

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio

15

Average of 25 ●
× 365 days
× 300 years
× (2+2 EXP)
Level 99

I've Been Killing
SLIMES for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level



I've Been Killing
SLIMES for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level.

 **Kisetsu Morita** **15**
Illustration by Benio

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Slime Spirit (Younger)
Shalsha

Witch of the Highlands
Azusa

Slime Spirit (Elder)
Falfa

Red Dragon-Girl
Laika



I'm
looking
them in the
eye right
now!

How
could you
look your
daughters
in the eye
after this?

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Objection!
Objection!

The culprit...is you, Mom!

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BONUS

Case Files of the Great Detectives Falfa & Shalsha

BONUS

**Laika's Lessons: A Day of Learning from
the House in the Highlands' Inhabitants**

Story by Kisetsu Morita Illustration by Benio

She slaughtered slimes for 300 years...

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I've Been Killing **SLIMES** for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level 15

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio



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ON
NEW YORK

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I've Been Killing SLIMES for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level 15

KISETSU MORITA

Translation by Tristan Hill

Cover art by Benio

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SLIME TAOSHITE SANBYAKUNEN, SHIRANAIUCHINI LEVEL MAX NI
NATTEMASHITA vol. 15

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I've Been Killing **SLIMES** for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level 10





AZUSA AIZAWA

The protagonist. Commonly known as the Witch of the Highlands. A girl (?) who was reincarnated as an immortal witch with the appearance of a seventeen-year-old. Before she knew what was happening, she'd become the strongest being in the world. Although she's had some rough times, it has ultimately given her a family, and she's delighted about it.

BEELZE- BUB

A high-ranking demon known as the Lord of the Flies and the demons' minister of agriculture. She treats Falfa and Shalsha as her own nieces and frequently shuttles between the demon realm and the house in the highlands. She's also Azusa's reliable "big sister" surrogate.





FALFA AND SHALSHA

Spirit sisters born from a conglomeration of slime souls. Falfa, the older sister, is a carefree girl who's honest about her own feelings. Shalsha, the younger sister, is considerate and attentive to others. They both love their mother, Azusa.

LAIKA AND FLATORTE

Red and blue dragon-girls who live in the house in the highlands. Laika is Azusa's apprentice and a good, hardworking girl. Flatorte is a cheerful, energetic girl who obeys what Azusa says. They tend to compete with each other as fellow dragons.



HALKARA

A young elf woman and Azusa's apprentice. She is an upstanding CEO who runs a company using her knowledge of mushrooms, but in the house in the highlands, she's known for her knack for screwing up.



ROSALIE

A ghost girl and resident of the house in the highlands. She's devoted to Azusa, who didn't shy away from her as a ghost and instead reached out to her. She can go through walls but can't touch people. She can also possess others.

SANDRA

A mandragora girl. After growing for three hundred years, she gained sentience and the ability to move around. She is a literal plant and lives in the vegetable garden in the house in the highlands. She's often stubborn and puts up a front, but she also craves the company of others.



PECORA (PROVATO PECORA ARIÉS)

The Demon King. A girl with a devilish temperament who loves to use her power and influence to bewilder her subordinates and Azusa. She actually has a masochistic desire to be subordinate to someone stronger than she is, and she adores Azusa.





GOODLY GODLY GODNESS

The very being who reincarnated Azusa into this world. An upbeat and affable but careless goddess who fits perfectly in this world. She has a soft spot for women and tends to make lenient decisions.

THE GODDESS NINTAN

A goddess long worshipped in this world. She is a troublesome one, always looking down on others and turning people she doesn't like into frogs, but after losing a fight to a human (Azusa, who broke the level cap), she softened a bit.



DEKIE (DEKYARI'TOSDE)

An elder god who has existed in this world since ancient times.

Dekie is uninhibited, has an uncanny manner of speaking, and can change her form at will.

The other gods feared that she would destroy the world on a whim, and they sealed her away deep underground. After the seal was undone, she lost a fight with Azusa and wound up working under Nintan. She is currently enjoying her life on the surface (using a fixed form, on account of her true appearance being an embodiment of pure chaos).





YUFUFU

A droplet spirit (a variety of water spirit). She has a great broad-mindedness that can coax even Azusa—she's everyone's momma who pokes her nose in everyone's business.

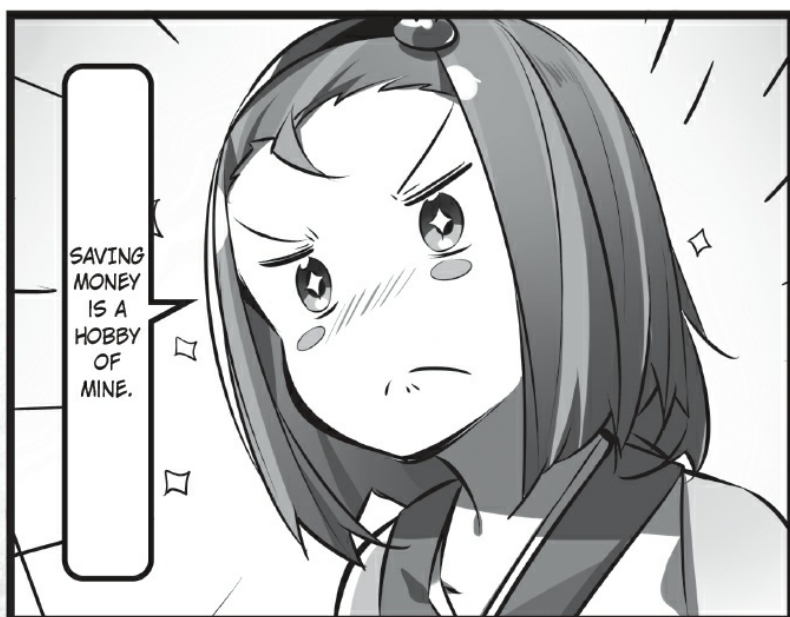
CANHEIN

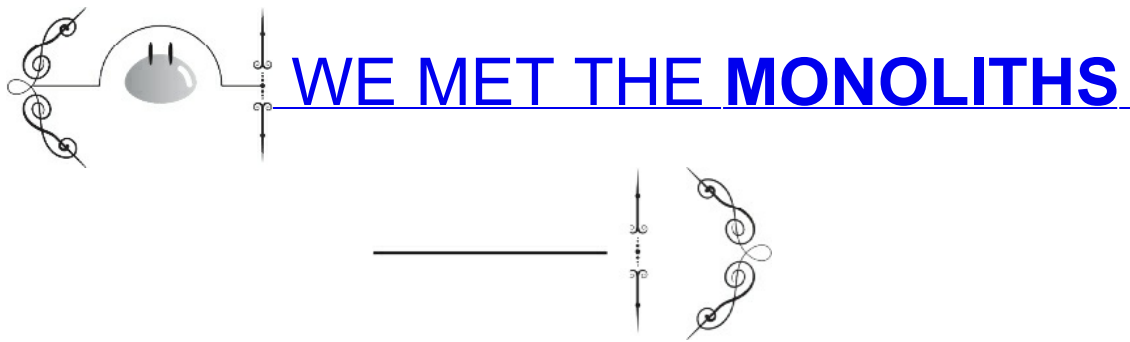
A dark elven phantom thief. Canhein sent a letter of warning to Azusa's family and had a showdown with them (which she lost). She hopes to erase all traces of her ancestor Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser's infamy (which she believes she inherited) from the world, but she is clumsy and has no talent for thievery. She is polite, courteous, and utterly unsuited to work as a phantom thief.



FIGHTSLY

The Fighter Slime who took the form of a human to master martial arts. She wants to become the strongest martial artist ever with her Fighsly-style slime fist, but she has a less-noble love of money. Currently training as Beelzebub's apprentice.





It all started a few days back, when Beelzebub came over.

“I shall be paying a visit to the home of a rather amusing group of demons in the near future. Feel free to come along, and bring the girls with you, if you’d like! You can meet me at Vanzeld Castle, and we shall fly on wyverns the rest of the way.”

“When you say I should ‘feel free’ to bring the girls, does that mean I can leave them behind if I don’t want to?” I asked.

“Absolutely not. Bring them.”

“Then you should’ve said that in the first place!” I snapped. It wasn’t hard to imagine Beelzebub’s rejection if I’d shown up on my own.

“If you dare to come alone, then I shan’t guide you the rest of the way! Or lend you a wyvern, for that matter!”

“Petty much?!”

This was more or less business as usual for us, but since she went out of her way to provide me with a schedule for the visit, I knew she’d give me the third degree if I blew off the trip without a very good excuse. Plus, we didn’t usually have any set plans, and the date of Beelzebub’s trip was no exception.

And so Falfa, Shalsha, Sandra, and I climbed up onto Laika’s back and flew off toward the demon lands. Carrying four adults would have worn Laika out pretty quickly, but since three of the four were kids, she was able to manage. Sandra was clinging to my back, with Shalsha sitting behind her and Falfa holding up the rear.

“Is everyone okay back there?” I asked.

“Don’t worry,” said Sandra. “I’m using my vines to hold us all in place.”

Now that she mentioned it, I noticed that her vines had reached their way up to me, too. I idly wondered whether mandragoras even had vines in the first place, but then again, growing a few vines would have been a small feat compared to mimicking a human form.

“We’re strapped in nice and tight, Mommy!” Falfa called out from behind me.

“We’re not rocking at all,” added Shalsha.

Okay, so these vines are literally just seat-belts, aren’t they?

“I wonder what Beelzebub meant by ‘amusing’ demons, though,” I said. “She couldn’t have been talking about demon comedians or anything like that, right...?”

“I believe that when Beelzebub said ‘amusing,’ she may have meant it in the sense of *intriguing*, Lady Azusa,” said Laika. “Perhaps we’re on our way to the homeland of a demon species with a unique and fascinating way of life.”

Leave it to Laika to provide an intellectual explanation for all this.

“A ‘fascinating way of life,’ huh...? You might be right, but you could say that about pretty much all demons, couldn’t you?”

From a normal human’s perspective, crows, moles, and kangaroos were all pretty fascinating, too. I didn’t know whether kangaroos existed in this world, but I figured they were probably out there somewhere.

Dragons and spirits were plenty fascinating as well, of course. Their way of life was similar to a human’s, but there were still many cultural differences.

When it came to demons, their sheer variety only made that all the more true. The word *demon* did not refer to a particular species, but it was a blanket term for the various intelligent life-forms that lived in the demon lands. Looking at it that way, that diversity was probably inevitable. The point was, all that variation meant there were sure to be a ton of demons with unusual lifestyles out there.

“Falfa wants to watch a demon shed their skin! I’ve never seen that happen

before!”

“Shalsha wants to see one regenerate a severed tail.”

“If we were talking about humans, I’d be skeptical,” I said. “But I can imagine a demon doing both those things...”

Some demons look an awful lot like lizards, after all. Actually, come to think of it, do dragons shed their skin? They’re pretty lizard-like, too, in a manner of speaking! It would probably be super rude to just come out and ask Laika that, though, so I guess I’ll keep my mouth shut this time.

“Hey, do dragons shed their skin? I’m a plant, so I don’t know these things. Teach me.”

Never mind, Sandra asked anyway!

“No, we don’t,” said Laika. “To the best of my knowledge, there are no varieties of dragon that shed their skin!”

Thanks to Sandra, I’d obtained a new piece of dragon lore: They didn’t shed, period.

Yeah, that’s probably for the best... I might seriously freak out if I found Laika’s or Flatorte’s empty husk lying around the house...

We continued flying toward the demon lands, occasionally stopping to rest or sleep at an inn so Laika didn’t grow too tired to fly safely. We made it to Vanzeld on the exact day Beelzebub had told me to be there, arriving just a little past midday.

We’d been told to show up to a banquet that Pecora would be hosting that day. Beelzebub would be attending, too, so the timing worked out perfectly. It seemed like a good chance for my daughters to learn some table manners, so I was all for it.

Partway through the banquet, Pecora seemed to remember something she’d been meaning to talk about.

“Come to think of it, Beelzebub,” said Pecora, “you’ll be leaving for your business trip to Slab Hill tomorrow, won’t you?” Apparently, she had her minister of agriculture’s schedule committed to memory.

“Indeed, for the first time in quite a long while,” Beelzebub replied.

I guess that answers the question of where we’re going. I wonder if it’s actually just a hill with a slab on it?

“There’s a type of vegetable that’s only cultivated in that region,” Beelzebub continued. “The locals, for better or worse, are not inclined toward change in any form. As such, they’ve been farming the same crops since time immemorial without making any effort to selectively breed them.”

Beelzebub’s explanation raised an immediate concern in my mind.

“Um, hey,” I said. “Just to be sure—do these locals have anything against outsiders showing up in their territory?” I wasn’t worried about my own safety, but since my daughters would be tagging along, it seemed like a good idea to double-check.

“Worry not. Slab Hill is a welcoming land, and you shan’t experience any such troubles. ’Tis simply slow-moving.”

“A slow-moving land”? I’m pretty sure lands don’t usually move at all, actually!

“Isn’t it just?” said Pecora. “The ones who live there don’t have much need for money, so it’s a really laid-back sort of place. It might be the slowest-changing region in all the demon lands.”

Oh, so it’s the people who live there who are slow-moving, not the land itself. I guess they just sit around most of the time.

“Oh, I know!” I exclaimed. “I bet we’re visiting a town of gargoyles, right? They must spend most of their time in statue mode!”

“Wrong,” said Beelzebub. “Also, being as gargoyles need to eat, they move on a regular basis. If they look like stone to you, ’tis simply your own prejudice.”

“Okay, then are they living suits of armor or something like that...?”

“You’re on entirely the wrong track. Also, a living suit of armor would be closer to a monster than a demon. It wouldn’t have the intellect to communicate.”

Okay, so then who are we visiting?

“Stop stringing us along and tell us who we’re going to see!” Sandra demanded. Apparently, she was just as curious as I was.

“Nay, I think not. This is surely the best time to string you along, is it not? But perhaps I shall give you a hint, at least,” Beelzebub said with a self-satisfied smirk. She was clearly enjoying herself as she paused to think up the promised hint.

“Hey, Falfa,” I whispered, “if you say ‘Beelzebub, we won’t come over to play anymore if you don’t tell us what’s going on right now,’ I think she’ll fess up!”

“Oh no you don’t!” Beelzebub shouted. “That’s foul play! Have some shame, you coward!”

Whoops—earned myself a scolding. Though I guess it is bad form to drag a kid into things like this.

“Hmm... How about this: The residents of Slab Hill are rather...cutting-edge,” said Beelzebub.

“‘Cutting-edge’? You mean, like, avant-garde?”

Are they a bunch of eccentric artists, maybe? I was starting to picture a village of demons wearing loud and outrageous outfits.

“That does sound like an intriguing place. Shalsha is extremely interested,” said Shalsha.

“Maybe we’ll find a bunch of art galleries there,” suggested Laika. She seemed instantly drawn to the prospect as well.

This was actually starting to sound like a good place to bring my daughters. Maybe they’d have a real cultural experience there...or so I thought. An instant later, however, I realized my theory had a massive hole in it.

“Oh, wait! If this was a thriving village of cutting-edge artists, then it wouldn’t be slow to change, would it?”

Plenty of artists took tradition very seriously, sure. But Beelzebub wasn’t exactly an art person herself, and it was hard to imagine her describing an artist as “uninclined to change,” however traditional their work might be.

“Worry not. You’ll understand when we arrive tomorrow. It will all make

sense after a single glance, in fact, and it would be no fun to spoil the surprise, so I shan't say a word more on the subject." Beelzebub flashed us another obnoxious smirk.

"Psst, Shalsha—try saying 'If you don't tell me what they're like, I won't come over to play anymore!'"

"As I said before, dragging the girls into this is foul play! Stop it at once!"



The next day, we mounted up on wyverns and made for Slab Hill, the home of these supposedly fascinating demons.

"Shalsha predicts that a place called Slab Hill must be a deeply historical location," said Shalsha. "Perhaps it's a hill covered in ancient stone slabs with the deeds and accomplishments of their creators inscribed upon them."

Interesting. I could believe that.

We hadn't even arrived yet, and Shalsha was already brimming with excitement for what we might find. Her expression hadn't changed much, but I could tell she was in high spirits. I wasn't convinced that a hill covered in old slabs would be any fun for me, but for Shalsha and Laika, at least, it would be a hit.

"I could see that!" I said. "*Slab Hill* does sound like it could be the site of an ancient city or something, just judging by the name."

"You'll understand in due time," said Beelzebub. She knew the answer, of course, but she merely smirked instead of clarifying.

Judging by her response, I had a feeling it wasn't going to be quite as simple as a bunch of stone slabs with historical records carved into them. I also didn't like the idea of dancing to Beelzebub's tune, so I decided to abandon that line of thought and throw out a totally random theory.

"I bet it's exactly what it sounds like: a hill where the Slabs live! We'll be meeting Mr. Slab and his family before we know it!"

"Ugh!" Beelzebub grunted. "That...is essentially correct. You've taken the fun out of this, Azusa."

I was right?! But I was just guessing at random!

Just then, the wyverns began to descend. It seemed we were nearing our destination.

“Look—there it is! Slab Hill lies just over yonder,” said Beelzebub.



The instant our wyverns touched down, I picked out our destination’s most distinctive feature. A ton of slabs—or, well, objects that I could describe as slabs—were scattered all over the place. They were blocklike; some were black, some purple, some standing upright, and some fallen onto their sides.

“What is this place...? Are we in an artist’s garden or something?” I asked.

Some artists display their works in parks and similar spaces. Maybe that’s what’s happening here. Some sorts of art only work if you have a big, open space to set them up in. At a glance, this certainly feels like the site of something like that. I may not know how to evaluate art, but I can at least tell when something feels artsy!

“Isn’t this basically what Shalsha predicted?” I asked. “Looks like a collection of stone slabs to me.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Beelzebub replied. “And wait—you mean to tell me your earlier remark was but a blind guess? I take back what I said about you being correct.”

“Correct is still correct even if it was pure dumb luck.”

As we chatted, I approached one of the black blocks. It was probably about two and a half meters tall, and it was inscribed with writing. The upper section was in demon script, while the lower section was in the language we typically used. It read:

“WELCOME TO SLAB HILL, THE HOME OF THE MONOLITHS!”

“Oh, monoliths? Those are basically big stone walls, right?” I mused. *Though I guess in this case, it’s probably the name of a race of demons...*

“Oh, Falfa sees now! It’s true! They’re all monoliths!” Falfa shouted with glee as she sped off, running up to inspect one stone slab after another. Watching

her, I was reminded of a little kid running around an art exhibit.

“The monoliths are a species of demon that resembles walls or slabs in form, and they’re one of the most unusual races of demon in the world,” said Shalsha, gazing with keen interest at the cluster of stone slabs. “They’re virtually never seen around Vanzeld, so Shalsha can say with reasonable confidence this is my first encounter with one.”

“Hmph. Walls, huh?” muttered Sandra. “I wonder if roots can grow in them.”

That thought’s kind of horrifying to visualize, so I wish you’d kept it to yourself, Sandra.

“I see... I have never encountered this monolith species, either,” said Laika. “Or at least not that I know of. It’s such a strange feeling to see so many all at once. It’s almost as if I’m dreaming...”

“I know what you mean,” I agreed. “It feels like I somehow got lost in a maze of them.”

There weren’t any buildings nearby that looked like houses to me. In fact, I could barely see any structures at all amid the sea of monoliths stretching into the distance. (Though it was difficult not to see the monoliths themselves as structures, especially since none of them had moved an inch.)

“Well? Amusing, are they not?” said Beelzebub. “Even in the demon lands, you’ll never find another place with so many of them. This is a valuable experience, so you’d do well to enjoy it.”

“I guess this explains your hint about the locals being ‘cutting-edge’...”

I could see a few monoliths with corners that were very slightly rounded, but by and large, they were extremely sharp and angular. I wasn’t expecting Beelzebub to take us to a theme park or anything, but even with my expectations set low, finding a way to “enjoy” this place seemed like a pretty tall order.

“So, Beelzebub,” I said. “I appreciate you bringing us out here and all, but I have no idea how I’m supposed to get anything out of a place like this, so if you could serve as our guide—”

“I must see to my work as the minister of agriculture, so regrettably, I shall have to leave the girls in your care for the time being. Treat them as if they were your own.”

“They *are* my own! I’m their mom!”

Beelzebub ignored my retort entirely, bringing out her wings and flapping off to who knows where.

I really wish she’d told me we’d have a ton of free time... I went into this totally blind! How am I supposed to know where any of the tourist attractions are?!

I took another look around the vicinity. Needless to say, it was full of nothing but monoliths.

Agh! This is like going on an overseas trip with a friend who knows all about the destination, only to have that friend ditch you the moment you arrive!

What am I supposed to do now...? If this was a city in a foreign country, I could at least walk around and enjoy the sights, but the only sights around here are monoliths, monoliths, and more monoliths...

Judging by the look on a certain family member’s face, she was experiencing the same sort of anxiety that I was.

“Lady Azusa...? I’d like for us to stick together, if you don’t mind,” said Laika. “For some reason, I can’t seem to keep my composure. It feels like I’ve been abandoned in a town in some foreign land...”

“I know exactly what you mean! I agree completely!”

Laika, an outlandishly powerful dragon-girl, was flushed and fidgeting uncomfortably. It seemed she was pretty sensitive when it came to this sort of thing.

My daughters, on the other hand, had left Laika and me in the dust. They were some distance ahead, and judging by the way they were craning their necks to look up at a monolith, I figured they were reading an inscription. They had initiative—something Laika and I lacked.

I took Laika by the hand.

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m not sure I’d have the courage to walk around in a place like this alone. I have a feeling we can push through if we’re together, though, one way or another!”

Like how crossing on a red light isn’t scary as long as you do it with a friend! Not that they have traffic lights in this world.

“Y-yes, you’re right...,” Laika replied. “I must admit, this is rather reassuring.”

“Oh? That’s great! Okay, let’s go take a look around!”

“B-but also...walking around holding hands is rather embarrassing, isn’t it...?”

Laika’s face was still bright red. *She sure is a shy one, huh?*

“Oh, it’s fine! It’s totally normal for a couple girls to walk around holding hands, even in this world. Let’s get a move on! Though I, uhhh...don’t really know where to go... I guess we could ask a monolith?” I suggested.

“Perhaps, but do you think they’ll answer us? I haven’t heard them say so much as a single word so far.”

Laika had a point. Slab Hill was silent as the grave. There were monoliths every way you turned, but there was no hint of any other people around. For the time being, Laika and I stepped close to a shiny black monolith standing nearby.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I don’t suppose you know of any good places to sightsee around here?”

The next carriage is currently two stops away.

②③ Bound for the Ogre Valley terminal by way of Slab Hill Hospital.

It’s like an info sign at a bus stop!

©Benio



“Um, sorry... We’re not actually interested in catching a carriage. But do you know any tourist attractions nearby...?” I asked hopefully.

“Apologies. I am currently working as the carriage line’s navigation system and cannot speak with you at this time.”

“You mean this is your job...?”

“Now that I look at it,” said Laika, “there’s a carriage timetable written out farther down. It even has the fares required for each stop along the line.”

“I guess this is basically just a bus stop...”

Okay, but with all the monoliths around here, how were we supposed to figure out that this one in particular was the bus stop...?

“Delays have been known to occur when carriage drivers are unable to find their stops. Please plan accordingly.”

“See?! It’s totally confusing!” I exclaimed.

Of course they get lost! How’s anyone supposed to find their way around in a place like this?

“All right, we’re not getting anywhere with this,” I said. “Let’s try asking that monolith over there instead.” I pulled Laika along by the hand. *Amazing how having someone with you can make you more proactive.*

We arrived at a monolith a little taller than the bus stop monolith—or whatever you wanted to call it—from before.

“Ummm, hi!” I said. “I was wondering if I could ask you some questions about Slab Hill?”

“I’m sorry. I’m currently working as part of an installation created by an artist from Vanzeld and am unable to show you around. The title of this piece is *Being*.”

“So some of them really *are* pieces of art!”

I have no idea how I’m supposed to tell the art monoliths from the normal monoliths without asking! This is so confusing...

I was gradually working up the nerve to tackle this place head-on. Clearly, I

had no choice but to question the monoliths one by one until I got some answers. Surely that would accomplish *something* at the very least? The place was lousy with monoliths in every direction, so I figured there had to be one who was both helpful and unoccupied!

We ended up talking to a very narrow—and consequently rather tall-looking—monolith next.

“Scuse me!” I said. “Do you know of any tourist attractions on Slab Hill that we could go see?”

“Tourist attractions? Ha-ha-ha! As if we’d have any of those!”

So much for hometown pride!

“W-well, in that case, would you mind teaching us a little about your people?” asked Laika, stepping in to back me up. “We’re not monoliths, and we’re very curious about your lifestyle.” She had a point—learning about how the monoliths lived felt like it could count as a tourist attraction in its own right.

“Okay, okay! If you want a guide, I’m your man—follow me!”

The monolith started slowly but surely rumbling across the ground, almost like it was being dragged. *Well, looks like that’s how they move...*

“So you said, ‘I’m your man,’” I noted. “Does that mean you’re, well, a man?”

“Nah, not really. Monoliths don’t have biological sexes. We’re basically just walls, so why would we?”

“Guess I can’t argue with that...”

Laika and I followed after the monolith. Our unplanned excursion was finally moving along.

“So to start, most monoliths are tall and narrow. I bet that’s how you picture us when you hear the word *monolith*, right?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah, I do,” I agreed. Glancing around, I saw that most of the monoliths in our vicinity were oriented that way. I noticed one lying on the ground, but it looked to me like it had simply fallen over.

“Not all of us, though! Some are longer horizontally than they are vertically.

Y’know, like the one you’re looking at now.”

“Wait, so it’s *not* lying down?! It’s just shaped like that?!”

“According to our beauty standards, being horizontal isn’t attractive. A lotta horizontal monoliths have body image issues.”

“I guess that’s the monolith equivalent of being short...?”

Just as we were discussing the horizontal monolith, another demon—one of the more common humanoid varieties, with horns—came along and sat down on it.

“Oof, that’s another thing. People treat ’em like benches. Happens all the time.”

“I’m starting to feel sorry for it...”

No sooner had the words left my mouth than the monolith toppled forward, dumping the horned demon onto the ground and landing right on top of them. I heard a pained “Bweugh...” from somewhere beneath the stonelike slab.

“Course, if you try, they’ll knock you right off. Sitting on someone without permission is about as rude as you can get.”

“Yes, I can sympathize with that,” said Laika. “People try to hop on my back sometimes when I’m in dragon form, and it always irritates me.”

“I think anyone who tries to ride a dragon without permission must have a serious death wish,” I noted. *They’d be asking to get dumped midair or end up with a face full of fire breath...*

“That’s another good thing about being vertical: Your top’s too tall for most people to reach. Hardly anybody tries sitting on me.”

