

## Choco

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You wake at the crack of dawn — eyes bright, head clear — and immediately get to work, loading the skewered balls of broiled rice flour and other treats from the freezer into your little food cart, before you tie the reins on yourself and head off down the beaten path to start your day.

Dango, as you've learned in your little cookbook of snacks, is a treat made from combining rice flour with water and potentially some other things to knead into a sort of dough, before cutting the mass up and rolling it into small balls to cook and stick on a skewer, with any number of toppings to be added to spice up the mild, sweet base flavor. It's not like you're a complete expert on the subject matter, though. On the contrary, you'd only started making the snack for yourself some months ago, and the food cart idea was a relatively recent addition when you decided to make full use of your continued passion (after a couple taste tests from some willing volunteers — you mean friends, of course). A bit of a change from practicing magic and creating potions, but at least it's a bit better for practical use outside the field, unlike the former, and in most cases won't make you high, have you come down with a case of magical or chemical intoxication, or just outright kill you if you so much as get the concentrations wrong, like the latter. If you don't add the murderous ingredients yourself, that is.

All things considered, you think you're enjoying this even more than the magic and potions interests, though that might just be the fixation speaking. Possibly so. After all, haven't you pored through about the same number of books and websites and practical experimentations, just as you did for your previous two interests? Ah. But you shake your head — that doesn't matter now, when you can see the treeline finally beginning to thin, and the town past the prairie is just on the horizon. The sun gradually peeks from the eastward hills, tinting the dawn a rosy orange amidst the brightening sky, the myriad morning clouds reflecting its thick, golden light. A perfect Galabastarin sunrise. You don't think you'll tire of seeing this every day.

The streets of Andediluvian are quiet as you stroll into town, finding your place on the side of the road as the first roadside stalls begin to set up within this designated length of walkway. You too loosen yourself from the harness and add some magical coal to the stove, before you light it all up with a hot spark and shield yourself; the flame crackles to life, a miniature sun of its own in the hearth, and it should be good to continue burning from now until noon. Perfect conditions for preparing today's special, and good for warming up the treats some ala roasting them on an open flame.

With that, Choco's Choco Dango is officially open for business.

(To be frank though, it's not your signature cocoa-powdered treat that is your favorite variation of all the confectionery, but with your name being as is, labeling the stall with any other flavor would just be a whole crockpot of strange.)

Early morning, right as the sun rises, is typically the least busy hour of the day, especially on a weekend. There's barely any traffic, buying you time to snack on a lemon-zested skewer and roast a cup of tea over the fire, both good components in a healthy, filling breakfast. The lemon dango in particular is a fruity blend of sour and sweet — though just a smidgen too sour, you'd say. Best to cut back a bit on the zesting next time round, and you hope that you'll remember your mental note of that.

Once the sky has turned its usual shade of pale indigo, you've finished most of your own self-care to tend to rush hour period one, which is oddly exclusive to off-days and holidays. The first day you'd worked was on a Saturday one month ago, and you were so sure with the late morning crowd that it would be the norm for the weekdays...well, good source of energy it may be, it turns out that the early birds of Andediluvian much favored their morning coffee to get them started for work. Roadside and homemade breakfasts are a specialty reserved for off-duty, it seems.

It still flatters you to no end that you've got regulars turning up at the stall, even with it only being up a month. Some humans, some Drakiri like you, some something else entirely, but they're all here

on the grounds of patronizing your humble stall, so you pick out Anika's choice tri-colored sweet, cut the medium-size balls into smaller pieces for the little scruffy Sprite kid who often hangs around, and fetch a few skewers of literal meatballs for Joanne, who's always so excited for meatball dango Sunday and Wednesday, and the friends she's brought along today. What in the world did you do, you wonder as you watch the group of katydids sharing a joke over their meal, to deserve any of this attention?

Well, no matter. It's a new day, a new slice of life; and there's nothing wrong with enjoying the camaraderie and the peace, isn't there?

The fire runs till half-past noon, which coincidentally just so happens to be the start of your regularly-scheduled breaktime. Andediluvian has seen road hawkers long enough to provide an actual parking space for them within town, all within walking distance while hauling your cart over. It's just a short distance down the street of Hubur, near the generally more congested shops and malls that line the roadside, so it'll be convenient for you to park your cart right over there and peddle your goods just outside the Watercourse Mall, where you'll get quite a bit of traffic.

For now, though, you're off for some actual lunch. Locking your food stall securely in place, you wander off to the street of

Mixing Waters, near the ocean and all its beaches, and you can practically taste the sea salt on the wind even when you're at the front door of the local fusion sushi eatery. You come here every Sunday you get, and today is no exception, especially with the roe pasta being as fresh as it is. (Really though, the seafood here's always fresh. Guess that's what happens when one sets up shop near the sea.)

As much as you'd like to admire the sunlight glittering off the frothy waves outside as kids roughhouse and splash each other in the water, there's only so much time in the world you have. Not that you leave with any lingering regrets, though, for you know the sea will always be right where you left it. Low maintenance. Perfect for allowing you to head back and haul one particular food cart of yours to the outside of the mall, and once you've got the preparations done, you're ready to face the second wave of customers.

