guide my instincts at all.

What it *did* do was something altogether stranger: Under my hands, the ingredients simply became *better*, with no real discernable point at which it kicked in—it seemed almost random for when it would activate.

It was *very* subtle—subtle enough that I almost missed it activating at all.

The kelp syrup, as I worked it into the fat substitute, took on a cleaner, rounder sweetness than it had possessed straight from the bottle, when I went to taste the mixture afterwards, the faintly briny undertone mellowing into something almost caramel-adjacent.

'If I hadn't been doing continuous taste-checks, I probably would never have even noticed...'

The chitin powder, too, sifted finer than it had any right to, its texture refining from *somewhat gritty industrial byproduct* toward something that *almost* behaved like proper pastry flour.

Even Misha's protein isolate—which had evidently gone into her original cookies with all the culinary grace of sawdust—integrated smoothly into my dough, binding together with the rest of the ingredients rather than fighting.

Tier upgrades. That was what the Perk actually *did*.

Every ingredient I handled, under my active guidance, was being qualitatively elevated one full Tier above what it started as. And Misha's already high-quality functional ingredients became something that probably had *no business* existing in a cookie at all.

Which—yes, *fine*, the Perk description *did* technically say exactly that. But reading a line of System text and actually *watching it happen* under your own hands, tasting the difference in real-time, were two entirely different experiences.

*'So **that's** how you work,'* I thought, watching the dough come together with a suppleness that my own meager technique could absolutely *not* take credit for.

The Perk's existence, however, meant the real recipe wasn't just the ingredients and ratios—it was *me*.

The same ingredients, mixed by *anyone else*, would produce something markedly worse. Or possibly something that didn't function at all, given that the entire sifting stage had hinged on the Perk quietly transforming what was decidedly *not-really-flour* into a flour-like substance that actually behaved.

Without that upgrade, the chitin powder probably would've just... stayed gritty industrial byproduct, and taken the whole structural foundation of the cookie down with it.

Which, I realized with dawning discomfort, was going to be a *big problem*.

Because the *entire point* of this exercise was to leave Misha with a workable recipe.

Something she could follow, reproduce, and bake on her own after I walked out the door. And if the recipe's most critical component was *my hands specifically*, then what I was actually creating here wasn't a recipe at all. Just a one-time demonstration of cookies that would never exist again unless I specifically made them.

*'And it's not even just this,' I thought, the full scope of it unfolding as I worked the last batch's dough. 'This applies to **everything**. **Every** recipe I ever make. The Perk makes it functionally impossible for me to create anything that anyone else can follow...!'*

The only theoretical workaround would be knowing *exactly* what each ingredient's plus-one-Tier version actually *was*—its proper name, what it looked like, where to source it—so I could tell people to simply use *that* instead from the get-go.

Write the recipe against the upgraded ingredients rather than the base ones, in essence.

Which was realistically... not going to happen.

That would require cataloguing *every single ingredient* I ever touched, figuring out what its superior version was called, confirming the superior version even *existed* as a purchasable product rather than as some theoretical quality gradient the System had invented—the sheer effort involved was *staggering*.

'Damn... So that's the actual cost of the Perk, huh?'

It made sense, in hindsight.

[Resourceful Chef] was undoubtedly, *insanely* powerful—free Tier upgrades on *every* ingredient I handled was the kind of effect that scaled *absurdly* well.

Of course it came with a rather massive downside. Everything in the System did.

The Perk made *me* better at the cost of making my results fundamentally *untransferable*, except for the finished product itself.

'But... If I can't give Misha a recipe she can actually follow... What exactly are we doing here?'

The cookies would be great—*probably*. Misha would be thrilled—*hopefully*. And then tomorrow she'd mix the exact same ratios with the exact same ingredients, produce something *noticeably* worse, conclude she'd done something wrong, iterate on it, fail again, and slowly spiral back toward larvae-based texture experiments.

The entire day would accomplish nothing except raising her standards to a level she couldn't possibly reach with the ingredients at hand and the recipe I had provided for her.

'It's not like I can just come by and bake cookies for the Emporium every day...'