“Huh... I sure am learning a lot about monoliths, all right...”

“Being tall’s not all sunshine and rainbows, though. Look over there.”

I glanced around and quickly spotted a monolith so incredibly tall and thin that it was almost pole-like. I probably would have assumed it was a piece of lumber sticking up out of the ground if it hadn’t been surrounded by other monoliths.

Just then, a strong wind blew across the hillside. The extra-tall monolith listed dangerously to one side before frantically jumping, just barely managing to right itself again at the last second.

“See? Makes it incredibly hard to stay upright.”

“There’s far more to monoliths than I ever imagined,” said Laika.

“Their ecology is fascinating, that’s for sure...,” I said. “When we first arrived, I didn’t even notice they came in all these different shapes and sizes.”

I had absolutely no idea what sort of muscles the monolith had used to jump like that, but these were creatures who looked more like walls or boards than living beings, so maybe that was a silly question to ask in the first place. Life was just full of mysteries.

“Incidentally, I’m betting that one had to get cosmetic surgery to end up so tall in the first place.”

“Cosmetic surgery?!”

Now, there was a term I wasn’t expecting to hear in this conversation!

“Yep. You get your whole body cut in half vertically, then stack one half on top of the other. Doubles your height in one fell swoop...in theory.”

“And it doesn’t, y’know, kill you...? I guess it must not, considering people have it done...”

“Yeah, monoliths don’t really have discrete organs we keep in specific places, so it’s no biggie. But of course, once they have the surgery, they start complaining about how they’re less stable than monoliths who were born tall. It’s a never-ending spiral of body image issues, and the only way out’s to love yourself the way you are.”

“It seems life is just as complicated for monoliths as it is for us,” said Laika.

“You’d never guess it, though,” I said. “They’re the least complicated-looking species I’ve ever seen...”

This might sound a little dramatic, but I was starting to think that all living things were destined to suffer such problems.

“There’s been a big fad in the cosmetic surgery world lately, by the way.”

““It has *fads*?!””

Laika and I shouted in unison.

“Yeah, there’s a new surgery that’s supposed to give you extra height but maintain some stability. Been all the rage lately. See? There’s one right over there.”

I looked...and saw a monolith straight out of a certain video game about falling blocks.



“It’s a backward L-shaped monolith!”

“That shape gives you a nice base to stand on. It’s supposed to be really balanced.”

“They’ve given this some serious thought, huh...?”

“But then some monoliths decided that going for an unbalanced shape on purpose was actually way cooler. I guess it’s sorta like when your people wear torn clothing on purpose for style.”

So it’s like distressed jeans being fashionable? I guess you can find something along those lines in every culture.

“That’s how you end up with shapes like that, see?”



“It looks like a punk with a pompadour!”

“Yes, I can see how that would be unbalanced,” said Laika. “Its head must be quite heavy, and it seems ready to topple over any moment. By the way, are you certain it isn’t shaped in the same stable manner as the monolith we saw before? Perhaps it’s just doing a headstand.”

Now that she mentions it, I guess it is just the same shape flipped upside down...

“Naaah, it’s pretty easy tell our tops from our bottoms. If one of you started walking around on your hands, people would think you were crazy no matter how cool it made you look, right? It’s the same for us.”

“You’re not wrong about that,” I said, “but I have no clue how to tell which way is up for monoliths.”

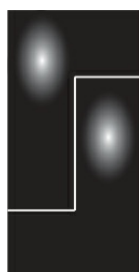
Laika spent a moment staring intently at them, comparing their tops to their bottoms, but in the end, she raised her hands in defeat. “I haven’t the foggiest idea,” she said. “As best I can tell, there’s no difference in color or shape that would indicate which side is up.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s kinda tough for darker ones. Lighter ones are easy, though—just look for the part that’s dirtier. That’s the bottom.”

“The dirt?! That’s it?!” I shouted. Laika and I clearly weren’t over our culture shock yet.

“Oh, and some of us are just born with unstable shapes like that, of course! Sometimes unstable monoliths will decide to pair up with a stable partner who can support them. Take a look at those two over there.”

I glanced over and saw a pair of monoliths who looked something like this:



“It’s the two shapes from before stuck together!”

Hmmm... Why does that image seem so strangely lewd to me...? Oh, but I guess monoliths don’t have biological sexes, so maybe concepts like that don’t apply to them...

“I’ve never stopped to consider a monolith’s lifestyle before, and this has been very enlightening,” said Laika. “It was well worth the trip, and I’m very grateful for your explanations.” She offered our guide a perfectly executed

thank-you.

“Yeah, thanks from me as well,” I said. “I had no idea about any of this stuff, and it’s been pretty amusing to learn.”

Amusing, huh...? I guess Beelzebub probably brought us here specifically for this experience. What a weird way to set us up to have a good time.

“Cool! Glad to hear it. It’s all the same old stuff for me, though. I see these sights every day.”

It “sees” them, huh? How does it see at all? I still have so many questions!

The whole time the monolith had been chatting and showing us around, it had been moving by dragging itself along the ground. I had to wonder: Wouldn’t the friction gradually wear its bottom surface away? The monoliths were living creatures, so maybe it would simply grow back... But I wasn’t even sure if they grew in the first place.

“Oh, and since we don’t have much in the way of tourist attractions, some of us have been playing a game with our visitors lately.”

That was when I noticed a crowd of normal demons gathered up ahead. *Oh, I thought, so they have something set up for demon visitors after all!*

A nearby monolith had the words BLOCK-BREAKING GAME VENUE written on it.

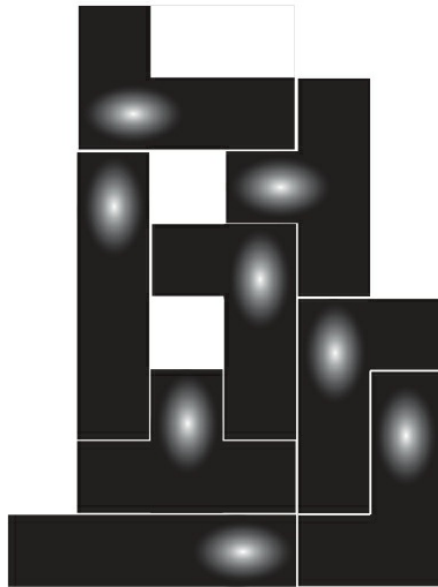
“Block breaking...?” muttered Laika. “But if the monoliths are the blocks, then wouldn’t that injure them...?”

Our monolith guide had an immediate answer to her worries. **“They don’t actually get broken, of course! Watch—looks like some kids are playing right now.”**

The moment the monolith said “some kids,” I had a feeling I knew what I was about to see...and I was right! My daughters were squaring off against a group of demons!

“Ah! Move to the lower left!” shouted Falfa.

“We should wait before we make that move, Falfa,” said Shalsha. “If we hold on until we have a long, thin monolith, we can break all those blocks at once. Monolith, rotate yourself once and lie flat, please.”



“No, they’re stacking up too high now, Shalsha!” insisted Sandra. “They’ve got us on the defensive! The monoliths are gonna stack all the way up to the top if we don’t move now!”

Each team stood in front of a stack of monoliths as more slowly drifted downward to join the pile, just like in that one game...

“Wait a second. You guys can float...?” I asked.

“Not super high, but yeah. It’s a pretty simple game, but you’d be surprised how heated the competition gets sometimes.”

“Well! This seems like it could be quite the intellectual exercise!” said Laika. “Huh...? Lady Azusa, you look rather shocked. Is something the matter?”

“Nah... I was just thinking I’ve seen a game that was a lot like this before, that’s all...”

I considered calling out to Falfa and Shalsha, but they seemed pretty engrossed in their game at the moment, so I quickly reconsidered. The demons they were playing against were putting up a tough fight, too, so breaking their concentration felt rude, even for their mother.

“Hooray!” shouted Falfa. “We got a long, thin one! Now we can break four rows at once!”

The long, thin monolith slid right into place, completing four lines’ worth of monoliths, and they vanished. A moment later, the same number of monoliths appeared at the bottom of Falfa and Shalsha’s opponents’ playing field, forcing their pile upward.

“So how does that, y’know, work...?” I asked.

“I dunno the details, but apparently it’s powered by teleportation magic. Some monoliths are really good at that stuff. Not that we can chant incantations or anything.”

For some reason, I’d had the feeling the monoliths were talking out loud all this time, but I guess it makes sense they can only “talk” by manifesting writing on their bodies.

“Teleportation magic...? I mean, I guess that’s theoretically possible... Not much range is required, after all,” I observed. I could use teleportation magic, too, but barely. The best I could manage was the kind of short leap through space used to dodge an attack. That was why I couldn’t just pop over to Vanzeld on a whim whenever I felt like visiting.

“I was under the impression that casting spells sans incantation is quite challenging without a surplus of mana to work with,” said Laika. “Do monoliths have a natural affinity for silent spellcasting, perhaps?” She’d always been good at this sort of analysis.

“Sorta, yeah. You see the monolith right in the middle, between the two teams’ piles? That’s the referee—watch it closely.”

A strikingly tall monolith was indeed standing in between the two playing fields. Well, it looked like it was standing to me, though I’m not sure whether it would agree.

“All right! We can take out two lines at once again!” shouted Sandra as she guided a monolith into position.

Bwmmph!

And at that very moment, an incredibly complex magic circle appeared on the referee monolith's body!

"Oh, I see now!" Laika exclaimed. "Monoliths can draw magic circles instantaneously!"

"I get what you mean and all," I said, "but can you really call that *drawing*?!"

Most likely, that monolith was capable of freely creating whatever sort of magic circle it pleased on itself, and that was what allowed it to cast spells.

"Hey, Laika...," I said. "Doesn't that mean if they had enough mana and used that technique just right, they could cast incredibly powerful magic pretty much continuously...?"

"That's very possible, yes," said Laika. "And that would make the monoliths a force to be reckoned with in terms of magic..."

"Hey, thanks! You sure know how to give a nice compliment."

This time, the monolith included a smiley face beneath its writing. I was kind of surprised by how many methods it had to communicate with us...

Old video games from before I was born tended to have major limitations on the text you could use when you entered your player name. Sometimes you could only use capital letters, or only lowercase, or you only had four letters to work with total. Compared to that, the monoliths' ability to display messages was incredibly advanced. They'd gotten to a point where they could even display reaction images!

"Not many people take an interest in us monoliths—not even demons," said the monolith. **"We don't make noise, after all, and so we often fade into the background. It's really hard to get noticed when you can't talk."**

"I can see how that'd weigh on you, yeah," I said. "If you were around a bunch of demons who were all talking, it'd be easy for everyone to forget about you."

Not having a voice would certainly make life inconvenient. It was clear the monoliths had their own problems to deal with, and the fact that the majority of demons were more or less humanoid probably meant there wasn't much incentive to consider such issues. It always seemed to go that way, somehow—

no matter where you were, minority groups always wound up a low priority.

“We do turn up in some ancient legends, though. Supposedly, people used to consider the biggest monolith a holy being, and they called it the Playground of the Gods. That was long before I was around, though, so dunno how true any of that is.”

“I guess monoliths have been around pretty much forever, huh?”

How should I put this...? If there were some kind of creator god, I bet monoliths would be the easiest shape for them to come up with. Making a life form that looks like a plain rectangular plank sounds super easy. Even a god with no artistic talent whatsoever could make them, no problem.

Just then, Laika let out a little “Ah!” It looked like she’d remembered something.

“Um, excuse me,” she said. “I don’t suppose there’s a museum nearby, or somewhere else where we could learn more about this ancient monolith?”

She really loves her museums, doesn’t she? Of course, I was starting to get pretty curious about the monoliths’ history, myself. They were so tremendously different from all the other species I’d encountered so far, and it was likely their history would be just as surprising.

“Yeah, why don’t we visit a museum?” I said. “It’s not like we have a schedule or anything.”

“A museum? Nah, we don’t have any of those. We’ve got a crazy-old elder who’s been around forever, though. We usually just call it the Elder Box. It might have some answers for you.”

“The Elder Box”? That’s one heck of a nickname... I guess that probably means it’s thicker and more boxlike than the rest of the monoliths. Maybe monoliths get thicker as they age?

I had a billion questions, but I knew asking them would just derail the conversation, so I held off for the time being.

“All right, then!” I said. “We’ll go pay the Elder Box a visit. Can you show us the way?”

“Yeah, sure thing. I could just put up a map for you, but it’s probably safer to take you there myself.”

Seems like we got the most considerate monolith of the bunch, huh?

“Come to think of it, we never asked your name, did we?” I said. “What should we call you? I’m Azusa, by the way, and my dragon friend here is Laika.” The monolith had been so friendly and helpful that, in retrospect, it was probably rude of me to just call it “the monolith” over and over. Though if it happened to stand next to a bunch of its similarly shaped kin, I still probably wouldn’t be able to tell them apart...

The monolith displayed its name on its surface.

“You can call me MO-85209.”

“Your names are *codes*?!”

That barely even counts as a name at all! It’s more like a serial number!

“Yeah, we like ’em that way. The Elder Box’s real name is MO-1, by the way.”

I wonder if that means it was the very first monolith...?

“It seems we’re about to meet with a legend, Lady Azusa,” said Laika. She looked equal parts excited and anxious about the prospect.

At times like these, I couldn’t see her as anything but a studious young girl. And that’s exactly what she was—by her species’ standards, she was still developing. She’d grow up into an even more impressive and imposing dragon before I knew it...

“...Actually, Laika’s plenty impressive as is. She doesn’t need to become any more incredible.”

“What are you talking about, Lady Azusa? For what it’s worth, I firmly believe that I still have ample room to grow and improve myself.”

On the other hand, I guess Laika would be a totally different person if she lost that ambition. Might as well let her do her thing.



We followed after MO-85209, making our way toward the Elder Box's supposed location. Our guide's name sounded more like a convict's ID number to me than anything else, but I couldn't very well expect it to change its name on my account. I got the sense that a monolith didn't really care if its name was cute, or cool, or whatever, as long as it allowed that monolith to distinguish itself from its fellows.

We passed through countless rows of monoliths, making our way deeper and deeper into the cluster. As we moved forward, the scenery around us began to gradually shift. We passed by more and more trees until finally, it seemed we'd entered a small forest.

"Huh! So there's more to Slab Hill than a hill and a bunch of monoliths," I observed.

"Per my observations," said Laika, "many cultures consider the deepest, gloomiest regions sacred. I believe humans have the same tendency."

"I mean, I get the logic, at least. It's easy to believe there's something otherworldly in a place like this."

Maybe that's because dense, gloomy forests feel way more mysterious than your average town.

MO-85209, who was still moving in front of us, displayed a message on its back. (Or maybe its front? Perhaps that wasn't even a distinction that mattered to it.)

"We monoliths consider the place up ahead to be special. That's not because the place itself is sacred or anything, though—it's because that's where the Elder Box lives."

"Is that so?" asked Laika. "Then perhaps the Elder Box has a social standing similar to a priest or a shrine maiden."

I guess I'd better be careful about how I act when we meet it, then. Wouldn't want to accidentally do anything rude.

"It's believed that out of all of us monoliths, the Elder Box is the closest to the gods. As proof, once every hundred or thousand years, the Elder Box relays the words of the gods themselves to us! It spends the rest of its time

sitting still, though.”

So it's a box that relays messages from the gods?

It was probably rude of me, but I couldn't help picturing one of those boxes you drew fortunes from at shrines in Japan. I imagined shaking the Elder Box and a little stick with a number popping out. Then I'd find the matching paper with my divine revelation on it.

Though I don't think the monoliths are full of fortune-telling sticks, and I seriously doubt they have any papers like that ready for us, so it'll probably be nothing like what I'm imagining.

“Um, Lady Azusa?” said Laika. “I've had a thought, though I must admit it's a very silly one.”

“Oh? What is it? I was just thinking something pretty silly myself, so don't worry.”

“The elder we're about to meet is called the Elder Box, correct? I was just thinking that it would make more sense for it to be called the Elder Slab.”

I took another look at MO-85209.

Yep. That's a slab, all right. Definitely closer to a slab than a box anyway.

“Yeah, you're right. That does seem like a better fit.”

“You two sure aren't shy with your opinions, huh...?” MO-85209 wrote on its back, along with an exasperated-looking emoji.

Whoops. Guess we were running our mouths a little too much...

“I can't blame you, though. You've only seen normal monoliths so far. It's my fault for not explaining well enough.”

“You're a really logic-driven person, huh, MO-85209?” I said. “You're really good at keeping your cool.” *Of course, I can't really imagine an impulse-driven monolith...*

“You know, a demon king a few generations back actually used us as building slabs to stage an attack on the humans.”

“They used you...for an attack?”

“Yeah, they sent out a ton of monoliths to totally surround and seal up the town the human hero lived in.”

“That’s really mundane and really nasty at the same time!”

Pecora could be pretty nasty, too, at her worst—or rather, there were times when it felt like she put a lot of thought and energy into harassing me. Assuming that old demon king was one of her ancestors, it was starting to seem likely that sort of nastiness ran in the family...

Before I knew it, we’d advanced so far into the woods that the forest’s canopy had almost totally blotted out the sun. The demon lands didn’t get much sunlight, even on a good day, and it was so dim now that it felt like the sun had already begun to set. That was when MO-85209 abruptly came to a stop.

“There’s one thing I oughtta warn you about,” it said.

“O-oh? What’s that?” I asked.

“The legends say that entering the Elder Box will allow you to meet with the gods. That’s why they call it the Playground of the Gods, you see. I don’t recommend trying it unless you’re ready for what’ll happen, though. Not even us monoliths can tell what the Elder Box is thinking most of the time, and if anything goes wrong—well, that’s not my problem.”

“Got it. We’ll be careful.”

The first rule of cultural exchange was to always approach the person you were talking to with respect and consideration.

“...And to be honest, I’m not even sure the Elder Box is a monolith at all. It might be a prototype of our kind made directly by the gods...”

MO-85209’s attitude made it clear that it held the Elder Box in a fearful sort of reverence. That was probably a natural reaction when encountering something sacred, to be fair. People usually wound up regarding things as sacred precisely because they were mysterious or unidentifiable, after all. If the Elder Box was always giving them the lowdown on everything it knew, they might become unable to revere it.

An ancient box that the monoliths aren’t totally sure is even one of them at all,

huh? I wonder what it's like? Now I'm more curious than ever.

This probably wasn't what Beelzebub had in mind when she described this place as the homeland of an amusing species of demon. But in the end, I'd wound up just as interested as Laika was. After coming this far, I wanted to learn everything I could about the monoliths.

Finally, we arrived at the Elder Box's abode. I found myself standing in front of an enormous jet-black cube, each side of which was about ten meters long.

"Okay, yep! That's a box, all right! It's thick enough, that's for sure!"

Now that I knew what the Elder Box looked like, I had to admit: Calling it the Elder Slab would've been just plain wrong. It was way thicker than all the monoliths I'd met up to that point.

Laika stared up at the Elder Box in a daze. Compared to her dragon form, it wasn't all *that big*. But she'd probably never encountered a cube of its size before.

MO-85209, who was standing a fair distance away from the Elder Box, began displaying a series of rather large letters that scrolled across its surface from right to left. Apparently, monoliths could display their writing in much the same way that electric signboards did.

"O great and eminent Elder Box," said MO-85209, **"I have brought with me two visitors who wish to speak with you. May I impose upon you to share with them any tales you have to tell of the monoliths' history?"**

"It seems to me that our monolith guide is afraid, Lady Azusa," Laika whispered into my ear. "Look how far away it's standing."

"Well, of course it is. The Elder Box is huge—not to mention they're totally different shapes... I think I get why no one can tell if it's really a monolith now."

There certainly weren't any monoliths this huge back on Slab Hill. If we found some way to open the Elder Box up, we probably could've fit a legion of normal monoliths inside it. The fact that it was boxlike instead of slablike made it really easy to imagine that it was a similar but distinct species.

If someone found a huge black box like this back on Earth, they'd probably

think it was some unknown life form... It's certainly the most out-of-place artifact I've ever seen!

Now we just had to wait for the Elder Box to respond to our presence...but no matter how long we stood there, it didn't react at all. Eventually, I turned back to look at MO-85209.

"Hey, maybe the Elder Box can't read your writing, since you're so far away," I said. "Actually, can monoliths even read other monoliths' writing?" I still had no idea how monoliths saw things, or even if they could see at all.

"Yeah, we can usually understand the writing other monoliths put up no problem. Thing is, I've got no clue if that applies to the Elder Box... It's an exception in basically every way I can think of."

Now that I was standing in front of the Elder Box myself, I knew exactly where MO-85209 was coming from.

I pulled Laika by the hand. "Let's get a little closer, okay?"

"D-do you really think we should...?" said Laika. "I'm curious, certainly, but aren't you worried it might get upset if we get too close to it?"

"I mean, it'd be rude to start touching it, but it's also weird to say hi from this far away, don't you think? And hey—it's not like we have to worry about a strong wind knocking it over onto us when it's shaped like that!"

In that sense, I was glad it was cube-shaped. I'd had serious concerns that the ones shaped like chocolate bars would fall over if their balance was disrupted even slightly. A cube like the Elder Box, on the other hand, seemed as stable as could be. As long as a giant didn't wander over and decide to roll it like a die, I was pretty sure it wasn't going anywhere—and as far as I knew, there weren't any giants in this world big enough to pull that off.

"That's true, yes," agreed Laika. "I have no right to judge it for its size, and we certainly wouldn't want to come across as disrespectful." She seemed totally convinced by my reasoning. We stepped forward together, and each of us greeted the Elder Box in turn.

"Nice to meet you! My name's Azusa, and I'm called the Witch of the Highlands. I, um, came to visit this land on the recommendation of the demons'

minister of agriculture. I guess you could also say I'm here with the permission of the demon king, in a manner of speaking."

"I am Laika, a red dragon! It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance! For my own edification, I would like to request that you teach me about the history of your kin, if at all possible! I apologize for imposing on you when I'm certain you have more important matters to attend to, but any help you can give would be greatly appreciated!"

Well, that sure was a case study in the difference between my personality and Laika's. I'd gone out of my way to emphasize that a pair of important demons had approved my visit, as a show of credibility. No matter how important the Elder Box might have been, I figured invoking the names of the minister of agriculture and the demon king would at the very least convince it that we weren't a couple random hoodlums it should attack. I can't imagine that someone called the Elder Box would be a short-tempered ruffian, right?

As for whether I was here with Pecora's permission—well, that might've fallen into a bit of a gray area on the truth spectrum, but she *did* know I was going out to visit Slab Hill, so it wasn't a complete lie.

Laika's self-introduction, meanwhile, sounded a bit like a business e-mail. You could tell what a polite and conscientious person she was from her word choice alone.

However...

.....

.....

Silence. Complete, utter silence. Even after all that, the Elder Box didn't react in any way whatsoever. I couldn't make out so much as a single letter on its jet-black surface.

Maybe we're actually looking at its narrow side—or, well, what would be a narrow side on one of the other monoliths. No, wait, that doesn't make sense. Why would they have its side facing the entryway? Plus, if monoliths don't have the concept of faces, they probably don't have the concept of backs or sides, either.

“Um, excuse me?” I called out a little louder than before but still received no response. If this was a game, I would have assumed at this point that I had to use some sort of special item to talk to the Elder Box. But in a real-life setting, that seemed pretty unlikely.

“Are we behaving improperly, perhaps?” Laika asked, turning back to MO-85209.

“The Elder Box rarely ever reacts to anything we say to it. Some people claim it can only communicate using the words of the gods...”

So it's an oracle completely dedicated to its job, huh...? I guess that means paying it a visit to ask about history was doomed from the very start.

“Hmm. It may be the oldest monolith, but I guess that doesn't mean we can communicate with it,” I said. “Seems like we should probably just give up.”

I could tell the Elder Box was a very unique individual. But perhaps it was *too* unique for us to learn anything from it.

“I suppose so...,” said Laika. “I can certainly see how it came to be called the Playground of the Gods, in any case. I think anyone, demon or human, would assume a monolith of this size and shape must be a divine creation.”

“A playground, huh? I wonder if those legends talk about the gods playing games on top of it or something?”

I recalled plenty of legends from my past life about gods throwing parties atop large, flat boulders. People from ancient civilizations tended to be really impressed by huge objects, no matter what world they were from.

“It seems that isn't the case, Lady Azusa,” said Laika.

She was now facing away from the Elder Box, and when I followed her gaze, I saw that MO-85209 was displaying a series of large scrolling letters again.

“Nah, they don't call the Elder Box the Playground of the Gods because the gods played around on top of it. They call it that because the gods played around *inside* it.”

“Inside it, not on top of it? Does that mean it's hollow in the legends?”

The instant those words left my mouth, the gloomy clearing seemed to grow

even darker than before.

Wait, what just happened?!

“Look out, Lady Azusa!” shouted Laika.

“Huh?!” I yelped, snapping my head back around.

The Elder Box was tilting toward me!

Is it trying to fall on me?! I am feeling pretty attacked right now—physically. Crap, I wasn’t paying attention to it at all, so I missed my chance to react!

My mind raced as the Elder Box bore down on me and Laika.

It’s too late to dodge, right?! But if it really is empty, maybe I could catch it and hold it up? Even if I can’t push it back upright, as long as I can stop it from crushing us, I should be able to—



“—ey! Hey! Wake up! Cease your slumber and awaken!”

“Lazy Azusa! Lady Azusa!”

I heard a pair of voices calling out to me. I recognized Laika’s voice in an instant, but the other...

Who is that? And come to think of it, wasn’t I about to get smooshed by a giant monolith called the Elder Box...? If I’m hearing Laika’s voice, that means she’s fine, and I guess I’m probably okay, too.

I slowly opened my eyes. I wasn’t at all surprised to find Laika in front of me, but the real question was: Who else was in the room with me? I looked over to find out.

It was the goddess Nintan.

“Huh? What’re you doing here, Nintan?” *And actually, where is “here” in the first place?*

We were in a simply decorated room that, at a glance, looked like some sort of conference hall. There was a large table in the center of the chamber and a couch off in one corner, which I was currently lying on.

I didn’t get crushed to death by the Elder Box, did I...? No, that can’t be it.

Nintan wouldn't be acting so casually if I were dead.

"We are far more concerned with the mystery of how *you* found your way here," Nintan replied.

Taking a closer look, I noticed that Goodly Godly Godness and Dekyari'tosde the elder god (aka Dekie) were both there as well, sitting at the table. Godly Godness was waving at me, but she was always laid-back no matter what was going on, so I couldn't assume the situation wasn't serious.

"Sorry, but do you think you could catch me up on what's going on...?" I asked. My head was still spinning.

"What's going on'? It is hardly a complicated matter. We had gathered to play a game in the Playground of the Gods. When you happened to arrive, we chose to take advantage of the opportunity and bring you inside," said Nintan.

Huh. Is it my imagination, or did Nintan just use a term I recently learned in a very different way than I've been imagining it...?