If not immediately, for late afternoon is typically when things start to pick up. Around this time is still relatively tame, even if it's not the same lazy pace as early morning. You warm up and serve your dango, and in your flow, almost mistake the tall, messy-haired lady visiting your stall for a normal patron.

"Hello, Choco." The Lady greets you, bending down so as to meet your eyes. Her real form is that of a large Dracus, you'd know —

but even when she's taking the form of a human for convenience's sake, she still towers over both you and the cart by a wide margin.

"Hey there, Milady!" You beam, and gesture to the confectioneries you have on display. "Here to buy some dango? It's three dollars a skewer."

"Hmm. Well, I was just dropping by, but...sure. You still got the lemon ones?"

You check your supply; sure enough, you do have a few left, but you're low on stock. "Yep, still got a few. Would you like them chilled or warm, Milady?"

"...chilled would be nice, thank you."

She pays her fee and you serve up the yellow skewered treats, and if she ever minded about your earlier gripe with it being slightly too sour, she either doesn't notice or care. "'Tis quite lovely, as usual. Refreshing sour aftertaste, as well."

Or she actually likes it. "Why, thank you!" You pause for a moment, waiting for her to finish chewing before you continue. "I thought you'd be out of town today? Said you'd be off to Marriss a week ago to look at its history lore stuff and all that."

If anything, she just chuckles. "For the millionth time, Choco, ancient mythology isn't just 'history lore stuff'."

"Mythology, historillogy, lorillogy — they're all the same logies in my book," you quip back as you roast a skewer over the fire for another customer.

"The latter two don't even exist!"

Now that gets a good laugh out of you. "Hah! Anyways, you're back early from your trip. What happened?"

"Oh, you know...researching the ancient spells said to be woven into the land, and all that. You see..." As you continue to tend to the stall, she starts on a long explanation of how she went off to Iceclaw Pass, ran some tests, found someone freezing in the cold and took them to the nearest town to recover from near-frostbite, and at that point the magical pulse she was studying had become undetectable, or something, and the cold was getting to her so she thought she'd return here.

"Heh. Funny how the minute you come back, you want a nice cold dango," you say, and the amused smirk on her face doesn't go unnoticed by you.

"Very funny, Choco...say, how's the stall been doing?"

You gesture to said food cart itself with a free hand. "It's been right here as it's always been," you joke. "Business has been alright, though. Still supporting the cost of the ingredients enough, though it's gotten busier recently in the evenings."

"Hmm. Like afternoon-level busy?"

"No, not quite at that point yet...it's still chillier than midday, but a bit livelier than usual. You think it might have something to do with the ancient energies of Halloween?"

"The ancient energies of—" Milady pauses a moment, and does a double take. "—uh, I mean, it's not ancient, per se, but the magic is definitely still entwined somewhere within the primal threads, I guess?"

"So it's like a bunch of magicals influencing the overall magical vibe?"

"...close enough." She shrugs. "I guess you can put it that way..."

"Cool. Means it'll peak out on the day itself and I'll get one heck of a lotta business rolling in on that day," you say.

"Huh. Thought you didn't care about money."

"Yeah, I don't," you clarify, "but it's nice to know that I'd be really fueling the festive spirit by selling all these sweets, y'know? Making people happy. Ain't that nice?"

"I thought Halloween was supposed to be about scaring the living daylights out of people."

"I can put cherry filling in the dango and do that too," you suggest.

"Hmm, red insides. A nice bright and warm color."

"It's sure to up their vitality and cheer them up at the same time, right?"

"Totally."

Color theory jokes aside, you sell your dango while Milady sits back and enjoys the view, occasionally commenting on the patrons who look your way. Must be some good comments, you think, because you've sold out your stock by late afternoon, slightly before the sun's due to set. Seems you won't have to stay here till early evening.

"Packing up?" Milady asks as you extinguish the fire with an ice spell of your own, and strap the essentials to the cart. You nod and once you're done with all the preparations, hoist the reins around yourself as you shift back to your standard Drakiri form.

"Alrighty, that should be the last of that — well, I'll see you around, Milady!" You smile at her brightly and wave, and she bids you farewell in turn.

"Thanks for the talk and the dango, Choco!" She says. "Want to hang out at the Stones tomorrow for tea?"

"Sure!" You call back. How could you ever miss a chance for some good tea, anyway?

The road back is all the same gravel, the same trees, yet there's something whimsically alluring about the fireflies coming out to play as the sun begins to set below the horizon, dusky orange slowly fading to a deep, twilight indigo.

The second you get home, you wash the utensils, stock the cart with fresh skewer sticks, boil yourself a cup of matcha tea and warm up leftovers in the fridge as you watch the sun set below from the horizon, evening becoming starry, starry night by the time you've finished dinner. There's no need to rush tomorrow, not when the next day is your off day and you'll be free to meet up with Milady, so you let yourself take longer than usual in the shower and in combing the numerous tangles out of your mane.

You hit the bed feeling just as you did at the crack of dawn — eyes bright, head clear, and quick to doze off the very second you get comfortable.