The thought was meant to be dismissive. A flat statement of obvious impossibility.

Except my brain, treacherous thing that it was, actually paused on it.

'...Actually. Couldn't I? What's stopping me from doing exactly that?'

I turned the idea over, and it stubbornly refused to fall apart under inspection.

*'I'm already heading down to Mr. Shori's every morning anyway... and cookies **keep**. Surely they'd last a day or two, minimum, right? So it wouldn't even need to be daily—every two days, maybe even every three, if the batches are large enough... It'd generate [Cooking] experience out the ass—given the crazy quality ingredients—and I'd get regular time with Misha built into my schedule. Keep her from getting too lonely in here between customers...'*

The more I poked at the idea, the more it simply *worked*.

It was arguably an even better solution than the original plan had been.

A recipe handed over was a simple transaction — and yes, it would probably have made Misha happy enough. But a standing baking arrangement? Now we were talking about a *routine*, with a major reason to show up consistently.

A recurring, low-stakes ritual, the likes of which friendships *actually* got built out of.

'Okay... Definitely filing that one under "propose to Misha once the test batches prove the concept." No point selling her on a cookie schedule before we know the cookies are even good... But I like the idea. Good work, brain.'

For now, though, the work itself demanded my attention—and I had an audience.

Because Misha, in the meantime, had been intently observing me.

She had, for once, abandoned her usual slouch entirely—rising up to what I could only assume was close to her full natural height, which put her *several heads* above me and made her loom over my shoulder like an extremely interested lamppost.

All four eyes tracked my hands and she had produced, from somewhere, a datapad, and was taking notes with rapid, scratchy claw-strokes.

"Why does Ela fold like that instead of just stirring it all together?" she asked at one point.

"Air," I said, with the confidence of someone who had learned this fact approximately four seconds ago from a Skill prompt. "Folding keeps air in the mixture. Air makes the texture lighter, which makes for a fluffier cookie."

"Mm." *Scratch scratch scratch*. "And why does the fruit powder go into the liquid first?"

"It, ah—*blooms*. Releases the flavor compounds properly. Dry powder straight into dough just makes... *pockets*. Sad little flavor pockets."

"*Sad little flavor pockets*," Misha repeated solemnly, writing it down verbatim.

'Please never show anyone those notes,' I silently pleaded.

Because the truth was I was bullshitting my way through a solid third of her questions, as I didn't *really* know what I was doing at any deep level.

The ingredients were *far* too alien to substitute one-to-one into any of the handful of cookie recipes [Cooking] had come pre-loaded with—and it wasn't like the Skill had a deep bench there to begin with.

It was called [Cooking], *not* [Baking], after all.

And then, at the very end, came the reckoning I'd been avoiding for the better part of an hour.

The *larvae*.

I had steered around that tank with the dedication of a scav avoiding a corpo checkpoint.

Every time Misha gestured toward it, I'd found some urgent technical matter that needed *immediate* attention on the opposite counter. But her insistence had only compounded with time—"*the protein density, Ela! The texture! The customers deserve the full experience!*"—and there was a limit to how many times I could tell a friend *no*.

That limit, as it turned out, was thirty-one and I had officially reached it.

"... *Fine*," I finally conceded, on refusal number thirty-two, through teeth that were only slightly gritted. "Fine. The larvae go in. *But*." I held up a finger before her celebration could fully launch. "They go in Ela's way."

I walked to the tank and opened the lid unceremoniously.

I breathed *exclusively* through my mouth—a decision that helped with the smell and did absolutely *nothing* for the knowledge of what, exactly, I was doing here—and fished out a small handful of the pale, curled little eldritch horror embryos, feeling them shift softly against my palm in a way I was going to be revisiting in nightmares for the foreseeable future.

I carried them directly to the blender, dropped them in, and hit the button.

'Really hope the Rest Function isn't going to go kaputt again anytime soon... I can't afford dreams for the next few weeks. Months, maybe.'