"Wait...does that mean...they call the Elder Box the Playground of the Gods...because the gods use it as a place to play games?!"

"Have you lost your wits? You might as well have asked Us 'Does that mean they call this store a clothes shop because you can buy clothes here?' How are We supposed to reply?"

That name wasn't the stuff of ancient legends! It was just a cold hard fact!

The Elder Box, the Playground of the Gods, is very literally just a place where the gods go to play games together!

Just then, Godly Godness walked over to us. She was holding a stone slab—actually, no, it was more like a chalkboard of some sort.

"We just wrapped up a game, and a couple of the other gods had to leave to get some work done," Godly Godness said. "That's when you showed up out of nowhere, and we were like, 'Hey, might as well bring her in, right?'"

"It's HARD to play games with just THREE players," Dekie shouted from across the room, waving both her hands at me. Her reaction struck me as a little melodramatic—maybe she still wasn't used to this era's standards.

Laika must have already heard all this. Or so I assumed, as she didn't seem shocked at all. She still looked pretty bewildered, though, and I for one still had plenty of questions.

"So, um...why is your playground here?" I asked. "And why is it shaped like a box...?"

"Again, We might as well ask you why your house in the highlands is located in Nanterre. Our only answer is that it is here because it is here. If you mean to ask why it was put here, that would be because at the time, this land was in the middle of nowhere, far from where any demons dwelled. Their towns tend to be terribly noisy, after all."

Not to mention that something like this would stick out like a sore thumb in a city! There was one part of Nintan's explanation that didn't quite line up for me, though.

"But wait—the monoliths live here, don't they? And while this box isn't as plank-shaped, it still feels like it's connected to them somehow."

The monoliths even thought of the Playground of the Gods as the eldest member of their race.

"I'm thinking that after you gods finished making your playground, you created the monoliths as a thinner version of it. Am I right?" I asked, very aware of how outrageous it was to be probing into the literal origin of a whole species.

"No. The monoliths simply felt a sense of kinship toward the Playground of the Gods and chose to live in its vicinity. We had nothing to do with that whatsoever."

So it was all just a big coincidence!

"Although We were concerned that this land would grow clamorous, the monoliths do not speak and make little to no noise. Thus, We chose to leave them be."

It's true that the only noises out here in the woods are the cries of wild animals...

"Okay, but were the monoliths and this box made by the same god or

something?" I asked.

"How long do you intend to question Us?! That knowledge is beyond humanity's purview, and so We shall not answer!"

"You're the one who brought me in here, so the least you could do is fill me in..."

"Absolutely not!" said Nintan, crossing her arms with an air of finality.

Well, guess that's a no go. Time to give up, and—

"The MONOLITHS have been around since AGES ago. This BOX is OLD, too, but it doesn't have ANYTHING to do with them."

Dekie gave me the answer I wanted, just like that!

"Hey! How dare you make Us look like a fool?! **Become a frog!**"

A bluish-white light began to emanate from Nintan's hands. A moment later, it burst forth...and struck Godly Godness, not Dekie.

"Your aim's terrible!" I shouted.

"Curses..." muttered Nintan. "We have become so used to turning her into a frog, We do so reflexively now..."

A god like you shouldn't be making that sort of careless mistake! This place was weird enough even before it was occupied by a random giant frog!

It felt like frogification was becoming a habit for Godly Godness these days...

"That's better!" she said. "I start feeling sluggish if I don't turn into a frog every once in a while, ribbit!"

...though Godly Godness seemed to see it as less of a habit and more of a hobby.

"Enough of these digressions. We are here to talk of games," Nintan said. Meanwhile, Godly Godness was rolling something across the table with her tongue. "Cease that at once! That's disgusting, and We expect you to wash it yourself!"

I'm with you on that one, Nintan.

The object Godly Godness had rolled came to a stop right in front of me. It turned out to be a six-sided die, which landed on the number three.

“This room looks like a big die, doesn’t it?” said Godly Godness. “And dice games are exactly what we use it for! Whichever god made this place really knew how to live it up!”

My shoulders slumped as a sense of exhaustion washed over me. *I bet Laika already heard about all this while I was out, too.*

“I thought a place where the gods played games would be a little more, well... majestic,” I said. “This place is kinda plain, honestly. It has zero mystique.” *There’s not much point in coming here, if you ask me.*

“That is by no means the case,” said Nintan. “The fact that this is where the gods play games lends it mystique in and of itself. What could be more mysterious than a space kept secret by the gods?”

“I get where you’re coming from, but honestly, you gods don’t have much mystique, either...” *Though maybe I feel that way because I meet up with gods on the regular.*

“Anyway, since you’re HERE, we should PLAY a game!” said Dekie. There were a few small boxes—sized to fit on a typical tabletop, obviously—sitting beside her.

“We’ve got quite the selection in stock!” said Godly Godness. “Everything from the all-time classics to the newest releases! Come on, let’s play, let’s play!” She’d returned to her usual form and started picking up boxes to show me.

This world didn’t have video games, so all the boxes laid out on the table contained board games. There were so many of them, in fact, that the place reminded me of a board game store.

Laika and I exchanged glances.

“W-well, what do you think...?” I asked.

“It’d be a shame to pass up the opportunity... Though it wouldn’t do to keep Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra waiting for too long...,” said Laika.

“That will not be an issue,” said Nintan. “If We desire it, a year’s worth of festivities in this place can last but a minute in the outside world. We can even arrange matters such that barely a second would elapse. The passage of time differs here.”

“Well, *that’s* implausibly convenient!” I exclaimed.

“Rude!” Nintan fired back. “It is dream come true for every game lover who wishes they could keep playing forever!”

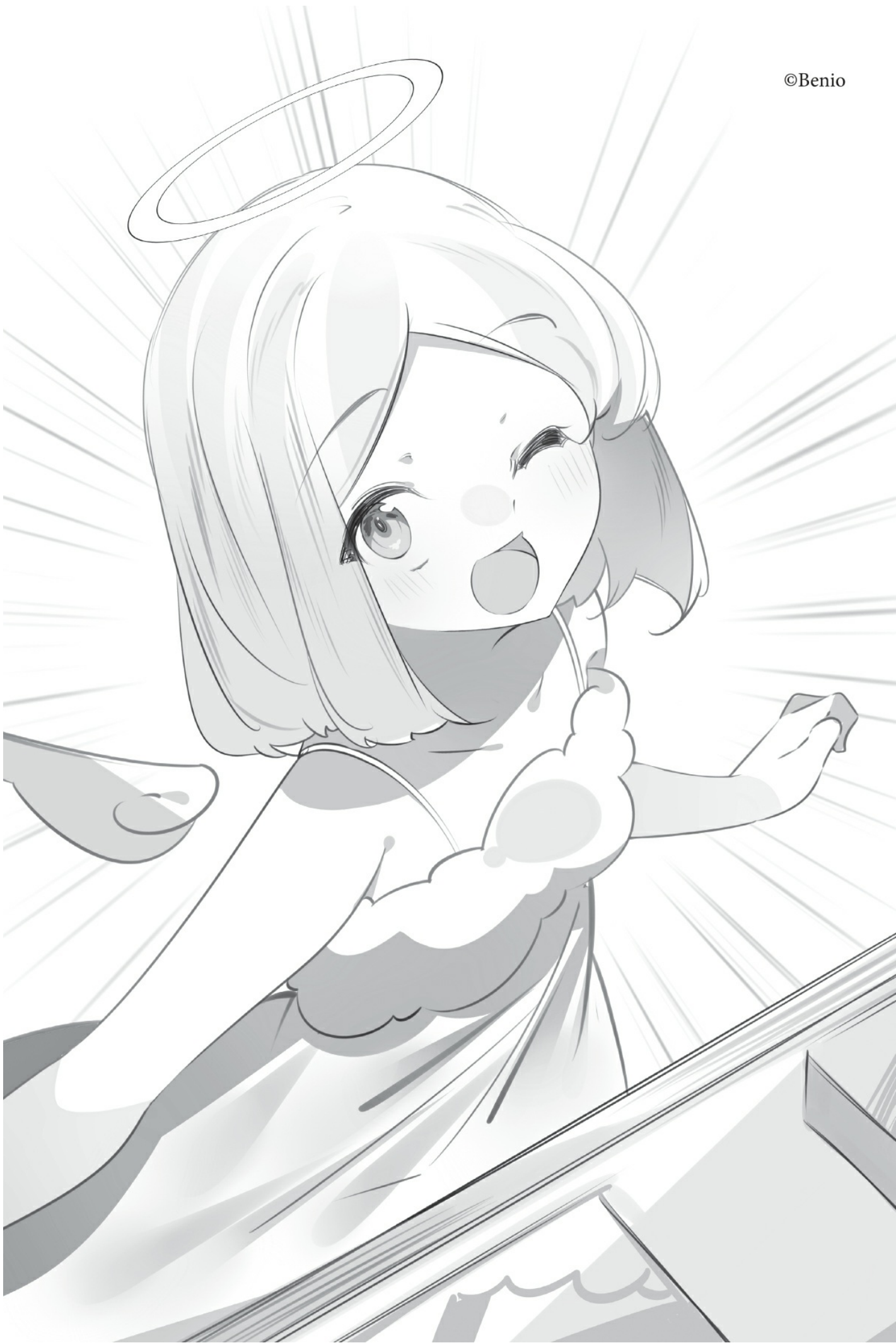
I mean, I guess gamers are kinda like that, but still...

“Actually, wait a second. We’ve already played all the board games over here, and seeing as there’s five of us...” Godly Godness put down the game she’d been holding and picked something else up off the table: a thick book with the words GENERIC FANTASY RPG printed on its cover.

“Let’s play a pen-and-paper RPG! I’ll be the game master!”

A pen-and-paper RPG in another world?! Seriously?!

Incidentally, the “pen-and-paper RPGs” that Godly Godness was talking about weren’t like the role-playing games you play on a computer. They were tabletop games that you literally played with a pen and paper as your primary tools, in which each player took on the role of a character in a story. I’d never played one myself, but I’d watched videos of people playing them in my past life, so I understood the general concept.



What was that one famous pen-and-paper RPG? The Something or Other of Cthulhu, I think?

“That sounds GREAT! I’m ALL for it!” said Dekie.

“We are as well,” agreed Nintan. “A game with no definite winners and losers has the potential to be far less frustrating.”

That seemed like a bad attitude to start a game with, but in any case, all the gods were in favor of the RPG plan.

“You and Laika should go ahead and make a couple characters for yourselves, okay?” said Godly Godness.

“Playing an RPG in another world, huh?” I muttered. “This is starting to feel a little meta...”

“But twenty-first century Japan has plenty of RPGs set in the same time period or in the near future, right? It’s totally normal!” said Godly Godness.

Meanwhile, Laika and Dekie had already started rolling dice.

“Lady Azusa,” said Laika. “I don’t fully understand what sort of game this is, but why don’t we at least give it a try...?”

Well, that settles it. If I leave now, I’ll look like a total killjoy.

“...Okay, okay. I’ll play,” I said.

And so Laika and I embarked upon our very first pen-and-paper RPG experience in another world.



In this game, the basic details of our characters—our classes and so on—were determined randomly by rolling dice. That seemed reasonable enough to me, and I wasn’t expecting anything too weird to result as I casually made my first roll.

“Let’s see, looks like my class is...sage? Huh. Is that an advanced class or something?” I asked.

“Ooh! You really do have luck on your side, Azusa!” said Godly Godness. “That’s a pretty powerful class!” She was clearly more excited than anyone to

be playing. “One of the nice things about this game is that character creation’s pretty quick and easy. Some of the slower games can take up to five hours!”

“Really? Five hours...? Are you serious...?”

“I suuure am! Games like that are pretty tough to play, unless you’re a college kid or have a ton of time on your hands. Games that go all in on dungeon crawling are real time wasters! Personally, I’m into games where you can run a boilerplate campaign in about three and a half hours. Or if you wanna do a longer story, you can play once a week and wrap it up in four or five sessions—games like that are pretty darn satisfying! If I had to pick a favorite system, I’m really into this one called Monochrome Cross that’s all about fighting with supernatural powers. Like, haven’t you always wanted to go full middle school edgelord and blast a bunch of fire or lightning at people? For me, it’s easier to get into a game with a clichéd plot, like where you have to save a kidnapped princess, or where you find out your best friend is the big bad who is turning into a monster!”

“Since when were you such a chatterbox?” I asked, stunned.

“If we’re talking about classical fantasy, you can pretty much break things down into systems designed for pure dungeon crawling and systems designed for big, dramatic stories. As for the latter, I’m a fan of Seventy Thousand Citadels! In that one, the plots always spiral out of control superfast and the world ends up on the brink of destruction every single time!”

“Not sure I’m comfortable with gods being into games where the world is destroyed...”

“Better in games than real life, right? And sure, it might seem kinda childish, but sometimes throwing everything you have into acting out a childish fantasy can be really fun! Just forget about how it makes you look and dive into the role!”

To make a long story short, I kept rolling the dice and putting together my character assembly-line style. Once that was done, I figured we’d just head into a dungeon, take down a boss, and be finished...until a tiny dice-related incident threw everything for a loop. Though strictly speaking, the roll in question was Laika’s, not mine.

“O-oh no, the goblins are attacking! Big Sister, save meee!”

I spoke in a slightly theatrical falsetto. I was literally acting, so this seemed like the right moment for it.

“P-please stop calling me Big Sister, Lady Azusa,” said Laika. Her whole face was beet-red, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if her head literally burst into flame.

“Well, that’s our backstory, isn’t it?” I said. “Your character is my character’s older sister. I’m Lily the sage, and you’re her mighty big sister, Arusha the hero!”

That’s right: One of Laika’s rolls during her character creation had determined that the third player in our party—in this case, me—was her character’s younger sister.

“Hey!” said Godly Godness, our GM. “Come on, Laika—I mean, come on, Arusha, stay in character! It’s hard to role-play when you’re talking as yourself the whole time!”

“U-understood!” yelped Laika. “Hiyah! Keep your hands off my sister Lily, you monsters! I’ll cut you all down!”

“Okay, Arusha, now you have to roll two dice!”

As a general rule in pen-and-paper RPGs, whenever you tried to do something—attacking an enemy, casting a spell, or any number of other actions—you rolled dice to figure out whether or not you’d succeed. Some games apparently used many-sided dice with crazy, complicated shapes. But this one kept it simple with the same old pair of six-sided dice used in most board games.

Laika cast the dice...and rolled a pair of ones. It was a critical failure—the worst roll you could possibly get.

“Whoops! Arusha, you rush forward to protect your sister but lose your footing and fall on your butt. The goblins surround you. Oh boy, you’re in big trouble now! What a perfect way to fail!”

“There’s nothing perfect about this! I’m in terrible danger!” shouted Laika.

“That’s exactly why it’s perfect! Games like this are way more fun if your

characters screw up every once in a while!”

Dekie the priest went on to wipe all the goblins out with death magic, so everything turned out fine in the end, but Laika’s hero still came out looking like a bumbling klutz. She hadn’t done any of it on purpose—she was just following the will of the dice—but it was pretty funny to see her have to play the total opposite of who she was in real life.

“That’s exactly right, Azusa! You’ve caught on to the true appeal of pen-and-paper RPGs!”

“Would you please stop reading my mind?”

“You seem rather out of breath, Miss Sage. Shall I cast a healing spell upon you?”

That line, shockingly enough, had come from Dekie. She was playing a young, straitlaced priest who had been raised in a temple. She was doing a great job of talking like her character would, too, which was really disconcerting considering her usual style of speech...

“Ah, no, I’m fine! Don’t worry about me,” I said.

“In stories such as these, those who say such things invariably bear the most deep-seated problems,” said Nintan, the party merchant.

“Stop right there, Miss Merchant!” shouted Godly Godness. “I just said not to talk as yourself, didn’t I?! Stay in character and speak like a merchant!”

“Enough with your petty tyranny! Nobody likes an overbearing game master!”

Godly Godness and Nintan really will use any excuse to duke it out, won’t they?

As the game carried on, I kept doing my best to play the role of the youthful sage who always relied on her heroic older sister.

“Big Sister, help! Heeelp! The Cyclopes are attacking!”

“Lady Azusa, is it just me, or are you going out of your way to call me Big Sister...?”

“That’s just my character! And speaking of, you’re supposed to stay in

character, too, remember? You shouldn't be calling me Azusa."

"U-ugh... A-all right, Lily... S-stay back. I'll handle them..."

Then Laika buried her face in her hands.

"This game is the very definition of torture for me!"

Maybe because she looks up to her own elder sister, she's having trouble taking on that role herself. She doesn't have any younger siblings, after all. I feel like I remember hearing something about the girls at her school seeing her as an elder sister figure. But even if that's true, it doesn't mean she was comfortable with it.

"Is something the matter, great hero? If ever you wish for your loyal priest to lend an ear to your troubles, you need only say the word."

Meanwhile, Dekie's so in-character it's seriously weirding me out! I didn't even know she could SPEAK without all those weird INFLECTIONS...

After about three and a half hours of gameplay (according to the flow of time inside the Playground), our party united as one to defeat the boss awaiting us at the end of the dungeon. I had a feeling Godly Godness had gone out of her way to wrap up the adventure just before we started getting bored. In that sense, she could be quite thoughtful.

"All right, that's the end of this story!" Godly Godness said when we were finished. We all took a moment to thank her for running the game.

"I have to admit, that was actually pretty fun," I said. I was totally satisfied with how things had gone.

Apparently, it was typical for the players in games like these to talk about their experience after it was over—or, in Godly Godness's words, to have a session postmortem. Whether that was actually standard among pen-and-paper RPG aficionados or was a Godly Godness house rule was a little unclear, of course.

"Wasn't it?" said Godly Godness. "There's something special about analog games like this, isn't there? It's a type of fun you can't quite get from running around in a VR world with a hot girl avatar!"

I really wish you'd stop referencing stuff that only I can understand. Actually, I'm not even sure I got all the nuances of that one.

"This is a really good place to play games," Godly Godness added. "Sometimes less really is more! It makes it easy to focus on the game."

Come to think of it, I guess this room really is empty aside from the table, the couch, and the mountain of board games. There aren't any distractions.

"This place has been here since time immemorial, after all," said Nintan. "Even We have forgotten precisely when and by which god it was created."

Part of me wondered how they could bring themselves to meet up regularly in a room with such a sketchy history, but then again, what could possibly scare a god? Plus, a room like this could have only been created by a fellow god.

"Well, I think Laika and I should be heading back to the real world," I said.

From the sound of things, we'd be emerging from the Elder Box only a second after entering it. But since so much time had passed from my perspective, I still felt guilty for making everyone wait. Also, I was afraid that if we got dragged into another game and Laika ended up embarrassing herself again, she might break down altogether.

Definitely don't want this turning into a bad memory for either of us!

Laika and I bade the gods farewell...and the next thing I knew, we were once again standing in front of the Elder Box.

"Looks like we left just as suddenly as we entered," I observed.

The truth, we now knew, was that the Elder Box was a very strange game room created by the gods, not an elderly monolith. That said, I was fairly certain it would be better for everyone if we didn't share that fact with the monoliths.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I looked up to find that words were scrolling across the Elder Box's surface.

"I hope you enjoyed yourselves, Azusa and Laika. The gods were very pleased to have unexpected guests at their gathering. The monoliths, meanwhile, are akin to my children, so please keep treating them well."

Huh...? Wait—this almost makes it seem like the Elder Box is alive after all...

“Um, Lady Azusa...? Did you just see...?” said Laika, who had clearly noticed the writing as well. “Come to think of it, the gods never did tell us who made their playground, did they...?”

Nope, they sure didn't. They said the monoliths and the Elder Box had been around for ages, but nobody knew or remembered who made them, or why.

“I, the Elder Box, bid you good day!”

One last string of words flashed by for the barest of moments, confirming what I already suspected: We were reading the words of the Elder Box itself.

“Hey, Laika? I think this might spiral out of our control if we aren't careful, so...how about we just keep what happened today a secret...?”

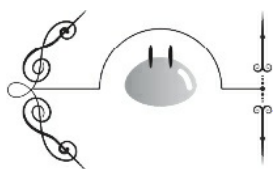
“Agreed... Besides, I think I need some time to collect myself...”

We turned back around and found that MO-85209 was displaying a message for us.

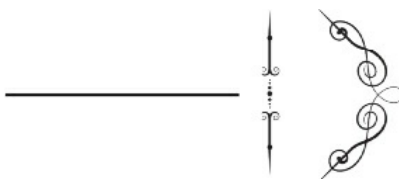
“Well, looks like the Elder Box isn't gonna react. Better give up—that's just how it goes. It only gives us advice and guides us once in a blue moon, and I guess today wasn't the day.”

Oh. That must mean MO-85209 couldn't see the Elder Box's writing.

Once again, I came to realize that the world was still full of mysteries.



WE VISITED A SLIMELESS DESERT



One day, Flatorte and I made our way into the village of Flatta to stop by the guild.

“Scuse me, Natalie!” I called out as I stepped inside, leaving the door open behind me. “I have some magic stones I was hoping to trade in!”

“Yes, of course! I’ll be right with—,” Natalie began, only for the smile on her face to freeze when she turned to look at me. I figured her reaction was probably due to Flatorte having stepped through the still-open door with a truly enormous wooden chest in her arms. Oh, and to be clear, when I said her smile froze, I *didn’t* mean that Flatorte froze it with her cold breath!

“This thing’s full of magic stones. Thanks in advance!”

The *thud* when Flatorte set the chest down was so tremendous, it almost seemed to shake the guild itself. Magic stones were, well, stones, so their weight added up pretty quickly. I don’t think anyone other than a dragon could’ve possibly lugged that thing all the way down here.

Actually, *I* probably could’ve carried it, if I’d tried. I would’ve split it up into a few loads rather than go to the trouble, though. Flatorte, on the other hand, viewed any daunting task as a test of her strength and tended to just jump right in. She hadn’t volunteered for the task this time, however—carrying the gems was one of her chores.

“Buying magic stones is part of the guild’s responsibilities, so I can certainly help you...,” said Natalie. “But why do you have so many...? Did one of you start working as an adventurer recently?”

“I, the great Flatorte, got bored and spent a whole day battling monsters in the mountains! It was a great workout!” Flatorte declared, hands on her hips and head held high.

“That’s pretty much the whole story,” I confirmed. “She just got the impulse to go out and fight monsters, then came back a day later with a box full of magic stones.”

I hadn’t needed any more of an explanation than that, honestly. Sometimes, you just woke up on the wrong side of the bed and wound up grumpy all day for no reason. It seemed logical that you could wake up one day and feel the irresistible urge to do battle for no reason as well.

...Does that make sense? It’s never happened to me, but I can’t rule out the possibility that it’s happened to other people.

Anyway, the long and short of it was that Flatorte went and fought her heart out, then came back the next day and slept in until noon. She had a way of taking things to extremes.

“I suppose that would explain why there aren’t many of the usual slime stones in here,” Natalie said as she glanced through the box. “Most of these are from larger varieties of monster that don’t live in this area.”

I usually only kill slimes, so that’s what I bring in most of the time.

“None of the monsters around here are worth fighting. I want some stronger foes to show up!”

If something strong enough to challenge you showed up, it could level all of Flatta, so I really hope that wish doesn’t come true. Flatta was a calm, peaceful village (aside from the sudden surge in weird shenanigans we’d been seeing over the past few years), largely thanks to the fact that only weak monsters like slimes inhabited the region.

“It’s going to take me quite some time to count all these, so would you mind if I paid you a few days from now? I estimate the full payment will be at least three hundred thousand gold,” said Natalie.

“I, the great Flatorte, couldn’t care less! Pay us whatever you want—it doesn’t matter if it’s three hundred thousand or thirty thousand!”

“I would most definitely get fired if I got caught paying you a tenth of what you were owed, so no thank you! You’ll be paid exactly what the stones are worth!”

Real adventurers were professionals, so they were probably fussy about their wages. Flatorte, on the other hand, couldn’t be bothered. Her goal was to get some exercise, and the magic stones were a fringe benefit, at best.

“Oh, that’s right!” said Natalie. “Seeing the great Witch of the Highlands herself just reminded me of a very strange quest that came in the other day.”

I turned my back on Natalie before she could say another word. “Nope! I don’t like where this is going one bit, so I’ll see you later!”

“Ah—no, wait! I’m not going to try to talk you into taking the quest, I promise! I was just making small talk!”

And just like that, I changed my mind. I had to be careful about these things, given how ridiculously high my stats were. Otherwise, I’d end up as the guild’s conveniently overpowered errand girl before I knew it.

“I think it would be faster to show you this map before I explain the quest’s particulars,” Natalie said as she laid a rather large map on the counter. It wasn’t a local map, either—it seemed to depict the whole world, just about. “In the far, far, faaaaaar southern reaches of this map’s territory, there is a region that gets so ridiculously hot, it’s basically unlivable. There’s no cold season, either—it’s hot year in and year out.”

“I’m losing energy just listening to this...,” muttered Flatorte. Being a blue dragon, she preferred chilly weather.

Natalie pointed to a spot on the map. It was indeed far to the south, and it seemed to be a desert. “This region is called Namhadd, and recently, a traveler from far away who happened to end up there noticed something strange about the area.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“It seems there are virtually no slimes to be found in Namhadd!”

“...Okaaay. Cool,” I said. I really didn’t know how else I was supposed to react.

What was she expecting me to make of that?

“No, wait, think about it! Isn’t that strange?!” said Natalie. “Slimes are one of those monsters you can find literally anywhere! I don’t know much about the demon lands, for example, but my understanding is that slimes are just as common there as they are here!”

Figsly’s training gym sprang immediately to mind. “Yeah, they have slimes there. They’re all over the place,” I said.

“Exactly! Slimes are thought to exist in all corners of the world. Now, this isn’t to say there are literally no slimes at all in Namhadd—supposedly, you’ll see one every once in a blue moon—but they’re not all over the place like they are everywhere else. Isn’t that strange?”

“All that means is that it’s a part of the world with a small slime population. I don’t see why that’s such a big deal.” *The world’s a vast place. Slimes probably just aren’t native to the region.*

“Maybe. But the thing is, the moment you leave Namhadd, slimes start showing up absolutely everywhere again, just like normal. It’s only the Namhadd region where their population suddenly drops off. That’s weird, right?!”

“I guess, but I can’t say it’s particularly interesting,” I said. I felt bad about being such a killjoy, but I just couldn’t bring myself to get invested in a conversation about slimes, of all things.

“Well, people from a university decided to study the phenomenon and find a scientific explanation for it, but they still haven’t come to any conclusions. Finally, they decided to contact the guild and offer a cash reward to anyone who can track down the cause!”

“Good for them. Okay, see you later!”

“...You’re being awfully curt today, great Witch of the Highlands.”

“Can you blame me...? I’m not interested, I’m no slime researcher, and this isn’t an emergency, so why would I care?”

It was like the unidentified flying creature incident all over again. Sure, some

people would probably be interested, but as far as I was concerned, it was so unimportant it went beyond “someone else’s problem.” This was just “some random slime’s problem,” if you asked me.

Plus, I knew if I pretended to be interested, I’d risk getting Natalie’s hopes up. I didn’t want to let her down by revealing in the end that I didn’t care, and I definitely didn’t want to get roped into actually solving this mystery. Some people made a point of playing along and being all, *Oh, cool! I’m so curious about what’s going on!* when they didn’t actually care at all, and even when it was obvious they were just being polite, there were always other people who’d take that sort of lip service seriously. As far as I was concerned, that just seemed like a good way to disappoint people for no reason, and I tried to avoid it whenever I could.

So that was why I made a point of not showing any interest in the tale of Namhadd and its lack of slimes. It just wasn’t my thing. I killed slimes on the regular, but killing them and wanting to learn about the deepest secrets of their nature were two totally different matters.

“All right, then,” said Natalie. “I really did just bring it up as small talk, so I don’t mind changing the topic.”

“Great. Sorry, Natalie.”

“Instead, we can talk about all the ways the guild’s been getting on my nerves lately!”

Ugh! That’s even worse than slimes!



In the end, our conversation about the land without slimes fizzled out before it even got going. That said, I lived with a pair of slime spirits, and I decided to mention it to them over dinner that night. Falfa and Shalsha weren’t exactly slimes themselves, but they certainly had a stronger connection to the monsters than I did, and I thought there was a chance they’d find the topic interesting.

In the end, someone in my family really did latch on to the conversation—but it wasn’t Falfa or Shalsha. They were slime spirits, sure, but that didn’t mean they were interested in researching slimes. No, the one who took an immediate

interest in the topic...was Halkara.

“Oh, Namhadd? That sounds great! That region’s famous for being incredibly hot, you know.”

“You’re curious about the slimes, Halkara? I’m a little surprised.” I’d never gotten the impression that she had any interest in them.

“Oh, no, not the slimes! I couldn’t care less about those. You just never know what sort of unique medicinal techniques you’ll find in faraway lands, so I was thinking it might be nice to go and see what it’s like there.”

Oh, so she was thinking about medicine-making! Of course.

“Namhadd’s so far away that it’s hard to even imagine traveling there on foot, right?” Halkara continued. “I’ve never been there, but I’d be glad to have an excuse to visit.”

“You have a really positive outlook when it comes to these things, don’t you, Halkara?” I said.

“I guess it’s a habit I picked up back when I was Halkara Pharmaceuticals’ only employee! I had to travel to all sorts of places for my work, and I always made sure to do some sightseeing and track down a few local delicacies everywhere I went, even if business was my top priority.”

You know, she has a point. Having an excuse to go somewhere you’d never visit otherwise does sound kind of nice. Going on a trip to a stupidly hot desert and complaining to everyone back home about the weather might be kinda fun, too.

“So, Laika,” said Halkara. “Would you mind carrying me to Namhadd sometime soon?”

Oh, right. Halkara’s proactive enough to follow through on a trip like this, even after it only came up in conversation.

I guess Namhadd is one of those places we’d never go to without an excuse, and this is the perfect reason to get up and go there.

“Certainly,” said Laika. “That will be no trouble whatsoever. Whenever you are able to take time off work, I’ll—”

“I’ll go, too!” I said. It was time to be proactive and put myself out there as well.

“I thought you didn’t care about those desert slimes, Mistress,” said Flatorte, a puzzled look on her face. She wasn’t wrong—I’d really flip-flopped on this one.

“Yeah, I really don’t care about the slimes,” I replied. “Traveling somewhere far away’s a goal I can get behind, though.” You don’t get that many chances to go to deserts, after all.

Oh, right! Considering the guild’s got a quest in the area, I know exactly who else I should invite.



Some time later, I set out on my journey—a fairly long one, this time—aboard Laika, who had returned to her dragon form.

I was accompanied by Halkara and Wynona. It had been too long since I’d gone on a trip with Wynona, and since she was an adventurer, I figured she could try to solve the slime mystery and score some points with the guild while we were there.

Well, that was my intention, anyway.

“I hope you appreciate, Stepmother, that we adventurers are far too busy to waste time worrying about slimes. I bet that quest hasn’t been left unresolved for so long because the mystery is so perplexing. It’s been ignored because there aren’t any adventurers who consider it worth their time.”

We’ve only just set off, and she’s already shooting down my ideas! “So the adventurers see it that way, too, huh... I’m starting to think Natalie’s the only person who finds this mystery interesting.”

“The number of slimes in a region hardly matters, whether that number is large or small. I suppose an excess of slimes could potentially be a problem, but Namhadd has the opposite situation on its hands. Surely the lack of slimes hasn’t caused any trouble.”

“...I’m not gonna disagree. I actually think you’re right.”

I made a mental note that the guild’s employees saw these things in a very

different light than its adventurers did.

“Now, now,” said Halkara, trying to soothe Wynona’s irritation. “It’s not every day you get to visit a great big desert like Namhadd, right? We might as well enjoy it!”

“Yes, that’s true,” Wynona admitted. “The area’s nothing but a desert, so it never occurred to me to go there before now. If it weren’t for this, I doubt I ever would have. There’s so little reason for me to go, it felt like a waste to turn down this opportunity.”

“I know, right?” said Halkara. “It’s famous for being hot, boring, and nothing else! How could we pass up a chance to experience that nothingness for ourselves?”

I can’t believe you two agreed to visit a place you have nothing nice to say about... I guess it’s such an unattractive destination that its unattractiveness became attractive ? This seems complicated.

“Out of curiosity, have you ever been to Namhadd before, Laika?” I asked.

“I’ve never had anything to do there, so no,” Laika replied.

It was starting to sound like the whole purpose of our trip was to bask in boredom. *I really hope that by the time this is over, we’ll be all,* I heard that place was a nothing destination, but it was actually really cool! *I’d rather not spend this whole trip bored to tears...*

“Also, just to be certain, you wish me to land a short distance away from Namhadd rather than within the region itself, yes?” asked Laika.

“Right,” I confirmed. “Flying straight to our destination wouldn’t be interesting! Halkara and I decided on that together.”

Our plan was to start our journey at the edge of the desert, about five days away from Namhadd on foot. Considering our walking speed, though, I wasn’t expecting it to take quite that long. I figured we could make the trip in three, as long as we kept up a good pace.

“That’s right!” Halkara cheerfully replied. “Sometimes it’s best to take your time and do things the slow way! We’ll get a nice, long taste of nothing!” I, on

the other hand, was really hoping we'd find something—anything—of interest.



We arrived at a settlement that served as a common entry point into the desert. Before us, a vast sea of sandy dunes stretched all the way to the horizon, and above us, the sun glared mercilessly down onto the earth with its searing light.

“Ahhh, what lovely weather! I’m almost tempted to turn back into a dragon and have a nice bake in the sun!” said Laika. She was perfectly at home in this climate...but the rest of us were already dripping with sweat before we’d taken so much as a single step.

“This is awful...,” moaned Halkara. “I think I’m gonna pass out... I’d rather explore a miserable, clammy cave than deal with this... Worst quest ever...”

“So it’s that bad, even from an elf’s perspective, huh...?” said Wynona. “This is the sort of place you’d expect to be exiled to.”

“Come on, you two,” I replied. “We basically came here just to experience this, right...? Try to be a little more positive about it.”

“How can I be positive in this heat...?” Halkara grumbled. “I’m not an adventurer *or* an explorer, you know...”

Wynona took a few tottering steps toward the desert. She, at least, had apparently found her resolve. I’d been worried she might suggest we turn right back around and go home, so I was glad it hadn’t come to that.

“I’ve heard that Namhadd proper is even hotter,” she said. “Supposedly, it’s the hottest region in the whole desert...”

The color drained from Halkara’s face.

“Um, can I drop out of this expedition...?” she asked.

“C-come on, don’t be like that!” I insisted. “It’s not every day you get to visit a desert, right?! Let’s go, let’s go!”

And so our journey began.

Before long, I noticed something out in front of us. The sand seemed to be shifting on its own.

“What is that? Some sort of local monster?” I wondered aloud.

A moment later, my question was answered as a slime leaped out from the pile of sand.

“So there really are slimes here! They weren’t kidding about those things showing up literally everywhere!”

Not only was the creature a slime, but it didn’t seem any different from the non-desert slimes I was familiar with. It looked exactly like the ones I saw around the house in the highlands.

“It seems the slime population in this area is still perfectly ordinary, Lady Azusa,” Laika explained as she dispatched the slime with a single punch. “Their numbers are only supposed to lessen in the vicinity of Namhadd.”

Needless to say, the defeated slime dropped a magic stone. Most adventurers would probably think it was too heavy to be worth carrying around, but to Laika it was barely more than a pebble, and she stowed it in her bag.

“Okay, let’s get a move on!” I said.

Halkara, however, had stopped in her tracks.

“I’m, um, already a little thirsty. Give me a moment; I need a drink,” she said as she pulled out her water bottle and took a few deep gulps. “Ugh, this water’s so warm, it’s like I boiled it...”

We’ve only been walking for about two minutes. Are we going to make it...?

The four of us pressed on through the desert. It was sand as far as the eye could see, which made it pretty difficult to tell where we were going, but we sucked it up and forged ahead.

“There’s no wildlife at all in this vicinity, is there?” Laika observed. “I suppose it is because of the scorching heat.” Her family of red dragons lived by a volcano and bathed in hot springs built into the mountain itself. It made sense that the temperature didn’t affect her.

“There’s actually a lot of creatures living in the desert. They simply don’t come out during the daytime,” Wynona explained, pointing toward the ground. “The majority of them shelter underground during the heat of the day. They’ll

start coming out in droves around dusk. Moles and other similar creatures are quite common.”

“Huh! You sure know your stuff, don’t you?” I said. “Leave it to an adventurer.”

“S-spare me the flattery, Stepmother. It won’t do you any good...”

Despite her attitude, all it took was one little compliment to make Wynona pleased as punch. Not that she would ever admit it, of course. In any case, I made it a point to compliment Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra whenever I could, and I wasn’t about to make Wynona an exception to that policy.

“Oh, and in the desert, many local plants adapt in unusual ways to help them maintain their water content and prevent evaporation.” This time, Wynona was pointing out ahead of us at what I quickly identified as a cactus.

“Ah!” Halkara yelped with excitement. “That’s a medicactus! They have incredible medicinal properties! I’ve never seen one growing in the wild before!”

That’s an elf for you. Spot one plant, and she’s over the moon.

“Plants like this are the whole reason I came to this desert! I have to take a closer look right away!” Halkara said as she sprinted off through the dunes toward the cactus.

“I, um, wouldn’t recommend rushing like that,” Wynona cautioned. “It’s dangerous... The sand’s going to trip you.”

Halkara, however, was far too excited to take her advice. “Oh, no need to worry! There’s nothing but sand around here anyway, so even if I trip, it won’t hurt a bit! I’ll be totally fine!”

Halkara was getting carried away, and I had a terrible feeling about where this was headed. *Come to think of it, don’t most cactuses have a ton of pointy spines...?*

“I really think you should be careful, Halkara!” I called out. “At least slow down once you’re close to the cactus!”

“Are you worried about me hurting myself on its spines, Madam Teacher? It’s

fine! I know all about those!” Halkara shouted back.

Oh! So she already knew.

Halkara closed in on the cactus...then tripped in the sand, pitched forward, and collided with it face-first. She’d more or less full-body tackled it.

“Oooooow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! Ouch, ow, ow, ouch, owie!”

“You knew all about the spines, and you got stabbed by them anyway?!”

That’s even worse!

“Ooouch, ouch, ouch! But wait, I think some of the spines are sticking in just the right places! This might be good for me, actually! The good spines are canceling out the bad ones!”

What is this, cactus acupuncture?! “How are you even talking with that many cactus spines in you?!”

“Stepmother,” said Wynona, “the spines of the medicactus are known to have a rejuvenating effect on the bodies of those stabbed by them.”

“The *spines* are the healthy part?! I thought it’d be the sap or something!”

I’d assumed it was like aloe, where the slimy liquid inside the plant had beneficial effects if you rubbed it on your skin. But clearly I’d been off the mark.

“I understand it strengthens the digestive tract,” Wynona continued. “Reportedly, the effect is significant enough to change a light eater into someone who could compete in eating competitions.”

“That’s impressive and all, but a light eater entering an eating competition can’t be a good idea.” *That sounds pretty unhealthy, cactus or no!*

For the time being, I was just glad to see that Halkara was unharmed. That said, the sight of her stuck full of cactus spines was still freaking me out every time I looked over.

“Wow! It feels like all the toxins are draining out of my body...”

“If you think you might collapse, please stay away from me, okay...?”

I decided to walk a little farther away from her, wary of secondhand stabbing.

Our journey through the desert continued, and eventually, we arrived at a single, solitary inn out in the middle of the dunes, where we decided to spend the night. Part of me wondered how an inn stayed open in a place like this, but apparently, it was used as a relay point for merchants moving goods through the desert. It was also handy as an emergency refuge for anyone who happened to take ill over the course of the trip.

“I wasn’t aware people did business in remote places such as this,” said Laika. “Clearly, I need to broaden my range of experience.” I didn’t know anyone as devoted to self-improvement as Laika, but in this case, I felt the same way. I also found getting firsthand experience with unfamiliar cultures fascinating.

There were a ton of camels tied up next to the inn. It seemed merchants rode them to cross the desert, and Halkara and I got the chance to try riding one of them ourselves. The meals the inn served were less exciting, unfortunately. Most of their food was dried, and the rest was pickled or fermented. Considering the costs of transporting food out into the desert, I couldn’t really complain. I figured it was the same problem faced by mountain lodges. Water was especially precious, meaning we couldn’t guzzle it down freely, either.

“Mnhhh. I’m still thirsty, but I guess there’s nothing we can do about that,” said Halkara. She’d sweated most of her water reserves away and was rather let down by the amount we’d been served with our meal.

“If you’re really feeling dehydrated, I can share some of my water with you,” I offered. I wasn’t nearly as worn down as she was. At times like these, I had to appreciate how strong I’d inadvertently become.

Of course, the liveliest of us by far was Laika. I could only assume that after living most of her life in a hot climate, her body had acclimated to retain its moisture.

By the time we finished dinner, night had well and truly fallen. Thanks to the light of the moon, however, it was still pretty bright out.

“Well then—I’ll be taking a nighttime stroll,” Wynona said, standing up from her seat. I got the sense she’d been planning on this from the beginning.

“Deserts are supposed to be nice and cool at night, right?” I said. “In that case, I think I’ll tag along.”

In the end, all of us followed Wynona outside. And the instant I stepped out of the inn, I noticed something.

“There’s actually some slimes out here!”

Slimes were all over, hopping around on the sandy ground.

“Lady Azusa, it seems these slimes take shelter during the heat of day and come out at night when it gets cool,” said Laika. “I suppose even ordinary slimes have enough intellect to make that sort of judgment.” She made a face that said “I learned something new today.”

We knew some very clever slimes—possibly the product of mutations, though I couldn’t say for sure—but all of them were, in the end, just exceptions. You could gather up a billion slimes, and you’d be lucky to find even one like them.

“I can’t comment on the slimes’ intellect, but it’s true that they instinctively come out during the cooler part of the day,” said Wynona, pausing to take some notes. “Slimes are just as uncomfortable in the heat as we are, I suppose. Also, it seems there are still plenty of slimes in this region.”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “This place is lousy with them.”

At the rate things were going, I worried we’d make it to Namhadd only to find that there were plenty of slimes there, too. What if they were all just buried underground, and nobody had noticed them?

Our main objective might be sightseeing in the desert, but since we’d brought Wynona along with us, it only seemed right to make like adventurers and solve the mystery of why there were so few slimes around Namhadd. If it turned out that the people of Namhadd were simply mistaken, it’d be a pretty big letdown.



Halkara leaned over and inspected the slimes as they bounced.

“I guess the fact that there are slimes here means they have no problems living in the desert,” said Halkara. “Actually, these slimes seem more energetic than the ones around the house in the highlands!”

Wynona picked up one of the slimes. “It feels quite cool, maybe because it was underground.”

I feel like if they didn't live in the desert at all, the researchers would have already figured that out, made their conclusions, and moved right along.

“In any case, once we arrive in the slimeless land of Namhadd, we'll have to keep an eye out for any factors that differ between here and there,” said Wynona. “As an adventurer, I'd certainly like to get credit for the quest, but even if there were nothing to gain from it, it seems worth doing.”

She's gotten a lot more laid-back since we joined that adventuring tournament with her, hasn't she?

“Just don't complain too much if we don't figure anything out, okay...?” I said.

“No need to worry, Stepmother. I've had low expectations for this trip from the start.”

“I feel reassured, but also a little let down...”

Wynona released the slime, then scratched her neck uncomfortably. “I've come to think that it's worthwhile to take pointless journeys in between the meaningful ones, every once in a while,” she said. “That's something I learned by watching how you live your life.”

“I know that was probably meant as a compliment, but it still sounds condescending.” *Or wait, no—she's just embarrassed, that's all! Or so I choose to believe.*

“In any case, they should be coming out soon,” said Wynona.

“‘Coming out’? What will?”

“The other inhabitants of this desert, of course. The ones besides slimes.”

Just then, something began to stir in the sand by my feet. A moment later, a

creature that looked like a little white mouse, small enough to fit in the palm of my hand, poked its head out.

“Whoa! There really was something buried under the sand!” I exclaimed.

“There! Yes! A white desert mouse! Yes, yes, yes!”

With a mighty—and very abrupt—shout, Wynona leaped forward and caught the creature she’d called a white desert mouse in her hands. You could tell from the way she moved that she was a skilled and experienced adventurer. The mouse had no time to run.

“Oh wow! It’s so much better seeing the real thing in person! Sadly, there’s a little bit of pink on its back, but it’s still quite cute! And even though it spends most of its time underground, it’s perfectly white and clean! What an incredible find!”

Ooh... I think I know why Wynona decided to come along on this trip now. She just wanted to see a white animal that only lives in the desert...

“I would love to bring it home with me, but the environment around my house is simply too different. It would probably be hard to keep it there. It’s heartbreaking, but I’ll have to give up and leave it here.”

I wanted to ask her how Grand Duke Polar Bear was doing in that case, but I’d seen polar bears in zoos back in Japan, so on second thought, he was probably just fine.

Wynona spent quite a while frolicking with the white desert mouse, while the rest of us decided to leave her behind and head back into the inn.



We spent another day traveling through the desert and then stopped at a second inn to spend the night. A new day arrived, and we forged on through the desert, before passing the night at a third inn. Walking through the desert landscape had felt new and exciting at first, but after three days of the same thing, I was well and truly tired of it.

“No matter how far we walk, there’s never anything new to see...,” I moaned. “Talk about tedious...” The scenery was so unchanging, I began to wonder if we were caught in a time loop.

When we arrived at the third inn, I went straight to the common room and plopped down in the first chair I could reach. I wasn't so much tired from all the walking as I was *done* with the whole trip in general.

"We should reach Namhadd tomorrow, Madam Teacher! It's the biggest city in the whole region, so just hang on until we get there, okay? Plus," Halkara said, lifting up a rather large cup, "it looks like this inn has plenty of water to spare! I never realized how good a nice glass of water could taste! It's a little bitter, but I still love it!"

There were a number of full cups lined up on the inn's front desk. Considering how precious water was out in the desert, it struck me as quite generous of the inn's owners... But I knew there was no such thing as a free lunch in this world, and the warning posted nearby proved me right.



"Oof, yikes... Are you sure you should be drinking that stuff, Halkara...? I've got some serious doubts about the hygiene situation here..."

"Oh, don't worry!" she said. "It'll be just fine. And this time, it's not just a guess!"

Does that mean that when she says everything will be fine, it's usually just a guess? I'd better not mention that, though, or I'd derail the conversation.

"My evidence: this spine!" Halkara said as she held up a small, slender thorn between two fingers. "I got jabbed all over by that medicactus, so my stomach's in better shape than ever! There's no way a little muddy water will give me a

stomachache today!”

“That’s pretty flimsy evidence, if you ask me. But you already drank it, and a stomachache’s better than dehydration, so I guess it all works out...”

Just then, Wynona—who had stepped aside to pay for our night’s stay—returned to us.

“It seems there’s a strange phenomenon in this area that causes empty buckets left on the ground in the day to fill up with water,” she said. “The downside is that drinking that water tends to make people sick. It’s something of a gamble, from the sound of it.”

“What sort of phenomenon is that?” I asked. “Buckets filling up on their own...? Is that really possible?”

Taking the story at face value, it seemed downright miraculous.

“Why not? The world is vast, and stranger things have happened. Regardless, you don’t have to risk drinking it. I’ve bought regular, potable water for us to have instead.”

I guess they do sell water from the oasis in Namhadd, so there’s no reason for us to drink the mystery water.

“I imagine many of the locals prefer to drink water with less dubious origins,” observed Laika. “That’s probably how they can sell water despite also giving it out for free.”

That seemed like a good enough explanation to me. The locals knew all about the mystery water making people sick, after all.

In the end, all of us except Halkara stuck to the water we’d purchased.

We set out again the next morning, and soon arrived at the city of Namhadd, which was built up around an oasis in the middle of the desert.

“This place sure is lively, huh? And we’re still on the outskirts, so it must be pretty big,” I observed. The city proper was protected by a large, gated wall, but there were plenty of market streets and buildings set up outside the gates as well.

“It’s the only real city in the whole region, so no wonder,” said Wynona. “I

imagine those walls were built less for defense and more to keep sand from blowing into the city.”

“You really know your stuff when it comes to geography, don’t you?” I said.

“Ugh... There’s nothing pleasant about receiving an offhanded compliment like that...”

Nice try, Wynona, but I can tell you’re pleased. Anyone could, it’s so obvious! Looks like I’ll have to keep laying on the compliments from now on.

“I’m so curious about all the medicines people make in the desert! I’m going to stock up and research everything I can find!” said Halkara. I was impressed by her attitude.

It was nice, I reflected, that this journey had multiple objectives. Even if we failed to achieve one of our goals, we could simply focus in on another one.

And come to think of it, if Halkara’s acting this upbeat...

“It looks like drinking the mystery water didn’t have any ill effects, huh?” I noted. I’d been sure she would wake up with terrible stomach cramps halfway through the night.

“Nope! I’m just fine! I can put up with a little subpar water, no problem! Besides, I can always just disinfect my stomach with alcohol afterward... Kidding!”

“In your case, I think you’re more likely to drink so much you *empty* your stomach, bad water, alcohol and all... But anyway, I’m just glad it didn’t make you sick.” *Oh, and since she’s completely in apothecary mode right now, I should make sure she pays attention to our other goals while she’s looking around.* “Tell us if you see any slimes, okay? We came all the way here, so we might as well try to solve the mystery if we can.”

The problem (if you could call it one) was that there weren’t any slimes around, so I wasn’t expecting her to find one right away, of course.

“Ah! Lady Azusa, look! A slime!”

“Seriously, Laika?! We only just got here!”

“Over there! It’s blue, and it’s hiding in the shadow of that merchant’s tent!”

“Wait, where...? Geez, you’ve got good eyes, Laika...”

Laika started walking toward the tent she’d indicated. It was so far away that part of me was sure she’d been seeing things. If she was right, then her eyesight really was incredible. *Maybe dragons are just naturally better at seeing far away?*

The rest of us followed after Laika, and when we arrived at the tent, we discovered that there was indeed a slime sheltering in its shadow.

“That’s incredible, Laika! I guess this place has slimes after all,” I said as I stepped toward the monster...but suddenly, I noticed something off about it. Normal slimes were round and plump, and this one looked awfully flat to me in comparison.

Apparently, the slime was spooked by my approach. It jumped to the side, clean out of the tent’s shadow and into the blazing sunlight. The sandy ground was boiling hot in the daytime...and the moment the slime touched down, it let out a sizzling noise as it melted away before my eyes!

“Wait, what?!” I yelped. “Did that slime just *evaporate*?!”

The only thing left in the slime’s wake was a magic stone. Slime stones were never big, but this one was quite small even by slime standards. I had yet to touch it, and it already looked cracked and brittle.

Wynona pulled out her notepad once again and started scribbling away on it. “It seems the heat did it in,” she said. “They say that Namhadd is the hottest city in the world, and I suppose that heat makes it unsuitable for slimes. Considering how small a magic stone it dropped, I imagine most of them get lost in the desert sands.”

“I guess that means the stories about there not being many slimes here are true...” I muttered.

“I see...,” said Laika. “The temperature was indeed lower in the part of the desert where we began our journey. Perhaps somewhere between there and Namhadd, the ambient temperature passed a critical threshold that slimes can’t survive. That would explain the lack of them in Namhadd’s vicinity quite handily: They simply boil away before anyone sees them.”

Laika, ever the clever one, had put the pieces together in no time at all. Her theory made total sense to me, and I had no reason to question it...or at least, not until I recalled something I'd seen at our inn the night before.

"Hey, Laika...? There's just one tiny question I have about your theory... Though maybe I'm just being paranoid."

"What is it, Lady Azusa?"

"Getting boiled away by the heat would kill a slime for sure...but what if they were melted, not boiled?" I asked. "Would they still be alive as a liquid...? In that case, they'd still have to evaporate to fully die."

"That does seem possible," said Laika. "It would stand to reason that they would melt into a liquid before evaporating into a gas. The slime we just saw evaporated after jumping onto the hot sand. But when it was in the shadow, it was still alive."

"And maybe they can reform and basically come back to life even after they melt, as long as it cools down again. Slimes are pretty much bouncy bags of water to begin with, so maybe melting is more like entering suspended animation than dying for them."

"That's a very strange theory, Stepmother," said Wynona, who seemed less than impressed by my speculation. "Is there some line of evidence that's led you to believe that?"

"I was just thinking...what if when it gets hot, the slimes all decide to crawl into buckets because they're cooler than the ground...then stay there to wait until night falls and it's cool enough for them to leave again...?"

Like, for instance, the mysterious water that appeared out of nowhere in buckets left on the ground by the staff of a certain inn.

I turned to look at Halkara. Wynona and Laika turned at almost the same time, an expression of shocked realization on both their faces.

"W-wait a minute... You're not saying that the water I drank yesterday was actually liquefied slimes, are you...? No way, right...? You just have an overactive imagination, that's all..."

Just then, a strange noise came from Halkara's stomach.

Grrugrrugrrugrrugrrugrr, grrugrrugrrugrr!

"Whoa! What the heck was *that* noise?!" she yelped.

"I knew it! Something's definitely wrong with you!" I shouted. "You should take a laxative or something while you still can!"

We should probably go find an apothecary in Namhadd. I'm sure they'll have something she can take to get all that out of her system.

I reached out for Halkara's arm...but I barely even managed to touch her before suddenly, she was gone.

Boing!

Halkara leaped almost three meters ahead of us. She didn't get a running start or anything—she just jumped straight forward from a standing position, much like a slime would.