"*Ela!*" Misha's cry was genuinely anguished. "The *texture!* The surprise! The customers will never experience the little *snap*—"

"Misha." I kept my thumb on the button, watching the contents render down into an anonymous, thankfully unrecognizable paste. "Ela is going to say this once, with all the love Ela has: *Nobody* is going to enjoy that surprise. Not a single customer in Delta, not a single customer in the lower layers, not *anywhere* in Neo Avalis. Ela refuses to believe that a customer exists that would enjoy the surprise—Ela is very sorry to say."

"Misha enjoyed it..."

"Misha, however, is *not* the target demographic," I reminded her, standing firm on this point, as much as the pouting Gryplik's face made me want to fold.

She grumbled extensively, but ultimately she conceded, and the paste went into the dough as an invisible, texture-free protein contribution, exactly as nature had never intended.

In the end, because I had genuinely no way to predict how any of this would behave in the oven—sweetness, spread, crumb, all of it built on ingredients I'd never even *heard* of before today—I hedged my bets.

I made three separate batches, with varying ratios: One conservative, one aggressive on the sweetener, one splitting the difference with extra binding fat.

We portioned them out, slid them into Misha's oven—which was, *naturally*, some kind of high-efficiency industrial unit that ran hotter than any oven had a right to—and waited.

And some time later, there they sat: Three trays. Twelve cookies each. Golden-adjacent, structurally intact, smelling actually quite promising in a way that genuinely surprised me.

They were ready for testing.

The taste-testing commenced with appropriate ceremony.

Misha and I stood side by side at the counter, one cookie from the first tray each, and bit in at roughly the same moment.

Or—that had been the plan, anyway.

What *actually* happened was that I bit into mine, and Misha took approximately one distracted nibble of hers before abandoning it entirely in favor of staring at *me* with all four eyes, watching my face with the intensity of a scientist monitoring a critical readout.

Which, I supposed, made a certain amount of sense.

In her mind, I was the customer stand-in—the baseline human palate against which the product needed to be measured.

Understanding did not make being watched any less unnerving, however.

Batch one—the conservative ratios—was... fine.

Which, considering where this kitchen had been two hours ago, was already a miracle worthy of documentation. The chitin flour had baked up into a clean, slightly crisp structure, the kelp sweetener gave it a mild, pleasant, faintly toasted sweetness, and the blended larvae paste was—thank *every god* this world might have had—*completely* undetectable.

But it was a bit dry. And *very* boring in terms of flavour.

Batch two—the aggressive sweetener ratio—swung *hard* the other direction.

The first bite hit with a bold, almost caramel-forward sweetness that was legitimately delightful for about three seconds, before it tipped over into cloying and low-grade nausea.

The extra syrup had also made the texture far denser and stickier than intended, gumming slightly against the teeth. *Interesting*, no doubt, but very unbalanced and not exactly what I had in mind when I thought of “cookies.”

Batch three—extra binding fat, moderate sweetness bump—however, was *the one*.

I knew it the moment my teeth went through it.

The structure gave that perfect, gentle resistance before yielding into a soft, tender crumb.

The sweetness sat right in the pocket—satisfying without overpowering, rounded off by the faint toasty note of the chitin and a whisper of the salt derivative pulling everything together.

Even the mouthfeel was right: Moist without being overly greasy and leaving stains everywhere, but also substantial without being *too* heavy.

It tasted, in short, like an *actual cookie*. A *damn* good one, at that.

"This one," I said, holding up the batch-three cookie. "This is the one. No contest."

"Mm." Misha finally deigned to properly eat her own samples, working through all three in quick, methodical succession, her ear tufts twitching thoughtfully with each.

She chewed the batch-three sample very slowly and her four eyes narrowed.

"How does Misha feel about them?" I prodded, watching her. "Honestly."

"... They are good," she admitted semi-reluctantly. "The texture is—" she made a vague, frustrated gesture with one clawed hand, "*—cohesive*. It's lacking a *surprise snap*, but Misha assumes that is preferred by customers, then..."

The warm, fuzzy feeling that bloomed in my chest at that was entirely disproportionate to the actual compliment, but I did not care one bit.