"I didn't realize you had such a springlike physicality, Miss Halkara. You would be excellent at the long jump," said Laika, who had picked a very weird moment to be impressed, especially since I was pretty sure Halkara couldn't usually pull off a jump like that.

"Hey, Laika...? I want you to take a close look at Halkara's eyes," I said nervously.

"Ah!" Laika gasped and clasped a hand to her mouth.

Halkara's eyes had started looking like slimes!

Boing!

Halkara jumped again, even farther than she had the first time.

Oh no—we're going to lose her at this rate! We have to catch her! Wait up, Halkara!

"None of this makes sense, Stepmother!" Wynona shouted as we ran. "Even if the water in those buckets was liquefied slimes, the worst side effects should be a stomachache or diarrhea! If Halkara's symptoms were normal, everyone would know about this condition!"

“You’re right about that!” I said. “The thing is...there’s one other factor that makes Halkara’s case special.”

For most people, the side effects of drinking a slime would have been exactly what Wynona had described. There was just one reason why things might have turned out differently for Halkara.

“What factor is that...?” asked Wynona.

“Halkara’s stomach was in tip-top shape after she got stabbed by the medicactus! That’s why she didn’t get sick and purge the liquefied slimes, allowing them to stay in her body for long enough to start causing more side effects!”

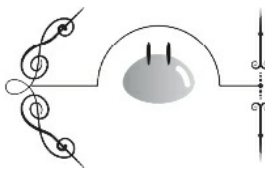
“Th-that can’t be... Or actually... Maybe it could? I’ve heard of some cases where healthy individuals suffered longer from food poisoning because they didn’t throw up quickly enough...”

To make a long story short, we eventually apprehended Halkara just as she was leaping out into the desert. Then we force-fed her a laxative and made her drink a boatload of water, which turned her eyes normal again, followed by the rest of her body.

“I feel like I just had a very, very weird dream... For some reason, I was a slime...”

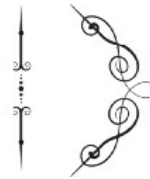
“Yeah, that makes sense. Trust me, we believe you.”

Thanks to Halkara accidentally making herself into a guinea pig, the medical community gained another case study of the effects of ingesting slimes on the body. A few days later, Wynona wrote up a detailed field report on heat tolerance in slimes, which apparently led to various advances in slime science.



WE ASKED A GOD ABOUT UNLUCKY

YEARS —————



Today was a day off at Halkara's factory. Halkara herself was at home, flipping through a book, when she suddenly heaved a sigh.

"I see. That explains it. It all makes so much sense now..."

I was in the kitchen washing dishes and could hear her muttering to herself. Her tone of voice didn't give me the sense she was dealing with a particularly big problem, so I figured it was safe to pretend I hadn't heard.

"Yep, yep. I've had the strangest feeling that everything's been going wrong lately, and now I finally understand why. Mystery solved. Now I just have to deal with it, so this issue's basically halfway resolved already."

She's saying all this loudly enough for me to hear on purpose, isn't she? That's definitely not a normal talking-to-yourself volume.

She hadn't actually addressed me, though, so I kept focusing on my dishes and pretended not to notice.

A moment later, Halkara stepped into the kitchen.

"Um, Madam Teacher, didn't you hear me? Aren't you curious what I was talking about? You're curious, right?"

"So you *were* trying to be heard."

"Well, here's your answer! Ta-daa!"

Halkara held out the book she'd been reading, which had the following words printed on it:

ELVEN AGES OF CALAMITY

BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER YOUR UNLUCKY YEARS

“The concept of unlucky years is a thing here?!” I exclaimed.

“Well, of course it is!” said Halkara. “Elves live for so long that we go through an awful lot of them, too. It looks like last year was an unlucky year for me, and that bad luck’s supposed to have carried over into this one, too!”

She made it sound like all of this was the most ordinary thing in the world.

In Japan, people traditionally believed that certain years in a person’s life were naturally unlucky. And as one might guess, I could see that the tables in Halkara’s book for elves listed ages in the triple digits, and even some in the thousands.

“Do you really think this is an unlucky year, though...? Your work’s been going great, hasn’t it? You even opened up a museum recently!” *There’s no way she’d have decided to start up a project like that if her business had been going through a rough spell.*

“Oh, my work’s going just fine, yes! But you know, misfortune doesn’t necessarily have to hit you in the workplace. In my case, I think I’ve been having a period of bad luck when it comes to my health.” As Halkara spoke, she strolled over to a shelf and pulled out a bottle of booze.

“I THOUGHT I’D BEEN DRINKING MYSELF SICK MORE OFTEN THAN USUAL LATELY, AND NOW I KNOW WHY! IT’S BECAUSE THIS IS AN UNLUCKY YEAR FOR ME!”

“That’s not the year’s fault! You just drink way too much!”

If you start blaming your bad habits on the year, it’s liable to curse you for real! Talk about shifting the blame!

“Oh, no, I’m not saying my being a bad drunk is all the year’s fault, Madam Teacher.”

“So you’ve got at least a little self-awareness, huh?” *How about trying some self-improvement next?*

“The thing is, up until recently, I only went on a drinking binge about two times a month. This year, though, I’ve been doing it up to four times a month on

average! The only reasonable conclusion is that my bad luck's been getting the better of me."

"Or maybe you're just getting worse at controlling yourself...?" *Everything you're saying to me right now sounds like a big, fat load of excuses.*

"If losing control was a recent development for me, I might accept that explanation, but I've always been terrible about limiting my drinking! My bad habits haven't changed a bit! I've *never* had self-control! As such, I have to assume my luck is the problem!" Halkara shouted, pumping her fist—still clasped around the neck of a bottle—into the air.

Don't chew her out, don't chew her out... "I think you might be able to fix this little problem of yours if you just tweak your drinking habits a little," I suggested. "Maybe the gods are sending you a message about cutting back?"

Halkara nodded vigorously. "That's right! I'm convinced this must be the work of some higher power—maybe even a god! Fortunately, I have a solution: I need to conduct a ceremony to ward off the bad luck plaguing me this year!"

"O-okaaay... I mean, I guess I can see how a message from the gods and a misfortune-warding ritual are kind of in the same universe..."

Halkara's logic was starting to make a little sense to me—but only a little. At any rate, she was dead set on blaming her habit of getting blackout drunk on the year.

In my opinion, the sort of purification ritual she was talking about felt like it should be the last resort for this kind of situation—one that you turned to only after everything else had already failed. If someone dumped a bunch of trash into the local river, you wouldn't start by praying to the gods for a miracle—you'd first wade in and try to clean it up yourself. It was just like how people who prayed to pass their entrance exams without bothering to study always wound up failing.

As the head of the household, I decided it was my responsibility to tell Halkara clearly that she needed to get her drinking under control.

"Look, Halkara—," I began, only to be instantly cut off.

"Lady Azusa! I've realized something terrible as well," Laika shouted as she

dashed in from the dining room. She was holding a book, and after a quick glance at its cover, I had a bad feeling I knew where this was going.

“What’s wrong, Laika?” I asked.

“I’VE CONSULTED THE DRAGON CALENDAR, AND IT SEEMS THIS YEAR IS SUPPOSED TO BE TERRIBLY UNLUCKY FOR ME...”

“Dragons have unlucky years, too?!” I exclaimed.

“Ugh... And now that I know, I’m doomed to worry about it for the rest of the year... This has crushed my drive and ruined my focus. I see I still have much to learn...”

Laika looked incredibly troubled as she laid her book down on the table. She was the sort of person who readily believed in fortune-telling and the like, so it didn’t surprise me that this sort of thing bothered her.

What should I do about this...? It’d be easy to write it off as the two of them being overly suggestible, but if telling them that was all it took to make them stop worrying, this wouldn’t be a problem to begin with.

“I think you should just try not to think about it for now, Laika,” I said. “Find something else to focus on! Take your mind off it!”

“Wait a minute, Madam Teacher!” shouted Halkara. “That’s nothing like what you said to me! Where was that sympathy and compassion when I was the one complaining?!” She wasn’t wrong, to be fair.

“I gave you more specific advice because there’s a real way for you to work on your problem, that’s all. Your bad luck isn’t exactly an act of god.”

“I’m pretty sure it would take an act of god to cut down on my drinking, though!”

Okay. Now I’m getting irritated. “Look, Halkara, this isn’t even an unlucky year for you, is it? It’s the year after one—all you have to worry about is its lingering aftereffects! If the unlucky year itself is where your misfortune peaks, then everything should be well on its way to getting better. If anything, your luck’s improving. You just have to take it one day at a time, and it’ll all work out!”

“Oh! Good point,” said Halkara. That, at least, was logic she could accept

without question. “I guess that means I can keep drinking myself silly without worrying.”

Is cutting down on alcohol consumption the one absolute deal-breaker for her...? In that case, what would even be the point of a ceremony?

Just then, Rosalie poked her head into the kitchen—by phasing through the sink.

“Sorry to pop up in such a weird spot,” she said. “Ghosts like chilly, damp places, that’s all.”

“Uh, right. Sure. Makes sense,” I said. “Anyway, what’s up?”

“THE TRUTH IS, THIS IS AN UNLUCKY YEAR FOR ME, TOO, ACCORDING TO THE GHOST CALENDAR!”

“Who decided on all these stupid unlucky years?!”

I didn’t understand how such things even applied to those who were already dead. But seeing as ghosts were real, I figured they had to have some conception of luck.

On the other hand, isn’t it contradictory for a lingering spirit to be lucky? If they were really lucky, wouldn’t they stop being a ghost and move on...?

That was when Flatorte came strolling in from the hallway, laughing her head off. I had a feeling she’d been following Laika.

“‘Unlucky years’?” she said. “Of all the stupid things to be worried about! No way are those a thing! You might look smart, Laika, but the truth is you’re a big dummy deep down!”

“Quiet, you...,” Laika snapped, her face bright red. “I can’t help but worry about it. I’m not irresponsible and carefree like you are!”

The fact that she was blushing proved that she also realized she was being silly. She probably knew it was all in her imagination, but still couldn’t help fixating on it. That was how things like fortune-telling went. (And yes, I know that unlucky years and fortune-telling are different things, but they fall into the same broad category in my mind, and I tend to lump them together.)

“Okay, then,” countered Flatorte. “If unlucky years are real, then there must

be a bunch of statistics and stuff about how people get hurt way more often during them, right? Only there aren't, because they're not a thing!"

"...Ugh. That's...true, I suppose..." mumbled Laika. She couldn't think of anything to disprove the argument, and fell silent.

Amazingly, Flatorte had hit the nail on the head this time. She'd probably never opened a textbook in her life, and in terms of pure academics, she was far from the sharpest tool in the shed. If I'd never been to a certain town, I would have no way of knowing what special products they were famous for unless I looked it up. That kind of knowledge was completely beyond Flatorte.

When it came to thinking things through, however, she was remarkably quick on the uptake. She could be quite rational as well, when she wanted to, and the fact that she didn't fuss over petty details meant she often reached the correct answer faster than anyone else.

"If unlucky years worry you, you'd be better off not learning about them in the first place! It's not like knowing helps you. Looking into something that only causes you problems is like going out of your way to find a pit to fall into!"

"Just stop, please! Quit assaulting me with reasonable arguments!"

Laika's face was once again beet-red. This had turned into a bigger problem than I'd anticipated.

I could relate, of course. If I got a fortune that predicted I'd have terrible luck, I'd be a little worried, too. I'd probably blame any small blunders on my bad luck.

Of course, no matter what kind of fortune I got, I'm sure I still would've worked myself to death... If you want things to get better, you have to focus on improving your base situation however you can.

If unlucky years were a problem, then they were a problem driven by feelings, not actual luck. That was why it didn't help to have someone tell you not to worry. Some people, like Flatorte, genuinely didn't believe in unlucky years and thus had no problem with them. Depending on the person, either extreme was possible.

Of course, since a few of us really are worried about this, we'll have to find a

real solution.

I finished washing the dishes, then clapped my hands to get everyone's attention.

“Okay, then! Let's go make sure this unlucky year won't be a problem, shall we?”

“Are you sure?” asked Halkara. “An unlucky year for elves can only be ceremonially warded away in elven territory, you know?”

“And I would have to return to my homeland to cleanse a draconic unlucky year,” added Laika.

“Ghosts have to go to a famous spooky site,” said Rosalie. “Won't you be scared, Big Sis?”

I'm not going anywhere haunted, that's for sure! “Why deal with all of your years one by one when there's a place we can go to take care of them all at once?”



I set out with the members of my family currently fretting over their unlucky years—and Flatorte, who came along because she was bored—and made my way toward the Goodly Godly Godness Shrine in Flatta.

“Are you going to get a new virtue stamp card, Madam Teacher?” asked Halkara.

“No, I'm gonna ask Godly Godness about unlucky years,” I explained.

We arrived in front of the shrine and were instantly whisked away to an otherworldly space that reminded me of Nintan's at her own shrine. We found Godly Godness waiting for us within.

“Hello, hello! What's on your mind, everyone? Have something that's been bothering you? I'm all ears!” said Godly Godness. She could be pretty irresponsible, as far as gods went, but at times like these, she was quite proactive, which was helpful.

I gave Godly Godness a quick summary of why we were here. I explained that my family members had been anxious about their luck this year and asked for

her opinion on the matter. We had a direct line to an actual god, so it made sense to just ask her.

If Godly Godness said, *Unlucky years? Those aren't real. It's all in your head*, then that would solve the problem in an instant. A claim like that from her would surely stop Laika from obsessing over her supposed misfortune. After all, someone who thought unlucky years were important would put even greater weight on the words of an actual god. It was a problem-solving strategy that only people with divine acquaintances, like me, could pull off.

Unlucky years have gotta be something us lower beings came up with, right? At the very least, I'm pretty positive that the gods don't make those unlucky year calendars and pass them on to their priests or whatever. This'll work for sure!

My plan didn't end up playing out how I'd envisioned, however.

"Unlucky years, huh?" said Godly Godness. "Hmm. That's a toughie, all right."

Huh? That's weird. It looks like I managed to put Godly Godness on the spot, for once. "I was positive you were going to say *Unlucky years are just a superstition* and refute the whole idea with a single sentence...", I said.

"I'd love to, but I'm a pro when it comes to this sort of thing, you know? That means I can't just brush questions like this off. It's like how if you ask a scientist a science question, they never give you a concrete answer. When you're a pro, you understand that there are a bunch of possible alternatives you can't just ignore."

Something about a god using scientists as her go-to example felt a little off to me, but I understood what she was trying to say.

"How about you ask a god with more expertise?" Godly Godness suggested—and the next thing I knew, Nintan was standing beside her.

I'm sure gods can move around freely, but that sure was abrupt! Sheesh...

"You cur! Cease dragging Us away without warning!" Nintan shouted. "We are a god, and We demand the courtesy befitting Our station!" Unsurprisingly, she was furious.

“Come on, it’s no big deal! Anyway, blah blah blah, now you know what’s going on.”

“You cannot just say ‘blah blah blah’ and expect Us to understand the circumstances! You must actually summarize them!”

I decided this would be much easier and less likely to go wrong if I explained in Godly Godness’s place, so I stepped in to do just that. It wasn’t a particularly long story in the first place.

“Oh? Unlucky years, is it? Yes, We see,” said Nintan.

Hmm. That’s not a very direct response, is it? I’d been hoping she would say *Those are but a symptom of mental weakness*, or something, but apparently, it wasn’t going to be that easy.

“This is getting kind of freaky! You’re not suggesting unlucky years are real, are you...?” Rosalie asked apprehensively, the color draining from her face.

“The idea that members of a certain race will universally experience sudden misfortune when they reach a certain age is not true, no,” said Nintan. “Were that the case, unlucky years would be a matter of clear and established fact, feared by all since ancient times, not the ambiguous and uncertain concept that they are.”

Right? That’s what I thought, too. It’d be even weirder than literal magic existing.

“That means unlucky years are just a stupid myth after all, right? So there’s no problem,” said Flatorte. She didn’t worry about politeness even in the presence of the gods. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe in them, though—she just didn’t think they were a big deal.

Nintan shook her head. “Not precisely. Although unlucky years are not real in the manner they are most often conceptualized, well...there is truth to the idea of fate. Furthermore, it is indeed possible that a significant number of individuals meet terrible fates during their so-called unlucky years. Some people might even experience double the misfortune of regular years. As such, We cannot completely dismiss them offhand.”

“Wait... Fate is real...?”

I was so shocked, I had to double-check. If that was true, then wouldn't it imply that our futures were preordained?

"Oh, it's not as bad as it probably sounds to you, Azusa!" said Godly Godness. "It's not like everything you're going to do from now on is set in stone or anything. We gods are way too busy to preordain precisely when every single person in the world is going to fart or yawn or whatever."

I appreciate the reassurance, but I really wish you could've picked an example other than farting and yawning. Anyway, does that mean destiny isn't real, and how things turn out is just the product of coincidence? Judging by the way those two are acting, I don't think it's quite that simple.

Godly Godness turned toward Nintan and asked, "Does this world have a god in charge of that sort of thing?"

"Yes. There is indeed a god of fate."

Now that's a powerful-sounding god if I've ever heard of one...

"Establishing and adjusting the mechanisms of fate is her jurisdiction."

Seriously...? Fate has actual mechanisms?

"Although We are unfamiliar with the specifics, things such as random number generation and lottery jackpots would fall under her purview."

This is all starting to sound a bit sketchy.

"In any case, it seems very possible that she is involved in determining how unlucky years function. As such, neither We nor Godly Godness can provide you the answers you seek."

It feels like our question's getting blown way out of proportion.

"Thus, We recommend you pay the god of fate a visit and ask her how unlucky years work."

"I had a feeling that was where this was going!"

That's a pretty scary prospect! I had no idea what sort of person the god of fate was, or what her personality was like, so the idea of paying her a casual visit was a lot to stomach. What if the moment we met her, she said something

like *Oh, you're going to die tomorrow?* That would be terrifying!

At the very least, we should wait until after these supposedly unlucky years are over before we ask the god of fate whether they're real. That way we won't have to worry about what she says.

"You will find the god of fate here. Go and meet with her yourself," Nintan said, pointing to a piece of paper she produced with what looked like a map on it. "She is not the sort of being one can meet at a moment's notice, but this paper shall serve as a letter of invitation. Present it, and she will see you."

Agh! Now it's like we have to go!

"Be sure to tell me what she's like after you meet her, okay, Azusa? I'm pretty sure I've never seen her before!"

You're making it worse, Godly Godness!

Somehow, Laika's expression looked even graver than mine. "Ummm... Lady Azusa?" she said. "I deeply apologize. I never imagined this would turn into such a serious undertaking..."

"It's not your fault, Laika. How could you have known we'd end up visiting the god of fate...?"

"What if she tells me I'm going to drink myself into the grave tomorrow...?" moaned Halkara.

"If you're worried about that, then maybe start by drinking less."

At least Halkara could solve all her problems on her own, if she'd only put her mind to it.



The next day, Laika, Halkara, Rosalie, and I set out to meet with the god of fate. Flatorte would be staying behind this time to mind the house. She wasn't interested in any of this from the start, and more importantly, I was terrified of what would happen if she did something stupid and upset the god of fate.

I doubted that would happen, but I couldn't totally rule out the possibility that the god of fate would say *You have irritated me, and as such, I have fated you to die tomorrow.* It seemed like a god with free rein over fate could pull

something like that off, so I figured a little extra caution was in order.

Eventually, we arrived at our destination: a perfectly ordinary stretch of land by a perfectly ordinary river in a perfectly ordinary province. The only notable feature was a rather large boulder a short distance away from the riverbank.

“I bet this must’ve been washed down the river in a flood,” Rosalie speculated as she drifted over to the boulder. That seemed like a reasonable enough theory to me.

“All right, everyone, this is our starting point!” I said. “I’ll be counting steps out loud as I walk, and the rest of you should count in your heads so you can let me know if I mess up.”

Everyone nodded, and I stepped forward, calling out “One!” as I did. “Two, three, four, five!”

First, face away from the river and walk fifty-five paces forward.

Those were the first instructions on the letter of invitation Nintan had given me. Laika was directly behind me, with Halkara behind her. The three of us walked at close to the same gait, so I figured they would be able to match my stride fairly well.

“Fifty-five! All right—nobody lost count, did they? Are we still okay?” I asked, looking up at Rosalie, who was keeping track of us from above.

“You’re doing fine!” Rosalie called down to me. “Keep fighting, Big Sis!”

I’m not sure this counts as “fighting,” but anyway, next step! “Let’s see—we’re supposed to face directly north next and walk thirty-eight paces.”

I turned northward.

“One, two, three! Four, five, six!”

I had a feeling that even if I didn’t lose track of how many steps I’d taken, I was liable to wander off course little by little and end up moving in a totally different direction... But I did my best not to worry about that and simply follow the instructions to the letter. The gods, after all, tended to gloss over that sort of thing. The scale of their work was so huge that they didn’t usually fuss over the little details.

Besides, if we asked anyone but a god about unlucky years, they'd only provide us with vague, questionable answers. It wasn't the most convenient option, but asking a pro would be the quickest, surest way to get the answer we wanted.

"Next, turn slightly right and walk 1,483 paces forward. Then recite the necessary incantation (see second sheet of paper)—oh, come on, as if I could walk that far in a perfectly straight line! There's no way I'll wind up where I'm supposed to be!"

"There, there, Lady Azusa," said Laika. "We should at least give it a try, don't you think...?"

"Yeah, no point in giving up and turning around," I agreed. "We came all the way here, after all. It's just this ridiculous number... It's not impossible, but it's not very convenient..."

This time, I decided to have Laika and Halkara wait at the starting point and then follow after me, counting their own steps. That way we'd be able to compare where each of us ended up to determine how much we were diverging from the intended path.

I set out first, while Laika and Halkara rested in the shade of a nearby tree. I made it about seven hundred steps into the trip when suddenly, a slime bounced out in front of me.

"Sorry, but you're in the way. Later!" I said. The slime had hopped right into my path, so I crouched down, picked it up, and hurled it off into the distance.

"Ooh, great throw, Madam Teacher!" Halkara shouted from her shady resting place.

"Right? I guess I had a good grip on it or something," I shouted back.

All right! Now that I've got a clear path, time to get back to—

...Oh, crap.

I felt the color drain from my face as I slowly turned around to face the others.

"So, um... Does anyone know how many steps I've taken? I was so distracted

by the slime, I totally forgot.”

Nobody remembered, of course. An air of misery descended upon us.

“Wh-why not try marking the ground every hundred steps next time?” suggested Halkara. “They say that failure is the mother of success, Madam Teacher! It’s the same way with medicine—it takes tons of clinical trials to figure out the right dosage for new concoctions!” I probably looked really torn up, judging by how weirdly positive she was being.

“Thanks, Halkara... But that whole clinical trial comparison was kind of horrifying.”

And so my first attempt was tragically cut short by a wayward slime. On my second try, however...

“One thousand four hundred and eighty-three!”

...I managed to reach my goal and immediately drew an X on the ground.

Now I just have to pray that I didn’t swerve too much while I was walking.

Laika and Halkara counted their steps in the same manner I had and wound up stopping in dramatically different locations. Laika walked quite a bit farther than I had, while Halkara stopped a bit behind me.

“Yeah... I had a feeling it’d turn out like this,” I said. It would’ve been pretty remarkable if we’d all ended up in the same spot, considering the directions we were working with.

The variation in our results was bringing both Laika and Halkara down, and I had no reason to believe I’d somehow ended up in the right place, either.

“Hey, Rosalie, how did this look to you from up there?” I asked.

“All of you walk at a slightly different pace,” Rosalie replied. “It’s not that different over just a few steps, but at this distance, it adds up so much that you end up in totally different places.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured. Well, I guess it can’t hurt to try reciting the incantation anyway.”

I took a look at the second page of Nintan’s letter of introduction, where the

incantation was supposedly written.

“You all have your copies of the incantation, right?” I called out. The note was pretty short, so I’d written out separate copies for each of us earlier.

““Yes,”” Laika and Halkara answered from either side of me.

“Okay then, we’ll all read together! Maybe one of us lucked out and wound up in the right spot. Ready?”

Once again, a pair of yeses rang out.

“Hanselia vanselino oseley ruruuan!”

I recited the incantation, expecting nothing whatsoever to come of it—and then, without warning, I was whisked away to who knows where!



I found myself in a space rather similar to the one where I usually met with Nintan. That told me in an instant that wherever I was, it was related to the gods.

“Huh? Did I actually manage to stop in the correct spot?” I muttered to myself. “That’s practically a miracle.”

“Oh, so you really did show up. You must be the human Nintan told me about.”

A voice rang out from behind me, and I turned to find someone sitting—and seemingly working—at a desk piled high with clay tablets. She had long reddish-brown hair tied back in a ponytail, and her face was attractive in an androgynous sort of way. I only really knew she was a *she* to begin with because of the slight bulge of her chest. She gave a very stylish impression, all around, which was enhanced by the slight yellow and black accents of her clothing.

“Are you the god of fate...?” I asked, a little apprehensively. This wasn’t my first time meeting a god, but I was still nervous every time it happened.

“I am, yeah,” said the woman. “I’m the god of fate, Caven. Nintan told me to meet up with you, so I made it happen.”

The god of fate—Caven, apparently—wasn’t looking at me. She kept reading her clay tablets, even while she was talking. Apparently, I’d decided to visit

during her working hours.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like I wasn’t warned you’d be coming,” said Caven. “So what did you want to ask me? I’ll have it figured out before you know it.”

Maybe I just hadn’t met enough gods yet, but it felt like the ones I knew were all vastly different types of deity, this new acquaintance included. I couldn’t quite put it into words, but if I had to take a stab at it, I would say that Caven didn’t seem very interested in people. That wasn’t a problem or anything, but there *was* one issue: I was the only one here. My getting the location right, it seemed, hadn’t automatically brought the others along with me.

“Um, so...the truth is, the people who actually need an answer from you don’t seem to have made it here,” I explained. I could always act as their standin and ask about unlucky years myself, but if at all possible, I thought it would be better to have the ones who cared about the answer hear it directly.

“Oh, that? Not an issue. There’s just a bit of a time lag, that’s all.”

The very instant those words left Caven’s mouth—

—Halkara’s face appeared directly in front of me!

“Gaaah! Too close, Madam Teacher! Are you trying to give me the wrong idea?!”

“Why the heck would I do that?! And you’re the one who showed up right in front of me out of nowhere!”

I took a big step backward...

...and this time, Laika appeared directly in front of me.

“Eek! E-excuse me, Lady Azusa... It seems I chose a poor place to stand...”

“Nah, that’s fine. These things happen... Don’t worry about it...”

Laika bashfully backed away from me, and I stepped aside as well.

Okay, but that still leaves one person missing. They say that what happens twice will happen thrice, so if I just wait...

Rosalie, however, did not appear in front of me like I’d been expecting.

Maybe she's lagging even further behind than the others. Or maybe she showed up somewhere totally different. And why do my insides feel weirdly itchy all of a sudden...?

"Sorry, Big Sis. Looks like I appeared inside you."

Rosalie's voice sounds so close to me! It's like listening to one of those binaural recordings! "Okay, I see what happened here! I'm really not comfortable with this, so please get out of my body, thanks!"

Rosalie vacated my body right away, and thankfully, the itchiness subsided immediately as well.



“Okay. That should be all of you, right? Everyone must have counted correctly. The number’s what’s important, not the distance. You can’t end up here by standing on the right spot accidentally—if you don’t count the right number of steps, nothing happens. That’s how the event works.”

“The event”...? She’s being kind of meta about this, huh?

“Anyway, not to repeat myself, but I’m the god of fate, Caven. Okay, question time. What have you got for me?”

Even now that all of us were present, Caven was still glued to her clay tablets. I was sort of surprised by how busy she seemed. Out of all the gods I knew, she seemed to be the hardest worker.

Halkara, Laika, and Rosalie were all exchanging glances with each other. It looked like they hadn’t decided on who should ask the question—which, considering they’d be asking a god, was an understandably nerve-racking prospect.

“A-all right... I’m the one who brought all this up to begin with, so I’ll be the one to ask,” said Halkara, settling the matter voluntarily. “Um, Miss God of Fate? To make a long story short: Are unlucky years real?”

For once, Caven looked up from her tablets. She turned to Halkara for just long enough to say “Yep, sure are.”

“I—I knew it! Of course they are! I need to schedule a ceremony right away!” Halkara shouted. She was flying into a panic. Hearing her worst fears confirmed by the god of fate had clearly hit her pretty hard.

Maybe now she’ll actually make an effort to get a handle on her drinking.

Laika and Rosalie weren’t taking this news very well, either. Both of them looked fearful and bewildered. I was taken aback, too, to be fair. I’d never imagined unlucky years would be of such importance.

“Um, I am Laika, of the red dragons,” said Laika, stepping up to ask the next question. “I was wondering, well...what should one do to minimize the effects of an unlucky year?”

That’s certainly the most natural question to ask, now that we know they’re

real.

“Effects? There aren’t any,” Caven curtly replied.

“W-w-w-w-wait, what?! What’s that mean?! Are unlucky years a thing or not?!” I asked, bewildered. We seemed to be dealing with a rather arrogant god, at least in some ways, so it felt like a good idea to get all the details we could.

“I meant what I said,” replied Caven. “First, the elf asked me if unlucky years are real. Considering she was aware of the concept, and considering she used the words *unlucky years* herself to ask me the question, they’re obviously real, so I said yes.” The god of fate rested her elbow on her chair and pressed her face into her palm. “Then I said that unlucky years don’t have any effects—which is true, because they don’t. Nothing I said was contradictory.”

In other words, the concept of unlucky years is real, but they don’t actually affect anything?

“Oh, is that all?” said Halkara. “That must mean unlucky years are just a silly superstition! What a relief!”

“They’re not a superstition, no,” Caven said, once again casually refuting Halkara’s words.

“Huuuuuuuh?! Which is it, then?! Make up your mind, please!” Halkara wailed.

Yeah, I was just wondering that myself... If Halkara hadn’t asked, I would’ve done it for her.

“Well, the concept of unlucky years has existed in your society for ages, and despite how vague it is, people do believe in it. You can’t write something like that off as just superstition—it’s an established cultural custom. And like all cultural customs, it has an effect on your lives in all sorts of subtle, multifaceted ways.”

“O-okaaaay... I guess I can’t deny that,” said Halkara.

Watching their exchange, I’d come to understand something about how Caven operated.

This god’s a humongous pedant!

One meets people like this every once in a while. It was easy for such behavior to come off as cringey or irritating, but her attitude was a good match for her slightly odd, androgynous appearance. In a sense, her looks were salvaging her personality. If Fighsly or Misjantie tried to pull off an argument like that, I probably would've found it about five times as obnoxious.

"I'm not exactly a brainiac, so I might have this all wrong," said Rosalie, "but are you trying to say that unlucky years don't inherently bring misfortune? If so, then that's nice to know."

"Yeah, the ghost summed it up nicely," said Caven. "Basically, unlucky years are just another framework that someone dreamed up out of nowhere one day."

"A...framework?" Rosalie repeated, apparently confused by Caven's odd turn of phrase.

"Right. Using frameworks like that makes it easier for people to understand the world they live in. As long as you're using the frameworks as tools, there's no problem. When the frameworks start using *you*, though," Caven said, pausing to heave a sigh. "Well, then you've lost sight of your priorities, haven't you?"

She's a bit pompous, isn't she...?

"Basically, what I'm telling you is that you should think of unlucky years, good luck charms, and fortune-telling as nothing more than tools to navigate a world driven entirely by coincidence. As long as you never forget that you're the one using the tool, and not the other way around, things should work out just fine."

I get what she's saying, but boy, is the way she's saying it obnoxious... Then again, maybe this is just how gods are. Nintan's pretty conceited, too, in a different sort of way, so maybe being a god just makes you like this. I'm starting to think meeting Godly Godness first might've warped my idea of what a god is supposed to be...

In any case, we'd never find a more dedicated specialist when it came to unlucky years. This seemed like the right time to ask her all the questions we could throw at her.

“I’m Azusa, the Witch of the Highlands,” I said. “I was wondering—does what you just said mean there’s no such thing as fate in this world, and everything’s just a matter of chance?”

“Well, you just used the word *fate* yourself, which means it—”

“Right, you’ve already made that point, so we can just skip it this time, thanks! I figure you were about to explain that the concept of fate is a tool that was created to help us give meaning to coincidences, right?”

“You’re pretty quick on the uptake, Witch of the Highlands,” Caven said with a chuckle.

“I’m honored by your praise,” I said. “Anyway, the point is I understand the theory.”

Her explanations were needlessly long-winded, but basically, it seemed that she was saying fate wasn’t real and nothing was inevitable. Slap a coat of pretentious paint on that concept, and it could’ve come straight from Caven’s mouth.

“Yes, use of the word *fate* makes it real as a concept, but in the end, the things you call fate are nothing more than coincidences arbitrarily chosen and labelled as such.”

I told her not to bother, but she’s saying it anyway.

Caven looked me straight in the eye.

“I know what you’re thinking right now, Witch of the Highlands. You’re thinking that I’m being super long-winded, right?”

“W-well, yes...,” I admitted. I’d already been called out, so there was no point in trying to hide it.

“Mind if I give my spiel anyway, though? It’s gonna bother me if I don’t get it out.”

“At least you’re honest about your motives.”

“Thanks. I’ll try to keep it as quick as possible,” said Caven. She looked visibly relieved.

I had a feeling that people like me were hard for her to deal with. Laika and Rosalie, on the other hand, were hanging off her every word, while Halkara had checked out the instant she'd learned that unlucky years weren't real after all.

"Here's an example," said Caven. "Each of you recited the incantation Nintan gave you in the locations you individually walked to, right?"

"Yes, that's correct," said Laika. Caven immediately turned to face her.

I guess it's easier to explain this stuff to an active listener.

"You each ended up in different locations, and yet all of you wound up here with me. Tell me, dragon-girl: If you had come here on your own, taken your steps, recited the spell, and been successfully transported, what would you have assumed?"

"I—I would have assumed I'd been standing in the correct spot," said Laika.

"Exactly. You would've been convinced you'd found the one specific spot that worked. While I'm at it, you also would've assumed that since the incantation brought you here, it was special and specific as well."

"I would, yes. Wait...huh? But that's not what happened. We were all standing in different places, so why...?"

"Not to spoil the mystery, but the truth is that *I just check everyone who attempts to go through the process to get here and decide if I want to let them in or not*. You could've miscounted your steps, and it still would've worked just fine. All you really had to do was make a point of trying to count."

I figured it had to be something like that. Nobody would ever reach this place if it was really that specific a process...

"But still, the moment the process works for you, it becomes established in your mind as definitively correct. That's what I mean when I say that what you see as fate is cloaked in coincidence."

"I—I understand now!" Laika said with a vigorous nod. For just an instant, the trace of a smile crossed Caven's face.

Seems she likes to impress people. Also, looks like receiving Nintan's letter was the only real hurdle to getting here. No wonder the instructions were so vague

and sloppy.

“So yeah, that’s about the size of it,” concluded Caven. “There are nothing but coincidences in this world. Even if a convenient method with high odds of success ends up spreading far and wide, it’s still just a convenient method with high odds of success—never an inevitability. People are simply rationalizing away coincidence by fitting it into a framework of logic.”

She really likes calling things frameworks, doesn’t she?

With that, the god of fate’s long-winded explanation was over. Regardless of how she presented her argument, I had to admit it was pretty convincing.

Now then, seeing as we’ve resolved the unlucky year problem, I think it’s time for us to get out of here. I’m afraid that if we stick around to ask any more questions, we’ll be listening to her explanations for an eternity...

“Okay, I think we should be heading home now. Thanks for your time,” I said with a polite nod.

“Um, if I may—what exactly does your work entail, Miss God of Fate?”

And then Laika went and asked her another question!

I have to admit, I am pretty curious about that. If the god of fate tells you nothing’s inevitable, you have to wonder what she’s actually in charge of managing.

“This world is awash with irrationalities and inconsistencies,” said Caven. “My job is to compensate for them.”

She sure said that in just the right way to make her sound like a huge poser...

“What sort of work does that involve, specifically?” Laika asked.

Laika’s completely stepped into the question-asker role, hasn’t she? Also, Caven sure looks happy again. Don’t think I missed that smile!

“A fair question. Let me answer by way of example: Imagine a game in which your character died, and you got to roll a six-sided die to see if you came back to life. If you roll an odd number, your character is revived, and if you roll an even number, they remain dead.”

“So your odds of success are fifty percent,” Laika said with a nod.

“And yet somehow, it always seems like the *true* odds are closer to eighty percent that you’ll roll an even number and stay dead, doesn’t it?”

It really does! I agreed internally.

Caven heaved a theatrical sigh.

“Well, whenever that happens, it’s because I temporarily increased the odds of failure.”

“But *why*, though?!”

I just had to question her. I couldn’t help myself...

“For what it’s worth, I don’t want to,” said Caven. “So long as I remain the god of fate, however, I have no choice. Surely you’ve found yourself in a situation where all logic and reason suggests you’ll eventually succeed, yet you try a hundred times without pulling it off even once? Well, someone has to make sure things like that keep happening.”

“No they don’t! All that does is irritate people! And it’s really mean-spirited, too!”

“It’s a necessity. Fate is, after all, irrational at its core. And that brings us to this,” Caven said, standing up and pulling out a board with a messy series of numbers scribbled on it.

“This is the dartboard I use to decide who ends up having bad luck on their unlucky years.”

“Okay, make that *intensely* mean-spirited!”

“Here, I’ll throw a few darts now. Where they land will determine who ends up particularly unlucky.”

“That’s awful! Just terrible!”

What kind of monster would do something like that?! I thought. Though on the other hand, it did seem like something that a god of fate would get up to. Toying with humans was probably second nature to her.

“All right, let’s give it a try! Who’s going to meet a terrible fate this time? Only

one way to find out!”

Caven started lining up a dart. She looked totally serious about throwing it, and I had a terrible feeling that whoever got struck with misfortune wouldn't be long for this world. Having a god specifically pick you out to be cursed with bad luck seemed like a pretty big deal. Maybe you could get off with just a hole in your sock or something, but I doubted it.

“Oh no... Oh no... I always end up getting picked at times like these... That's the one sort of bad luck that always seems to get me...”

Halkara was shaking in her boots. *Thinking back, she might be right about that...*

“What if it hits me?” said Rosalie. “What'll I do if I get over all my regrets and can't stay as a ghost anymore...?”

That sounds like good luck, Rosalie! You're making this confusing!

Laika, meanwhile, was petrified with a look of bewildered terror on her face. The god of fate was effectively choosing someone to die right in front of us. In a sense, she was about to commit a murder, and that meant the right choice, without question, was to try and stop her.

On the other hand, if that choice was part of the god of fate's duties, then did we—a group of non-gods—have any way of stopping her? Did we even have the right to try? I wasn't afraid she'd retaliate or anything. I simply wasn't sure whether stopping a god from carrying out her duties was a good idea, period.

Knowing Laika, she'd probably already come to all those conclusions on her own. She was thinking furiously about what to do...and wasn't coming up with any good ideas. The fact that Caven was a literal god complicated the issue immensely. If she told us this was just part of her job, then we'd have no logical argument against it—so all Laika could do was shrink away from her in silence.

“I still have so much to learn...,” said Laika. “As I am now, I can't find an answer.”

This really is the ultimate choice, huh?

“Okay, here goes! Who's it gonna be? There are so many unlucky years out

there, it could be just about anyone!”

The god of fate could throw her dart at any second—but what was I supposed to do about it? Needless to say, I didn’t have an answer, either... But then I looked at Laika once more. I could tell in an instant how conflicted she was.

Oh. Of course.

And just like that, I had my answer.

The god of fate threw her dart—and I leaped forward, snatching it out of the air before it could hit its target.

“This is my answer!”

I shouted at the top of my lungs.

“I may be breaking some sort of taboo right now, but I don’t care! My disciple’s in a fix, and it’s my job as her teacher to step in and take action in her place! The way I see it, nothing’s more irrational than you putting Laika through all this stress and misery!”

I didn’t know what I was supposed to do, so I chose to prioritize removing one of my disciple’s worries. If that ended up making everything worse for us, then, well, I’d cross that bridge when we came to it. Fortunately, I was in the good graces of other gods, so I had some powerful connections who could back me up. I was ready to fight back to the bitter end, if that’s what it came to.

“L-Lady Azusa!” Laika said, her voice stifled with emotion.

“Well, well. You’d stop me bringing misfortune on someone in their unlucky year, would you? How very brave,” said the god of fate as she cracked an ever-so-slight smile.

Oh, she is just the worst! “In my book, going out of your way to bring misfortune on people one by one is plain irrational. Maybe it’s a necessary evil from the perspective of the gods...but from a human perspective, if someone’s about to die in front of you, and you’re in a position to save them, then nothing’s worse than standing back and doing nothing.”

The way I see it, you have to step in and put a stop to such things. I simply can’t believe that letting someone die is the right choice to make.

“Plus, I can’t bring myself to tell Laika that we’re helpless or that there’s nothing we can do to stop you,” I added, glancing at Laika and flashing her a grin.

No teacher with any self-respect could ever do a thing like that.

“Lady Azusa... I was truly blessed to call myself your apprentice!”

“Why the past tense?! You’re freaking me out! Stop it!” *You’re making it sound like I’ve doomed myself! I mean, maybe I have, but still!*

So, god of fate, Caven—what’s your next move?

“...I think I owe you an apology. This whole thing was just a joke. I hope you’re not too offended,” said Caven, raising her hands in a “please forgive me” sort of gesture.

“Huh? A joke?” I repeated. *If that was all a joke, then what am I supposed to do with all this righteous determination I’ve worked up...?*

“I don’t decide who experiences misfortune during their unlucky years,” admitted Caven. “Stuff like that is just a cultural tradition, and the gods have nothing to do with it. That’s the complete, unvarnished truth.”

“Okay, but then what was all *that* about?!” I shouted. *I am super not okay with this!*

“Honestly, it was just meant to be a stupid joke. But, uh...you were taking me so seriously...and I couldn’t find a good moment to walk it back... I’m sorry. I really mean it.” Caven apologized with all her heart and soul.

“Okay, no, that crossed a bunch of lines! Maybe a normal person could pull off a bit like that, but how are we supposed to assume it’s a joke when it’s coming from a god?! That was so tasteless!”

“Yeah. You’re not wrong about that. This was completely my bad...”

Well, I can’t ask for anything more than an earnest apology, can I? I guess I should probably just let it drop ...

“Um, Lady Azusa?” Laika said after Caven finally finished apologizing. “You were incredible just now... I want you to know that I’ll keep doing my best to learn from your example and continue applying myself as your apprentice!”

That's nice to hear, but it's also really, really embarrassing...

"That was amazing, Madam Teacher!" said Halkara. "I'll follow you for life! I'll stick with you even after I've destroyed myself with alcohol poisoning!"

"You really should've stopped after the first half of that, Halkara!" I shot back.

"I'll follow you for life, too, Big Sis!" said Rosalie.

"Coming from you, that sounds more like you're promising to haunt me, Rosalie!"

I hadn't meant to show off, but it seemed I'd unintentionally done just that, and now I was reaping the uncomfortable rewards...

"Anyway," I continued, "You got your answer, right, Halkara? Unlucky years aren't a problem, so it's time for us to go! We're heading home! Chop-chop!"

Yep, I'm choosing to beat a hasty retreat! No need to overstay our welcome!

That said, I noticed Caven looked a little sad to see us go.

"O-oh, okay," she said. "I guess we'll meet again, if fate brings us together. Feel free to come back if you ever have any other questions for me, though. I'll hear you out any time, as long as you don't mind me reading my tablets while I listen."

Is it me, or is she just starving for someone to talk to...?

I was starting to get the feeling that Caven was simply a poor communicator. Saying that to her face would've been rude, though, so I said my good-byes and went on my way instead.

Coming back to our usual world was a relief, but unfortunately, it wasn't quite the end of my troubles. I had to endure a chorus of people saying "You really are a wonderful person, Lady Azusa!" and other similar comments throughout the trip home on Laika's back. All those compliments made me really restless, to say the least. Being held in too high esteem was a problem of its own.

Maybe meeting the god of fate and going through all this embarrassment was inevitable from the very start... Ugh... And the fact that I know Laika means every word she says makes dealing with her compliments even harder!

Later that night, Halkara made a declaration.

“It’s time for a celebration! Here’s to knowing that unlucky years don’t mean anything—bottoms up!”

Then she drank herself into a stupor.

One thing’s inevitable, all right: If you drink yourself silly, you’re gonna pass out!



Sometime later, I found the chance to ask Nintan a question.

“So about the god of fate. She, um...doesn’t have many friends, does she?”

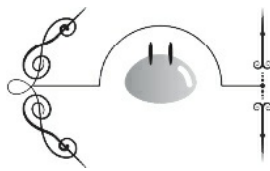
“She is very particular when it comes to maintaining her persona...which We imagine explains much of how she conducts herself,” said Nintan. “So long as she maintains that persona, she will be unable to proactively seek out the company of others.”

So it’s pretty much exactly what I was imagining...

“Although she can be troublesome, We do not believe she means any harm. We would be much obliged if you would keep her company from time to time.”

“Yeah, I think I can do that.”

Next time someone looks bored at home, I’ll task them with paying the god of fate a visit.



WE DECIDED WHEN MY BIRTHDAY

WAS _____



“Hey! Mommy, Mommy!”

One day, Falfa ran up to me as I was hanging some laundry out to dry. Shalsha was following along a little ways behind her, and Sandra was farther away still, half buried in the ground and watching us from a distance. That wasn’t where she usually photosynthesized, so I had a feeling she was preparing to listen in to our conversation.

“What is it, Falfa?” I asked.

“When’s your birthday, Mommy?”

Well, that’s a simple question.

“My birthday? Right, my birthday! My...uh...birthday?”

I paused, the laundry momentarily forgotten.

Come to think of it, what would count as my birthday...? I’ve barely even considered it...

The reason behind my confusion was simple: In terms of appearance at least, I’d been a seventeen-year-old girl since the moment I came into being in this world. That meant that, by most common definitions of the word, I didn’t actually have a birthday. You had to be *born* to have a birthday, after all, and I’d skipped the whole coming-into-the-world-as-a-baby thing.

I was never a crying newborn, or a toddler, or a child. I’d eaten a weird mushroom and turned into a kid once, sure, but was still mentally a three-hundred-year-old, so you couldn’t really say I was a child. While it wasn’t the same as being born, if I had to pick a day that would count as my birthday, I

figured it would probably be the day Godly Godness reincarnated me in my current form.

But wait. What day was that? And for that matter, what month?

I wasn't exactly thinking *Oh, this must be my new birthday* on the day I was reincarnated...

"Well, um, I actually don't remember," I explained. "I can probably come up with a reasonable guess, but, well..."

Around then, I noticed that Shalsha—who was still standing behind Falfa—was holding what looked like a notepad at the ready.

"Oh, you don't?" said Falfa. "Well, Falfa was *really* hoping you'd be able to give us a day! Falfa's so curious, after all!"

Behind her, Shalsha's writing hand froze above her notebook. She looked perturbed. "Without records, historians will never have access to real facts... They'll pile assumption upon assumption, and in time, the truth will be shrouded under a veil of speculation..."

Don't you think you're escalating things a bit, Shalsha...?

"Come on, Azusa, try harder to remember!" said Sandra. "How can you not know when you sprouted?"

"Humans don't sprout, Sandra." *Wait, do plants have sprouting days instead of birthdays? I guess seeds are basically like plant eggs, so that sort of makes sense. Actually, this is only confusing me more, so I think I'll just move along.*

In any case, the one thing I knew for sure was that my daughters wanted to know when my birthday was.

"All right, then—once I'm done with the laundry, we can go decide when my birthday is together, okay? I'm pretty sure it was around this time of year, so that should narrow it down a bit."

"We can't do that, Mom," said Shalsha with a shake of her head. "When studying history, an inaccuracy of even just a few days can completely recontextualize a historical record, often vastly altering its meaning. Assigning a date to a past event arbitrarily would be a horrible thing to do. It would turn the

historical record into nothing more than a fabrication.”

“Are you refusing to let me pick a date for my birthday?!”

To be fair, I could see Shalsha’s point. Strictly speaking, a birthday chosen after the fact wasn’t really a birthday. It would only be a substitute, at best.

Incidentally, I was pretty sure I’d figured out why my daughters were so interested in knowing when my birthday was.

They must be planning on doing something to celebrate it.

Thinking about it, I couldn’t come up with any other reason to ask someone when their birthday was. At least, not unless you were writing their biography or something.

“Shalsha wants to find a more accurate basis to determine the date of your birthday, Mom. A primary source would be nice.”

“A primary source, huh...?”

My birthday would’ve been recorded in my family register in my old life, so I could’ve just gone down to city hall to figure it out. In this world, however, things weren’t so easy...

Actually, what about the town hall?

“Maybe we could figure something out in Flatta,” I suggested.

I’d been living near the village for three hundred years, and its people had come to respect me long before anyone knew about my level being maxed out. I’d been making medicine for them for generations, after all.

“Isn’t that spirit named Yufufu supposed to be coming by this afternoon?” asked Sandra. “If so, that works out perfectly. You should go into town to handle this and do some shopping before she shows up.”

Indeed—Momma Yufufu had gotten in touch to tell us she’d be stopping by. Specifically, she’d sent a message courtesy of the pine spirit Misjantie. In her words, *“So hey, Yufufu says she wants to come over soon. That okay with you, man?”*

Apparently, spirits had ways of keeping in touch. It reminded me of how

communication had worked back in the era where only about one house in each neighborhood had a telephone... Of course, that was before my time, so I hadn't experienced it myself.

"Okay, then! I'd better pick up the pace and get all this laundry hung up nice and quick!" I said.

"Falfa will help!"

"Shalsha too."

With my daughters' assistance, I wrapped up the laundry in no time, then we set out for the village of Flatta.



We made our way to what was effectively Flatta's community center. Strictly speaking, it was more like Flatta's town hall, but the atmosphere of the place was much closer to that of a community center.

The mayor was present when we arrived. "Oh, Miss Azusa! I see you've brought your daughters with you today," she said as I walked over to her.

"Yes, and on that subject, I have a kind of silly question to ask you: Do you know when my birthday is? My daughters are curious, but I don't actually remember much about it myself." It was such a strange question to ask, I felt the need to explain the circumstances right away. I figured if I simply asked when my birthday was, I'd come off as some kind of narcissist.

"Oh, your birthday?" said the mayor. "I'd recommend checking the Record of the Village of Flatta, which we compile as a communal effort."

Oh, so this place really does keep a communal historical record? I guess Flatta has a better handle on these things than I gave it credit for.

The mayor told me she'd go fetch the record in question, and she returned a moment later with a rather thick tome in her hands. I took a moment to flip through its pages...

...and almost immediately came across an image I could only describe as a heavily idealized drawing of myself. I looked almost divine.

The page was titled Record of the Great Witch of the Highlands, Azusa.

“Wh-what the heck is this?!” I exclaimed. “Nobody told me I had a chapter in the record books!”

“Well, this record was established before I took over the office of mayor. If I had to hazard a guess, though, I’d say the officials at the time felt that running each and every little detail past the great Witch of the Highlands herself would be rude, and they decided not to trouble you.”

Are you sure? Because I think keeping a record like this without permission is even worse... Does this world have no conception of the right to control one’s likeness...?

Shalsha stepped up to the tome. She seemed eager to check its contents for herself.

“Here it is,” said Shalsha. “It says This account is based upon the guild’s records. On the day the great Witch of the Highlands was born, the clouds that had long shadowed our village parted, and a single beam of light shone down upon us.”

“Well, that’s obviously a total lie!” My birth in this world was definitely not that dramatic! There’s no way I would’ve forgotten something like that!

“It says that The people of the village knew that soon, a great fortune would be granted to them.”

“Yep, that’s another massive exaggeration!” And it also makes no sense, unless someone in the village had some precognitive powers!

“Does it say anything about what day all this happened on...?” I asked. Even if the account of how things went down was a little off, all we really needed was a date.

“It says that Some believe the great Witch of the Highlands was born on May seventh, while others believe she was born on May eighth, May ninth, May tenth, May eleventh, May twelfth, May thirteenth, May fourteenth, May fifteenth, May sixteenth, May seventeenth, May eighteenth, May nineteenth, or May twentieth. For many years, those fourteen theories have vied for legitimacy.”

“That’s a two-week span of possible dates!”

In other words, this has gotten us nowhere...

“Shalsha thinks this is progress, though. We now know that your birthday is almost certainly in May.”

“Sure, but I could’ve told you that already.”

At the very least, I remembered my birth in this world well enough to know it happened at some point in May. I distinctly remembered visiting Flatta a few times following my arrival and noticing a May calendar hung up on someone’s wall.

“Wait a minute. Didn’t you say this information was based on the guild’s records? In that case, maybe the guild has something more concrete recorded about my birthday.”

“It also says In truth, the guild’s records regarding this matter were lost in a filing accident some time ago and could not be directly referenced. As such, this account is based on the memories of a guild employee who had read the records some time prior.”

“This is getting less and less credible by the second!”

“What a conundrum,” said Shalsha. “We don’t have any primary sources. The guild employee might have misremembered. It’s even possible there was never a guild record at all.” She was quite the historian herself and broke the issues down in her usual academic manner.

“Yeah, good point... We can’t take this account at face value. I mean, it’s obviously full of lies, just based on the way it makes my birth out to be some kind of holy revelation.”

“The births of great individuals are often embellished with time. Shalsha thinks you should be proud to be someone of such significance, Mom.”