I had managed to actually succeed!

"*However*," Misha continued immediately, one claw shooting up, "Misha's were vastly superior in macros. *Vastly!*"

"Completely agreed," I agreed immediately.

Her cookies *had* been some kind of insane superfood—a nutritional powerhouse compressed into snack form. They'd also *tasted* exactly the way superfoods always taste, which was to say: Like an actual science experiment.

That was the eternal tradeoff, apparently constant across worlds.

As we finished cleaning up the tasting, a series of familiar System notification chimes went off in the back of my head—several of them, stacking up in quick succession.

I flicked a glance at the indicator, then deliberately set them aside for later, because there was a pitch I wanted to make first.

"So," I said, casually, as I stacked the trays. "Ela had a thought. What if Ela just... came by and baked these for Misha? Every few days?"

Misha's head tilted.

"Think about it," I continued, warming to the sell. "Misha wouldn't have to spend any time on baking—Misha could stay focused on the actual projects, the fabrication work, the store... And the customers would still get their snacks, fresh, on a rotation. Ela comes by every few days, makes a new batch—how often exactly depends on how fast they go stale, which we still need to test, or how fast customers clear the bowl, of course. Whichever comes first, really."

Misha went quiet, considering. And then, as she so often did when thinking hard, she started muttering to herself in Gryplik—entirely unselfconscious, having no idea I could follow every word.

{“...Misha has been so deep inside this project, Misha does not know what to do now that it is... finished? Is it finished? It is practically finished, yes... Misha never actually thought about what finishing would mean, though. The recipe completes, and then—then someone must bake it? Every few days... Forever! That is...”} Her ear tufts flattened. *{“That is very troublesome. Misha did not have a plan for the plan succeeding...”}*

I kept my face in a state of polite, uncomprehending patience through sheer application of [Elemental Balance], because there was absolutely no acceptable way for me to be reacting to any of this.

{“But friend Ela offers to help. Friend Ela, who seems to genuinely enjoy the baking—despite mistreating the larvae so terribly! The poor larvae... blended like common paste—} she paused mournfully for a few moments, *{—and... hm. Hmmm. Hours spent baking in Misha's kitchen are hours friend Ela is not elsewhere getting shot at, isn't it? Even a few hours a week are a few hours a week where Ela is not getting killed... That is...”}*

Her eyes brightened by degrees. *{“That is a **huge** advantage, actually. Yes. Yes, this solves several problems at once, actually!”}*

'Am I being scheduled for protective custody via cookies right now or something...?'

Misha's attention snapped back to me, all four eyes refocusing, and she gave a single decisive nod.

"Misha agrees to the arrangement," she declared. "Timetable pending experimentation—Misha *must* determine how long the snacks last. Both in staleness *and* in customer consumption rate, yes." The notepad came back out. "Ela will return within three days for the first data point."

"Deal," I said, and stuck out my hand.

Misha shook it with *great* formality, then immediately ruined the gravitas by using the grip to pull me into a hug. "This was very fun. Misha thanks friend Ela for the assistance."

I returned it without hesitation, wrapping my arms around her lithe frame and giving her a proper squeeze—but being careful not to actually crush the Gyplik's bones by accident.

"Ela had fun too," I said and truly meant it.

Despite the larvae, the chitin flour, the four bites of insect *embryo* I would carry with me to my grave. Somewhere between the ingredient inventory and the third tray of cookies, the whole afternoon had quietly turned into exactly the kind of normal, warm, unremarkable time that my life had been running a severe deficit on lately.

"Ela also thanks Misha. For the fun time and the shard help, of course."

"Yes, yes." She patted my back twice, then held me out at arm's length, all four eyes fixing me with mock sternness. "Ela comes back in three days, with baking hands and *no* dangerous shards. *Only* boring things. Misha was *promised* boring things."

"Boring things," I agreed, laughing. "Ela promises. Again."

And this time, walking out of the Emporium with the early afternoon-time artificial light of the 31st floor thoroughfare washing over me and the smell of fresh-baked cookies still clinging to my clothes, I fully intended to keep it...