“I don’t think you really want that, Shalsha! You and Falfa wouldn’t like it if I got all smug about people thinking I’m great, would you?”

“Falfa doesn’t want you to change at all, Mommy!”

Right? No kid would want their parents’ personalities to change out of nowhere.

And so our attempt to use the Record of the Village of Flatta as a reference ended up being a waste of time.

“Okay, how about we just say my birthday’s sometime in May?” I suggested. “We know that part’s true, at least.”

Shalsha shook her head. “That range is too broad, and we haven’t checked everywhere yet. We might still find someone who remembers when you were born.”

Shalsha’s really particular about the details, isn’t she?

“Ooh, Falfa has a great idea! 🎵” Falfa exclaimed, waving her hand in the air and hopping excitedly.

“Hmm? What’s that?” asked Shalsha.

“Falfa thinks Goodly Godly Godness might know! She’s a god, after all, and she and Mommy are friends!”

That’s it! We can just ask the person who reincarnated me into this world! She’ll know for sure!

We left the community center and headed straight for Godly Godness’s shrine. The grounds where the shrine was located had technically belonged to Misjantie’s temple originally, but by now, the pine spirit’s followers had been reduced to doing business off in a quiet corner of the lot. At the end of the day, gods and spirits alike had to bow to the whims of public opinion.

When we arrived at the shrine, Godly Godness herself stepped right out to greet us.

“Hello, hello!” she said. “We’ve sure been seeing a lot of each other lately, haven’t we?”

Falfa quickly explained that we were here to learn about my birthday.

“Ooh, I see! Well then, wait here for just a sec,” Godly Godness said before heading back into the shrine and pulling something out from a nearby shelf.

“Oh wooow! It’s so pretty!” Falfa cooed as Godly Godness presented us with the object: a roughly palm-size stone carved into a rather intricate shape.

“Isn’t it?” said Godly Godness. “It has twenty sides in total, and each side has a number from one to twenty carved into it!”

By that point, I already had a bad feeling about where this was going...

Godly Godness rolled her die. “Ah! It stopped on a ten. That means Azusa’s birthday is on May tenth!”

“Don’t generate my birthday like you’re making a character in an RPG!”

Seriously, talk about phoning it in! That’s so arbitrary, it hurts!

“Aww, come on!” said Godly Godness. “How am I supposed to remember the birthday of each and every person I deal with? I had a lot on my plate back then, I’ll have you know!”

I wasn’t sure if she was just being sloppy or if gods in general didn’t consider the exact dates they reincarnated people on important enough to remember.

“Plus, I was in charge of supervising a few different worlds at the time. Every world has a different calendar, and there’s no way I can keep track of all of them at once! Not to mention demons and humans use different calendars! Some other races have unique systems, too.”

“When you put it that way...”

I think I remember hearing that back in the Middle Ages, pretty much every region on Earth had its own totally different calendar system. I don’t know any of the details, but there were lunar and solar calendars, and I think the Mayans had a special calendar, too. Dealing with multiple worlds’ worth of that would make it hard to keep track of dates...

“Hey, Miss Goddess? Do you have any records about the day Mommy was born?” asked Falfa. She wasn’t ready to give up just yet.

Oh, that’s a good point. If she kept records, we could just look at those.

“No, I don’t keep records. That could lead to personal information being leaked!”

What a weird place to be unexpectedly diligent.

“So yeah, not my fault! If you wanna blame someone, blame the humans who

didn't bother keeping records."

That's some pretty blatant shifting of the blame. Not very godlike, if you ask me.

"Hmm. This is a real conundrum," groaned Shalsha.

I'd never had any particular interest in my own birthday, so this wasn't much of a problem for me, but Shalsha seemed to be taking it pretty hard. She was hanging her head so deeply, I almost started to wonder if she was nodding off.

"We took the extreme measure of asking a god for help, and not even *she* knew your birthday... Shalsha keenly feels the inevitable limitations of a historian..."

"There, there. At least we know for sure it's in May now, and we've narrowed down the possible range of dates. It's not like we didn't learn anything," I said as I patted Shalsha on the shoulder.

We'd done the best we could, and personally, that was good enough for me.

"She's right, Shalsha," said Sandra. "Everyone has their limits, whether they're a plant or an animal. Cheer up, would you? If your plans can't bloom in this soil, you just have to find somewhere more suitable." She jumped in to console Shalsha without wasting a moment. Maybe it was an easy role for her, since she was so long-lived herself.

"That, and most things start sprouting when the weather gets warmer. May sounds just about right to me."

"Please stop talking about me sprouting, Sandra."

While we were talking, Godly Goddess pulled out another, differently shaped die.

"This time, we'll roll a d12 to pick a month!"

"Put that back! I'm not going backward, okay?!"



In the end, I settled on a date over the course of our walk home.

"May seventeenth is the most likely date... So let's go

with that!”

I’m pretty sure that the day I made my first trip to Flatta was somewhere around the middle of the month. They weren’t calling me the Witch of the Highlands back then, and nobody looked up to me the way they do now. My level wasn’t maxed out yet, either, so I bet nobody even bothered noting down my visit. With our current information, this is my best guess.

“All right. We’ll say it’s May seventeenth,” Shalsha agreed.

“Yeah! Mommy’s birthday is May seventeenth!” Falfa cheered. “The seventeenth, the seventeenth!”

“That means it’s about a month away. I think we can work with that,” said Sandra.

That seemed like a definite sign that I could look forward to something happening on my birthday. *Sorry, you three! My hearing’s pretty good, and I can’t help but pick up on things like that.*

I was now positive that this whole line of questioning had been part of a plan to celebrate my birthday. The fact that they’d chosen now to ask made me think Shalsha had previously narrowed it down to “sometime in May.” Maybe there was a legend in Flatta about the Witch of the Highlands appearing in May or something.

As I learned later, my daughters actually had another reason to ask about my birthday on that particular day.

When we arrived home, we were greeted by a tantalizing aroma wafting out from the kitchen.

“Oh, you’re back!” said Momma Yufufu as she stepped out of the kitchen wearing an apron. “Welcome home, everyone. I was just making lunch—I’ll have it right out for you.”

“*Momma!*” I exclaimed. “You really are the momest mom to ever be a mom, Yufufu!”

“Hee-hee-hee! Today, I’ve made a simmered chicken-and-vegetable dish and a vegetable potage. I also got my hands on some rice recently, so I tried making

rice balls as well!”

Now, that’s a mother’s home cooking!

Before long, Momma Yufufu had filled the table with food. I found my eyes instantly drawn to the rice balls, which she’d formed into a very distinctive triangular shape. Sure, it was pretty normal for them to end up that way if you shaped them with your hands, but it was an exceptionally rare sight in this world. I picked one out and gave it a try right away.

“Oh! There’s no mistaking this—it’s a plain, salted rice ball, all right! I don’t think there’s any flavor more nostalgic for me,” I said. Visions of home, and of Momma Yufufu’s face, drifted through my mind... She was also sitting right in front of me, of course.

“I’m glad to see you like them,” she said. “I was speaking with Goodly Godly Godness the other day, and she told me you were incredibly fond of this dish and hadn’t had it in a very long time.”

“Ahhh, that explains it. I should’ve guessed she had a hand in this.” *It would be pretty hard to believe that Momma Yufufu decided to make these by pure coincidence.*

It was hard to imagine anyone who didn’t know about my past life deciding to make rice balls. Momma Yufufu was a spirit, and it was possible they ate very differently from humans, but broadly speaking, we lived in a cultural sphere where bread was the dominant staple food. Flatta was no exception, and while people did eat rice every once in a while, rice balls weren’t an established concept.

“It’s such a simple flavor, but that’s what’s so great about it! Something about that little hint of salt just puts me at ease,” I said as I savored every bite of my rice ball.

I hadn’t felt so relaxed in a long time. Godly Godness was usually an irresponsible troublemaker, but sometimes, she could be pretty thoughtful. It might have been wrong to use this phrase to describe a god, but I believed she was a genuinely good person deep down.

But...not everyone was as happy as I was. It was true I was the only one who

felt nostalgic for the rice balls, but the issue at hand was much bigger than that. My family wasn't used to eating rice, but that wasn't the problem either. Something was the matter with Falfa and Shalsha. I could tell from the looks on their faces that they'd made some sort of terrible miscalculation.

The dragon duo, on the other hand, were wolfing down the rice balls so quickly you'd never think they weren't used to eating them.

"There really is something to be said for gobbling down rice! I feel so energized," said Laika.

"It's sticking to my mouth like crazy, but I don't even care! I could eat another fifteen of these, no problem!" added Flatorte.

Those two had always sort of reminded me of a couple of high schoolers in a sports club, and watching them eat rice balls only strengthened that image.

After lunch, I took some time to wash the dishes. Momma Yufufu had cooked for us, and I couldn't let her do the washing, too. She'd come to visit us at the house in the highlands this time, and that meant she was our guest.

Of course, it would be a different story if we were talking about someone who stopped by as often as Beelzebub...

While I was busy, Momma Yufufu chatted with Laika and Rosalie at the dining table. Until, that is...

"I'll be right back—I'm just going to go peek into Azusa's daughters' room for a moment."

...she stood up and strolled down the hallway.

I had a pretty strong suspicion that something was going on. Conveniently, I'd just finished the last of the dishes and happened to have a sudden urge to walk down that very same hallway.

And if I just happen to pass by my daughters' room, well, that's just how the house is laid out! Nothing strange about that! I'm acting totally normally!

"...So we were hoping you could help us, Miss Yufufu."

That's definitely Falfa's voice.

“We’ve settled on when Mom’s birthday is, and we want to treat her to the best meal ever.”

And that was Shalsha. That settles it. They must be throwing me a birthday party! And since they asked about my birthday on the same day Momma Yufufu came for a visit...they must have been planning on asking her for cooking advice.

They could have asked another member of our family who could cook, but that would make it more likely someone would spill the beans. Plus, I’d already eaten tons of Laika’s and Halkara’s cooking, so none of their dishes would come as much of a surprise. That had to be why they’d turned to Momma Yufufu for advice.

“Well, of course I’ll help! If you’re trying to make Azusa happy, then I’ll pull out all the stops!” Momma Yufufu sounded very enthusiastic. She wasn’t exactly whispering, and her voice really carried.

“Things have gotten complicated, though. When she was eating those grains, it was obvious how much they reminded her of home. It’s going to be hard for us to beat that.”

That was Sandra just now...

“Tell me about it!” said Falfa. “They say that when you’re all grown up, nothing beats your mommy’s home cooking!”

Considering Falfa was already about fifty when she met her mommy—that is, me—it felt a little weird to hear her say that.

“That’s why we decided to find some sort of special ingredient to solve our dilemma,” said Shalsha.

Hmm? That’s not the direction I expected this conversation to take...

“So teach us where to find a super-special, rare ingredient, Yufufu,” said Sandra. “Then we’ll go get it.”

This is escalating quickly!

“Hmm. You know, they say there’s a mystical fruit known as the Sage’s Apple that grows somewhere near where I live.”

And now some sort of legendary item has entered the picture!

“They say that anyone who eats the Sage’s Apple will gain the ability to unravel the deepest mysteries of this world.”

What does that mean?! I thought we were talking about ingredients!

“But I think it would be too dangerous for you children to search for it on your —”

“Falfa understands! We’ll go find one of those apples!”

“We’re not like your ordinary townspeople. A little exploration is no problem for Shalsha.”

“It’s just an apple. If I ask the local plants where it is, we’ll find it in no time.”

Oh no... My daughters are ready to march right into danger...

Still, I couldn’t very well barge into their room and tell them they’re not allowed to do anything risky. I was at a loss.

What’s a mom supposed to do at a time like this?

In the end, I decided to head back to the dining room and pretend I hadn’t heard anything. Laika immediately asked me if something was wrong, though, so I clearly wasn’t doing a great job.

“Well, sort of,” I replied. “I’m just having a hard time deciding on something, that’s all...”

“Deciding what?” asked Flatorte. “Whether you want mutton or beef for dinner, or something like that?”

Lesson learned: The only decisions Flatorte frets over are really silly ones.

“At times like those, the best choice is always to have both!”

Now, that’s a glutton’s way to problem-solve!

“No, that can’t be it,” said Rosalie. “If my big sis is worrying about it, then it has to be a matter of life and death.”

“Sorry, but it’s nothing that heavy. It’s really no big deal,” I said.

My daughters were thinking about doing something risky, sure, but if protecting them was my only concern, I could accomplish that easily. All I had to

do was tell them they weren't allowed to go. The problem was that I knew how disappointed that would make them...and speaking as their parent, I didn't want to do that.

I sat at the dining room table, sipping a cup of tea and feeling a bit depressed. Even I felt down sometimes...though not very often, of course.

What would the right decision be in a situation like this...? This is tough—and I mean really tough...

Before long, Momma Yufufu returned to the dining room.

"Oh, Azusa? There's something I'd like to speak with you about," she said, her head slightly tilted to one side.

I had a pretty good idea what she wanted to discuss, and sure enough, she went on to tell me about how my daughters were planning to go on a journey to find the Sage's Apple.

"The three of them seemed so motivated, I just couldn't tell them no," said Momma Yufufu. "And so I thought I should at least let their mother know, for safety's sake."

"Thanks, Momma Yufufu. I understand. I'm sure it would've been really hard for you to stop them."

Since my daughters would be putting themselves in danger, Momma Yufufu was forced to reveal their plans to me. Now that they knew about the apple, even if she tried to tell them not to go search for it, it seemed likely they'd go behind her back to do it anyway. She had no choice but to tell me.

"All right—leave it to me! I'm their mom, so I'll handle the rest," I said. "I just have to make sure my daughters' adventure goes off without a hitch! That way nobody will be disappointed!"

"But how will you do that, Azusa?"

"I'll just turn myself invisible with magic, follow them, and back them up when they need a hand!"

Also, I'm kind of excited to watch my daughters go on an adventure to find me a present!

“The only problem is that this mission is a little too hard for them to complete on their own, right? That means that as long as I help them succeed, they’ll get the ingredient they want, and everyone will be happy! It’s a win-win!”

“That’s a good point. I think it’s a wonderful idea! ♪” Momma Yufufu agreed, clasping her hands before her chest.

I should have known she would understand a mother’s feelings at a time like this.

On the other hand, Rosalie—who’d been listening in to our exchange—looked a little exasperated. “You’re too doting for your own good sometimes, Big Sis...,” she muttered.

“I’ll take that as a compliment!”

“In any case, I’m sure that with your help, nothing will go wrong,” said Momma Yufufu. “It won’t be easy, but they certainly won’t find themselves in mortal danger.”

That made sense. If it was going to be truly risky, then I was certain Momma Yufufu would never have considered sending them to begin with.

And so it was decided that I would watch over my daughters in secret as they set out to find an ingredient for my birthday meal.

Now that I put it into words, this whole thing is starting to sound kind of overcomplicated...



Sometime later, on a certain day in May, my daughters climbed aboard Laika and set off for Momma Yufufu’s house.

When Falfa proposed the trip to me, she’d said, “We’re going over to Miss Yufufu’s house to play! ♪” That excuse was somewhat undermined by how heavily equipped they were. They even had knives, presumably to use as weapons in a pinch.

If this were Japan and my daughters had told me they were going out to play while carrying knives, I probably would’ve feared they were on their way to becoming criminals. But here, there was no need to worry about them fighting in turf wars with local delinquents or anything like that.

Anyway, after my daughters' group made their exit, I climbed aboard Flatorte and followed after them.

"I still don't get why I can't race Laika while we're at it," Flatorte grumbled.

"No way. They'd figure out we're following them!" I replied. This probably goes without saying, but we'd let Laika get quite the head start for precisely that reason.

"Uuugh, but I really wanna pick up some speed and blaze past her!"

"Don't! If you overtake her, it'll blow our cover in an instant!"

Thankfully, Flatorte restrained herself, and we touched down near Momma Yufufu's house without passing Laika. I walked the rest of the way on foot, pausing to make myself invisible with magic before I got too close. Flatorte followed along, and the spell made her invisible as well. This particular spell's effect included any allies who happened to be with me.

We arrived at the house just in time to watch my daughters put on their adventuring gear. This was a rare sight, particularly when it came to Sandra, who was wearing what looked like a set of leather armor.

"Okay, everyone! Are you all ready?" Momma Yufufu asked in a singsong voice.

"Yeaaah! ♪"

"Shalsha's preparations are complete."

"Yes, and there are way too many ferns around here, so we should hurry up and get moving."

"All right, then! I'll show you to the forest where the ingredient you want is said to grow."

Momma Yufufu took the lead, and my daughters followed along behind her. Flatorte and I, meanwhile, hung even farther back, magically invisible and undetected.

If anything went wrong and my daughters found themselves in danger, I would leap in to save them. If monsters were about to show up, for instance, I

would circle around and deal with them before they became a threat. I figured that was about all that was needed.

Around an hour into the trip, we spotted a dense forest at the bottom of a deep valley.

“This forest is called the Waterfall Basin Woods,” explained Momma Yufufu. “It’s said that the Sage’s Apple can be found here. Some people call it the phantom apple, since reaching this place is so difficult.”

I guess getting to Momma Yufufu’s house was pretty tough the first time.

“There aren’t any particularly vicious monsters in the woods, but the ground can get very muddy in some places, so be sure to watch your step!”

“Okaaaay! We’ll take regular breaks and travel at a safe pace without pushing ourselves!” said Falfa.

“*Safety first* is our expedition’s slogan,” added Shalsha. Looking a little closer, I realized that those words were actually written on the helmet she was wearing—which, incidentally, looked weirdly similar to the helmets construction workers wore back in Japan...

“All the ferns around here are of lower rank than me, so they won’t be a problem,” said Sandra. “I’m way out of their league.”

I don’t know how pecking orders work for plants, but you be careful, too, okay, Sandra?

“Well then, I’ll be heading home now. Be sure to make it back before the sun sets, okay?” Momma Yufufu cautioned. “If you don’t, I’ll have to contact Azusa and have everyone come over to help search for you,”

Of course, the truth is that I’m here already.

“Kay, guess I’ll head back to Yufufu’s place, too,” said Flatorte, as Momma Yufufu waved subtly in our direction. We were invisible, but she knew we’d been following her and could guess where we were. “I’ll have tea with Laika or something while we wait for you to get back.”



“Oh, sure. Say hi to Laika for me,” I replied.

With that, my daughters set out on their journey. *Time for me to follow along after them!*

The forest was pretty dark and gloomy, but since there weren't many animals around to cause problems, the atmosphere only served to make the journey feel like a real expedition. It seemed like a pretty good spot for a group of kids to have a blast.

“This place is so different from the woods we used to live in!” said Falfa.

“It's very humid here,” added Shalsha. “And remember that we were warned about muddy patches,”

“The moss says the apples we want are deeper inside, in a part of the forest with better drainage,” said Sandra.

Oh—does bringing Sandra along mean they'll know exactly where to find the apples...? I guess I there's no need to worry about them getting lost, then. This mission's difficulty level just went way down.

But wait, it's not that simple! Just because they won't get lost on the way there doesn't mean there's no danger in these woods, and the local plants might not know the way back to Momma Yufufu's house! I can't let my guard down yet!

Just then, Falfa suddenly turned around. I jumped in shock—I knew she couldn't see me, but it was still startling.

“What is it, Falfa?” asked Shalsha.

“Falfa thought she heard footsteps behind us just now...but I was probably just imagining them.”

You've got pretty good instincts, huh, Falfa...?

The girls carried on, and before long, they reached a rope bridge that spanned a river running through the woods. The ropes themselves were clearly decayed, though, maybe thanks to the high humidity.

“This looks dangerous. We should tie a lifeline, just in case,” said Sandra.



“Good idea. Falfa’s good at tying knots!” Falfa chimed in.

My daughters seemed to know their stuff, and they quickly put together a plan to keep themselves safe. Once they were all finished, Falfa carefully crossed the bridge first, followed by Shalsha and finally Sandra.

Ooh, that was great! Good job, girls! I thought, just barely stopping myself from giving them a round of applause. They were being much more responsible on this trip than I’d ever imagined they would. I had a feeling if Wynona were here, she would have given them a passing grade as adventurers...though of course, she was so soft on her big sisters that she probably would’ve given them a passing grade no matter what.

I, on the other hand, ran into a bit of trouble when I tried to cross the bridge. Right before I stepped onto it, I noticed a warning sign posted nearby.

What sort of warning is that...?

Now, I could’ve levitated across the river, or crossed it on foot and climbed up the cliff on the other side...but that sign felt like a challenge to me, and so I decided to use the bridge no matter what it told me.

I’m still a young, sprightly seventeen-year-old girl on the outside! I’m against excessive dieting on principle, but I’m also nowhere near overweight, so I should be able to cross a bridge like this no problem!

I took one step onto the bridge.

Creeeak...

An ominous noise rang out, and not a moment later, the bridge collapsed!

Agh! Without missing a beat, I jumped with all my might and sailed over to the other side. Thank goodness my level makes me so athletic... A normal seventeen-year-old would've fallen for sure.

That's when I noticed that my daughters had all turned to look back toward the bridge.

Oh, crap! Did they notice me...?

"It looks like the bridge finally reached its limit," said Shalsha. "If we'd been a little slower, we might have fallen."

Oh good. They think it just collapsed on its own.

"That's weird—it didn't feel like it was about to break. Maybe a boar tried walking across and was too heavy for it to support?"

Excuse me, Sandra! Rude! I'm not that heavy! For your information, that bridge broke because it was rickety! I wanted to complain out loud, but I was forced to restrain myself.

"We won't be able to use the bridge on the way back, then. It's okay, though! Falfa brought ropes and chains, so we can climb down and cross the river safely!"

So in the end, all I did was make this trip harder for them...

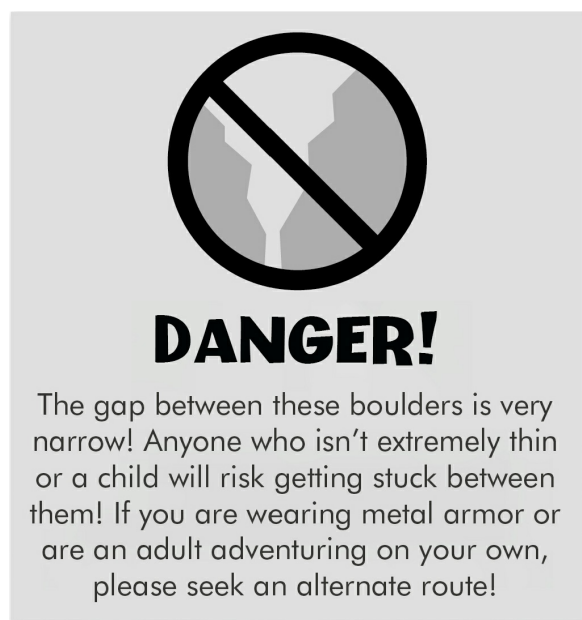
Am I being one of those helicopter parents who makes everything worse? No, no, that's not it—that bridge was on the brink of collapse already, so by breaking it myself, I made sure they didn't take that risk on the way back! That's definitely the story I'm telling myself anyway.

About fifteen minutes later, I saw a huge cluster of boulders looming up ahead of us. It looked like a bunch of them had fallen into the valley, filling up a whole portion of it.

You know, if this rock formation were somewhere less remote, I bet people would come here just to see it. It's going to make getting any farther into the valley tough, though.

"According to the moss, we can keep going if we squeeze through that gap,"

said Sandra.



“Good idea,” said Falfa. “Climbing over all these rocks would be really hard, after all.”

“Look—there’s a warning posted,” added Shalsha. “Adventurers who came here in the past must have left it. This proves we’re going the right way.”

Squeezing through that gap seems a little dangerous, but on the other hand, it’s clearly been stable for a very long time. Surely it won’t collapse now.

Sandra was the last to proceed into the gap, and once she was out of sight, I approached it myself. I had to stick fairly close to them if I wanted to make sure they were safe. Unfortunately, I found yet another irritating sign that complicated my plans.

...I’m sure I count as “extremely thin,” so this’ll be fine. I don’t diet or anything, but I’ve still got a really slender figure, so what could go wrong?

I started making my way into the pile of boulders. Partway through, I reached a point where I really had to stoop down to squeeze through the gap. The exit was fairly close, and I could even see the light from the other side of the passageway, but it struck me that this still probably counted as a cave.

That was when I had a little accident—by which I mean I got stuck.

Wha—?! What’s going on here?! Objectively speaking, I’m definitely as thin as they could expect anyone to be! If I’m not thin enough, then they should’ve written “anyone who isn’t a child” and left it at that!

I started squirming, trying to free myself.

Maybe the hem of my clothes got caught on something. That would explain the problem, since I'm definitely thin enough!

Just then, Sandra turned back to look in my direction. I stopped squirming and froze in place, not moving a muscle.

"I thought something was flailing around—maybe a monkey got stuck?—but I guess it was nothing after all."

Talk about a rude misunderstanding! Again!

"Do monkeys even live in this forest?" asked Falfa.

"If apples grow here, then it's certainly possible," said Shalsha.

Better just stay still for a minute... I'll be in deep trouble if they come back to investigate.

I waited until Sandra was out of sight, then started squirming again...

...and in the end, I got out by punching the rock to chisel part of it away.

"O-of course I got caught! Nothing weird about that... There's no way anyone bigger than a kid could get through there without getting stuck. And it's the boulders' fault anyway! Or maybe the sign's fault. It's part of the problem, too!"

That, or it could be that this whole forest is just too hard to traverse in general. Sure, slipping through the boulders is easy enough if you're small, but if you had to make your way over this whole pile, it'd be ridiculously tough! Any adventurer who can't use levitation magic would end up having to do some serious rock climbing!

On the other hand, my daughters were having quite an easy time on their trip so far. They hadn't struggled with any of the obstacles in their path, and they hadn't encountered a single monster. If anything, I was the only one finding things difficult...

Once again, I hurried ahead until I caught sight of my daughters.

"Falfa doesn't see any apples at all..."

"An objective like ours won't be so easy to accomplish, but we have no

choice,” said Shalsha. “Something that takes a fair deal of time and effort to obtain is just what we need to celebrate Mom’s birthday properly.”

Ah! They’re talking about me! I decided to focus harder than ever on making sure they didn’t notice me as I perked up my ears.

“That’s right,” said Sandra with a nod. “Azusa knows plenty of spirits, gods, and ghosts, after all. No normal gift would ever surprise her—we need something rare.”

Okay, but you don’t have to surprise me. I’d be more than happy just to have my daughters throw me a birthday party. I was fairly certain they knew that, too.

“Mommy would be happy no matter what we gave her, but that just makes Falfa *really* want to give her something amazing that she’s never seen before!”

Falfa, who had taken the lead, pumped her fists in the air as she explained her motivation.

Oh, I get it. I’m pretty unique, as far as moms go, and that uniqueness has made it hard for my daughters to figure out how to celebrate my birthday.

Most people would never even have seen the unique ingredients from the demon lands that Beelzebub brought over when she visited, and I always tried the local cuisine when I traveled far away. I was probably much harder to surprise than your average parent would be, and it was natural to want to surprise a person on their birthday. I was the same way—when I gave my daughters presents, I always searched for something that would surprise them.

In that sense, it was understandable that the three of them had volunteered to travel all the way out to this forest. There were risks involved, sure, but that just meant I had to do my job as their guardian and watch over them like a hawk.

My daughters continued into the woods slowly but surely, occasionally stopping to rest—and finally, they arrived in an area where some apple trees were growing. The trees appeared quite sturdy, and their apples looked delicious, even at a distance!

There was, however, one final obstacle waiting for my daughters there: A large monster stood between them and the apples.

“Is that monster a behemoth, Shalsha?” asked Falfa.

Shalsha nodded. “There’s no mistaking it. It’s a variety known as a wetland behemoth. As their name implies, they like to inhabit wet, humid regions.”

The behemoth was probably about as big as an elephant. Even a seasoned adventurer would have a hard time fighting that thing on their own. It noticed my daughters right away, too, and let out an earsplitting, intimidating roar as it turned to face them.

I braced myself, ready to jump in at a moment’s notice if my daughters needed me to protect them. If possible, I would’ve liked to settle things covertly, but that would be a lot harder this time around. I could easily dispatch monsters that tried to sneak up on them without my daughters noticing, but this one was right in front of them. If it passed out at random, they would definitely realize something was up.

If they were fighting a number of monsters, I could have slipped in through the chaos and started throwing punches, but since there was only one behemoth to deal with, I wound up with the same problem: It would look incredibly unnatural for it to react to an attack that seemed to come out of nowhere.

The decision would have been easier if they started shouting *Help us, Mommy!* or something, but at this point, I didn’t really have a choice. My daughters’ safety was my first priority, and my desire to stay hidden was nothing compared to it.

A moment later, however, my daughters did something I wasn’t expecting.

“Shalsha, Sandra! Let’s do this!”

At Falfa’s command, Shalsha and Sandra quickly took up positions around her, arranging themselves into what was clearly a battle formation. A moment later, Sandra dug herself into the ground.

“The ground’s soft here—nice and easy to dig through!”

Sandra burrowed straight under the behemoth, emerging again on its other side. At the same time, vine-like growths burst out of the ground and wound around the monster's legs!

Still, I knew Sandra didn't have the strength to pull a monster like that to the ground. I wondered for a moment what she'd do next...but it turned out I had nothing to worry about. The behemoth was distracted by the vines and turned its gaze toward Sandra, leaving Shalsha free to line up a shot with a bow and arrow.

"Bull's-eye!"

Shalsha's arrow pierced right into the behemoth's hide. The monster definitely felt that—it let out a bellowing "Groooooahhh!" as it writhed in agony.

"Hiyah!" Falfa shouted as she followed up Shalsha's arrow by stabbing the beast with a knife, before dashing away again without wasting a moment. Hit-and-run tactics were the default method for adventurers when combating monsters, a fact Falfa knew well.

"Another bull's-eye, coming up!" Shalsha declared as she loosed a second arrow, once again scoring a direct hit.

The behemoth tried to attack, but Sandra's vines were still binding its legs, restricting its movement.

"You're lucky—you get to test out these thorny vines I've been developing!" said Sandra. "The thorns make them even harder to shake off, don't they?"

"Now's our chance!" shouted Falfa.

"Stick to the plan and bring it down," said Shalsha.

The two of them circled around to flank the behemoth, then resumed their attack.

Incredible..., I thought. The sheer coordination of their teamwork was breathtaking.

I was captivated by my daughters' display. They certainly weren't in any serious danger. If anything, the behemoth was the one being overwhelmed.

There was no need at all for me to jump in and back them up.

I see now, I thought, still keeping a close eye on the behemoth just in case something went wrong and I needed to intervene. My daughters have really grown up—or maybe they were already grown up before I met them.

Logically speaking, that should have been obvious. Falfa and Shalsha hadn't spent their lives lazing about and doing nothing. They were both extremely capable in their chosen fields—way more capable than I was, in fact. Sandra was no slouch, either, and could now study on her own pretty effectively.

They'd never been physically weak, either. They were small, which probably didn't help their stamina, but they always took regular breaks, which more than made up for the deficiency. In the end, all their plans and preparation had clearly paid off.

I hadn't expected this trip to show me how much my daughters had grown. Maybe I should've known how capable they were, but I'd only ever seen them as my cute little kids. Just because I was their mom didn't mean I automatically knew everything about them, and this was one of the sides of them I'd missed.

At long last, the behemoth let out one final scream-like roar, then fled off into the woods.

"We won! Hooray!"

"A glorious success. Shalsha almost wants to let out a cry of victory."

"That'll teach it to underestimate a plant!"

That really was amazing, you three! Great work! I thought as I gave them a round of applause—then I realized what I was doing and stopped immediately.

"Shalsha just heard a dry slapping sound."

"Falfa doesn't think anything in the woods would make a sound like that! Maybe it was some sort of weird bird?"

Phew... I think I'm in the clear... Way to nearly give myself away, sheesh...

And so my daughters successfully obtained the rather exaggerated-sounding fruit known as *the Sage's Apple*! Their trip home took a little longer than the trip out, since I'd destroyed the bridge and they had to cross the river on foot,

but they reached Momma Yufufu's house safe and sound anyway. I made sure to get there first and have Flatorte hide, though I felt a little bad about it.

"Welcome back, everyone! You did wonderfully!" Momma Yufufu said as she gave each of my daughters a hug. I stood by, still invisible and simmering with jealousy.

Me too! I wanna give my daughters a hug, too!



In no time at all, May seventeenth—my substitute birthday—arrived. That morning, I heard a knock on my door and opened it to find my beloved daughters, Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra, standing right outside my room.

"Good morning, Mommy! Follow us to the dining room, okay?" said Falfa. She took me by the hand and pulled me to the dining room, where I found an apple pie laid out on the table.

"Happy birthday, Mom," said Shalsha.

"Now go on and live for another thousand years or so, like a cedar! You're still only three hundred, which means your life's barely even started," added Sandra, congratulating me in her own sort of way.

I certainly hadn't imagined they'd have an apple pie ready for me first thing in the morning. I'd seen them harvest the apples myself, but this was completely beyond my expectations.

I guess my imagination still has a lot of growing to do.

"Thank you so much, you three!" I said as I gave my daughters a big hug. I hadn't cared about my birthday in the slightest for many years, but if it meant getting to have a celebration like this, I'd have to start keeping track of it from now on. "I'm so happy! You three have to tell me your birthdays now, too—I'll have to do something for you as well!"

Surprisingly, all three of them looked a little awkward when faced with my request.

"Falfa's not sure, actually..."

"They didn't have calendars where we were born."

“Plants don’t really care about exact dates.”

I suppose that did make this a rather difficult question...

We talked it through, and in the end, we decided to make May seventeenth my daughters’ birthdays as well. Oh, and the Sage’s Apples ended up being delicious, with just the right balance of sweetness and tartness. Of course, an apple pie made by my daughters with love and care was guaranteed to be scrumptious no matter what!

That afternoon, Momma Yufufu paid me a visit. The two of us decided to take a stroll through the highlands together.

“I take it you’ve been having a lovely day, Azusa?” she asked.

“I really have! The best day ever, maybe. My daughters gave me an incredible present!” I replied.

Momma Yufufu took my hand and gave it a squeeze. “I’m overjoyed to see you so happy, Azusa. This might be one of the best days I’ve had in my whole life as a spirit as well.”

That was a little embarrassing to hear, but I could understand how she felt. After all, I had just finished celebrating my own daughters’ birthdays.

“I hope you’ll stay as my daughter forever, Azusa. Can you do that for me?”

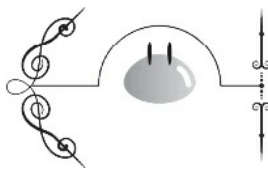
“Sure. I’ll be your cute little kid for as long as I can, Momma.”

Maybe it’d be nice for the two of us to take a trip together sometime? I thought as we watched my daughters play around outside a little later.

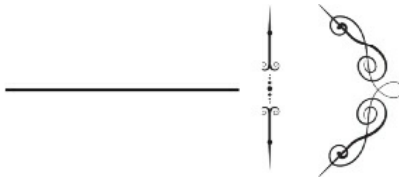
“I’d like to do all sorts of things for my cute little granddaughters as well,” said Momma Yufufu.

“Your granddaughters...? I guess that makes sense, since they’re my kids and all...”

Momma Yufufu didn’t look anywhere close to old enough to have grandchildren, and I hoped she’d stay that youthful and healthy for a long time to come.



I HELPED OUT A PHANTOM THIEF



One big difference between this world and Japan was you could always see the wide, vast sky no matter where you were. As a result, I could spot any wyverns flying nearby long before they got close to my home.

Well, okay, I probably could've seen wyverns in my old world if they existed and if I'd stood on a mountaintop. The point I'm trying to make is that there weren't any huge skyscrapers around to block my view.

At any rate, one day on my way home after a shopping excursion, a wyvern touched down in front of me. It had probably had an easy time spotting me, too.

"Good day to you, Miss Azusa," said Fatla, the wyvern's rider, as she climbed off her mount.

"Hey," I replied. "I guess wyverns are the fastest way to get around even if you can fly on your own, huh?"

Getting around in leviathan form must not be very efficient. They look pretty slow, after all.

"That's right," said Fatla. "There was a wyvern free today, so I thought I might as well use it. As for why I'm here—well, my companion can tell you the details."

A second rider descended from the wyvern's back: a snake-legged naga wearing a pair of glasses.

"It's a pleasure to see you again," said the naga. "My name is Sorya, and I'm the proprietor of the antique shop Ten Thousand Dragons, as well as one of the

Appraisal Knights.”

This is certainly an unexpected visitor! I gave Sorya a polite bow. “I remember, yes! You were a big help when we had to get Nintan’s offerings appraised.”

The Appraisal Knights were one of the demon lands’ knightly orders. They weren’t the sort of knights that went out and fought with sword and shield, though. The Appraisal Knight before me wasn’t carrying any weapons at all, in fact.

No, this knightly order was composed exclusively of specialists in appraising treasures and antiques. I’d been told previously that they were only considered a knightly order as a formality, since they were a unit under the direct control of the demon king. They traveled all around, performing appraisals far and wide, and had once come to Flatta. The appraisals they’d carried out then had led to Halkara founding her museum.

I didn’t often have ancient or rare items that needed appraising, of course, so I hadn’t had very many chances to encounter the Appraisal Knights in the past. As for Sorya’s appearance now...

“Seeing as you came all the way here, I’m guessing there’s some sort of problem involving an antique that you need help with?”

“You’re quite quick on the uptake, I see! In short, this letter arrived at my store the other day.”

Sorya handed me a letter, which I saw had been carefully written out in both Demon and human script. Something about the penmanship looked awfully familiar to me.

It has come to my attention that the Luxurda branch of your establishment is in possession of a work of art that was painted by Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser. I hereby inform you that on Commemoration of Demon King Anzai's Purchase of an Umbrella Day, I shall infiltrate your warehouse and make the painting my own.

※ Feel free to reach out in the event this schedule is inconvenient for you. Please direct all correspondence to the first room on the second floor of the four-story apartment building on the corner of Granite Gargoyle Street and Falconer Street in District Eight of Vanzeld, addressed to Canhein.

Phantom Thief Canhein

“It’s that phantom thief again?!”

The Phantom Thief Canhein was a dark-elven woman who, frankly, was so poorly cut out for her chosen occupation that it hardly felt accurate to call her a phantom thief at all. The fact that her only motivation for her crimes was obtaining and disposing of items related to her distant ancestor Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser certainly didn’t help with that impression. The idea of profiting from larceny never seemed to have crossed her mind at all.

On the other hand, I guess nobody ever said that phantom thieves have to be motivated by getting rich... Not sure what the rules are here—it’s not like there are all that many phantom thieves out there setting precedents.

Oh, and for a phantom thief, she was also *extremely* conscientious. “Did she seriously write out her full address as contact information...? Isn’t that something she should be keeping secret?” I said with a sigh.

I didn’t know much about demon law, but I had a feeling that if the Vanzeld equivalent of the police decided to arrest her, they would have an extremely easy time of it. It was also interesting to know that an elf was currently living in the demon lands. Maybe her phantom thief work meant she couldn’t live in the human kingdom anymore...

“Perhaps we should keep walking while we discuss the situation?” Fatla suggested.

I agreed, and the three of us started making our way toward the house in the highlands. Even if we wrapped up our business before we arrived, I figured I should at least serve them some tea before they went on their way.

“You haven’t told me what you want me to do yet,” I said. “but let me just cut to the chase and see if I have the right idea: You’d like me to protect that painting in your storehouse from the phantom thief, right?”

I wasn’t sure why Sorya would go out of her way to ask *me* to take on the task, but since she’d shown me the calling card, I had to assume that was her plan. Running the antique shop was her primary trade, after all. Knowing Canhein, I had a feeling Sorya’s usual security measures would be more than enough to protect her belongings...but it wouldn’t be that strange for someone in Sorya’s profession to want to err on the side of safety.

“That’s close to correct, but I’m afraid you’re a little off,” she said. She was off to my side, more slithering than walking with her snakelike naga tail. “You see, we were actually hoping you’d be willing to help the other side.”

“‘The other side’? What other side?” I asked, so confused I stopped in my tracks.

Fatla pulled out a second letter and held it out to me. I took it and gave it a read.

To: Azusa, the great Witch of the Highlands

Greetings. My name is Canhein the Phantom Thief. You may recall how you assisted me greatly in the village of Flatta. In the near future, I intend to break into the Ten Thousand Dragons storehouse in Luxurda. However, said storehouse's security measures are exceptionally tight, and I believe accomplishing my objective alone would be fraught with difficulty. Thus, though it pains me to make such a one-sided request, I would like to ask for the honorable Witch of the Highlands' assistance in this endeavor. Would a reward of 150,000 koinne be sufficient to secure your services? Note: I have entrusted this letter to a demon with connections to the great Witch of the Highlands for delivery.

Phantom Thief Canhein

"The phantom thief wants to hire me?!"

My incredulous shout echoed across the highlands. The name *the Witch of the Highlands* had spread fairly far and wide (much to my displeasure), but this was the first time that fame had led to a phantom thief reaching out for help. In fact, I was pretty sure most people went their whole lives without something like that happening to them.

"And there you have it," said Fatla.

There I have what? What part of this made sense to you?

"Assuming you don't have any other obligations, would you be willing to lend

a hand?" she continued.

"Wait, what?! Think about this logically for a second—you're asking me to take part in a crime! I don't want to be a criminal! Not to mention that the store's owner is right here with...us..."

My words trailed off as I turned to look at Sorya. *Come to think of it, why did she come along? Something weird has to be going on, right?*

"No need to concern yourself with my store," said Sorya. "We've given this endeavor our official approval."

"I guess you wouldn't be here if you hadn't, but *why*, though?!" *What possible reason could they have for approving of a crime?!*

"That's rather a long story, I'm afraid. Perhaps we should wait to discuss it until we're inside?"

Oh, I guess we are almost back to the house. If it's a long story, then maybe Sorya and Canhein have some sort of deep, complicated connection. I guess it wouldn't be strange for a phantom thief and an antique dealer to have a history.

"All right, then," I said. "Come on in, and I'll listen to the whole story..."

One thing's for sure: This request is one big mystery from start to finish.



I made some tea for everyone, and Sorya resumed her explanation.

"The location the phantom thief intends to raid is the storehouse for the Luxurda branch of my business. It's quite a fair distance from the main branch in Vanzeld," she said.

She is a member of the Appraisal Knights, so it makes sense that her business is successful enough to have multiple locations.

"That warehouse requires periodic cleaning. And so..."

"And so?" I repeated.

"...I thought it would be convenient to assign the phantom thief that task."

Hmm...? Okay, that's not what I was expecting to hear. "So, um, you and the

phantom thief aren't rivals or anything, then?" I asked.

"No, we've never met," said Sorya.

So your only connection is that you want her to clean for you?

"Incidentally, we sent a contract putting her in charge of cleaning the storehouse to the address written on the calling card I showed you. Said contract was returned to us, signed. In other words, the agreement has already been formalized."

So she's literally their janitor?! She's officially employed! "Okay, but you know that phantom thieves are, well, *thieves*, right? Aren't you afraid she'll only say she's cleaning up the storehouse, then use it as a chance to steal a bunch of stuff? This could turn into a huge loss for you!"

"Thankfully, the phantom thief in question only ever steals items associated with Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser, none of which are at all valuable," Sorya said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Oh, right. That's true... All she cares about is gathering up the items associated with her family's shameful history and locking them away for good.

"If I consider any items associated with the marquis as her fee for the cleaning work, it comes out to quite the advantageous deal on our part," said Sorya.

"Fair enough, but what if she doesn't even clean? For all you know, she won't even bother dusting the place."

Sure, they were dealing with a remarkably careless phantom thief, but wasn't the antique dealer being rather careless as well? *Then again, I can imagine Canhein actually doing the clearing. She's weirdly honest, after all...*

"I'm afraid there's something far more troublesome than dust in that storehouse. Dealing with *them* is to be part of her cleaning duties," Sorya said before pausing to take a sip of her tea. Her mannerisms were very elegant.

"The storehouse, you see, is infested with monsters known as mimics."

"Mimics?!"

I'd heard of those before. They were monsters that looked just like treasure chests but bit you the moment you tried to open them.

“A storehouse packed full of antiques is the perfect environment for mimics. Oh, but no need to worry—I hear they’re almost never seen in human territories these days, so your museum is almost certainly not infested,” said Sorya.

Well, that’s a relief. Guess I don’t have to worry about Halkara ending up as a mimic’s lunch when she goes to sort through the museum’s inventory.

“It’s very rare for anyone to go inside the storehouse in question, and even entering is something of a trial. That said, the mimic infestation is at risk of spiraling out of control. We have to do something to bring down their numbers.”

“And if a phantom thief breaks in and does that for you, it’d be just what you needed?”

Sorya nodded. “Our contract doesn’t specify anything about how many mimics she’s required to exterminate, but I’m quite certain she’ll fight back when they attack her. That, and some light cleaning, is all we’re expecting from her.”

“However,” Fatla interjected, “I doubt Miss Canhein will be up to the task on her own. If a group of mimics were to attack her all at once, she might not survive. And the storehouse is remote and unstaffed, meaning no one would be around to save her.”

“I’m pretty sure once a phantom thief starts shouting for help, that’s it for their career... But I suppose I’m starting to see where I fit into this picture...”

The pieces had all fallen into place. The phantom thief wanted me as her accomplice, while the antique store wanted me to help exterminate mimics. It seemed both parties’ interests were aligned.

“But why me? Couldn’t you hire a demon to help out instead?” I asked.

“We were concerned such an individual might plunder the storehouse’s contents, and as such, we decided someone familiar would be our safest bet. They will be around many valuable items, after all,” said Fatla. “We’re well aware that you aren’t interested in amassing vast sums of wealth, Azusa, which makes you an ideal candidate.”

I heaved a sigh. She had a point, but it also sounded like she was just foisting the task off on an acquaintance because it was easier.

“If you don’t object to the details of this arrangement, we’d like you to make your way to the town of Luxurda, where the storehouse is located,” said Fatla, acting like this was already a done deal. She could be surprisingly pushy about this sort of thing, but I knew all too well how nothing ever got done in a job like hers if you didn’t know when to be assertive.

As it happened, I *did* object to some of the details. It would be shocking if I didn’t. That said, I did owe the Appraisal Knights for helping out with all those offerings. I hadn’t expected their involvement to inspire Halkara to found a museum, but I *had* been afraid that a portion of my house would be eternally occupied by a heap of offerings that I had no clue how to put a price on. The Appraisal Knights had taken care of that for me, for free, and I felt a responsibility to pay them back for that favor.

“All right, I’ll do it,” I said. “It doesn’t sound like it’s going to take that long, so I’ll just take care of it and be on my way.”

“I greatly appreciate it,” said Sorya. “And while I’m at it, I’d like you to have this.” She handed me what looked like some sort of medal.

“Huh. What is it? An antique?”

“Actually, it’s a brooch modeled after the Appraisal Knights’ coat of arms,” said Sorya.

“Quite!” agreed Fatla. “After all, you’ll be an official member of the order for the duration of this job.” The leviathan gave me a quick round of applause. “Congratulations, Miss Azusa. Welcome to the Appraisal Knights!”

“I guess if you live long enough, you’re bound to end up in a knightly order or two...”

It feels like I’m a lot more receptive these days—or perhaps I’ve just resigned myself to my fate.

Azusa joined a knightly order!

“Well then, I’m expecting great things from you as an official member of our

order,” said Sorya.

“Right, sure... Though it kind of feels like an empty title...”

“I’m sure you’ll face plenty of difficulties both reaching the storehouse and clearing it out, but I’m also certain those tasks are both well within your capabilities.”

Oh, right. She said something about it being hard to get to before, didn’t she?

“Um, so, I hope you’re not about to tell me that the storehouse is at the top of a sheer cliff or buried deep underground or something...”

Sorya took a sip of her tea, then set her cup down before speaking.

“No, not at all. It’s in the middle of a town, as you’d expect it to be.”

Okay, then why is it hard to reach? I’m getting some mixed messages here!



A few days later, I traveled into the demon territory and arrived in Luxurda. Countless waterways ran through the town, which made the scenery quite striking. It was so lovely that I immediately felt the urge to do some sightseeing, but I held it back and made for the agreed meeting place instead. There, I ran into a familiar face.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! The Phantom Thief Canhein takes the stage...and thanks you profusely for coming all this way, Miss Witch of the Highlands! It’s a pleasure to work with you today!”

“I can’t tell if you’re trying to sound pompous, polite, or both! Pick one!”

“Once again, I will snatch away my target with grace and finesse! Oh, and I brought some snacks from back home for you. Just a little gift. I hope you enjoy them...”

“I can’t believe you’re talking yourself up and handing out souvenirs in the same breath...”

Now that I think about it, she was like this last time, too, wasn’t she? It’s like she can’t quite settle on a personality... This must be what happens when someone earnest and diligent at heart insists on becoming a phantom thief.

“You know, it was just the other day that I discovered Ten Thousand Dragons had one of Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser’s relics in its catalog! I was all ready to break in and liberate it, but then it struck me that there’s only so much one thief can do on her own, so I sent a letter to the proprietor, Sorya, to check up on the state of things.”

“You sent a letter of inquiry to the owner?!” *And you call yourself a thief?! Just how honest can you possibly be?!*

“Well, yes, but don’t you think checking in advance is a big step forward in my case, considering, well...”

“Oh, right. I guess people did call you the Afterwarner for a reason...”

Apparently, in the past, Canhein had decided that maintaining the mystique and style of a phantom thief was worth less to her than successfully stealing what she wanted, and so she had adopted the weird, backward system of sending warnings announcing the items she intended to steal *after* she’d already made off with them.

“Miss Sorya works as an Appraisal Knight under the direct supervision of the demon king,” said Canhein. “She used that connection to get in touch with Miss Fatla the leviathan, who recruited you to the cause.”

“So I have Pecora’s network to thank for this, huh...?” *Considering their order’s at the beck and call of the demon king, I shouldn’t be surprised that my name came up.*

“Between my unflappably tenacious thievery and your brutal physical violence, no storehouse will stand in our way!”

“Stop trying to make physical brutality my thing!”

Also, don’t act like tenacity is a phantom thief’s greatest strength! You’re supposed to be refined and mysterious, not stubborn as a mule!

“Well, whatever. Where’s this storehouse anyway?” I asked.

That information hadn’t been part of my briefing. In fact, Sorya hadn’t told me much of anything after I agreed to take on the job. I got the impression all that stuff had been left to a certain phantom thief to figure out.

“We’ll have to travel the waterways to reach the area of the city where the storehouse is located. So first things first, we need to find a boat.”

Oh, we get to ride in a boat? That kinda fits the phantom thief image.

“But since I don’t have a boating license, I can’t operate one, so—”

“You’re not even willing to break a law like *that*?!”

No doubt about it—this phantom thief is just a decent person! Or maybe just a regular law-abiding citizen.

“I’ve enlisted the help of someone who does have a license and can take us! Our boat’s moored just over there.”

We headed for the waterway and descended a small staircase of about seven steps, leading down to a dock. Then, as we walked along the dock, I heard a voice.

“Ooh? If it iiisn’t Azusa.”

Wait a minute. I know that drawl...

It was Captain Imremico the mermaid!

“Captain! What happened to your ghost ship?” I asked.

“Oh, thaaat ship? It’s docked at the shipwriiight’s, going through maintenance,” said Imremico. “I caaame here for a job ferrying someone arooound the waterways.”

Considering Pecora’s involvement, I should have expected that I would know all the personnel selected for this mission. It was better than working with strangers, though, so I couldn’t complain.

Imremico’s boat was crewed by an assortment of skeletons, each carrying an oar. I figured they’d be paddling us along the canal.

Canhein and I climbed aboard.

“Weeell then, time to cast off!”

The boat began to move, and we cruised gently down the waterway.

“It almost feels like we’re on a sightseeing gondola,” I commented. I was

enjoying the view of the town from our vessel.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! I’ll be carrying out a spectacular raid on that storehouse...and I’ve already informed its owners that I’m hoping to start work just a little past noon, so I’d really like to arrive by then!”

Of all the pointless things to be conscientious about! I knew that was just the sort of person she was, so I wasn’t going to complain out loud, but there was one thing I felt the need to double-check in advance.

“So how are we supposed to get to the storehouse using these waterways?”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I have no idea!”

Excuse me?

I laid a hand on Canhein’s shoulder. “Wait. What do you mean, you have no idea? Did you seriously set out for the storehouse without knowing where it is? How were you even planning on getting there?”

“Um, would you let go, please? You’re scaring me... I have a very good reason, so please let me explain. I intend to take full responsibility!”

“If you have a good reason, you should’ve opened with that!”

And so Canhein explained the circumstances.

“The waterways in this city form a complex, netlike structure. To make a long story short, if you don’t follow the precise route to your destination, your boat ends up looping all the way around to the beginning again.”

“I’ve definitely seen this scenario in an old game!”

“According to the shop’s owner, the route to the storehouse—and the layout of the storehouse itself—are both trade secrets that she can’t reveal to me. She said there’d be no issue with me figuring out the route and breaking in on my own, but that if I drew a map in the process, I would have to destroy it after I was finished to keep that information from getting into the wrong hands.”

“I think I get it. Well, that’s a pain... But wait—didn’t they formally contract you to clean the storehouse?”

“Yes, but they told me they were too afraid that I’d lose the map and didn’t

want to provide one.”

“They don’t have much faith in their phantom-thief-for-hire, do they?”

“The opposite, actually. They told me that if I was good enough to call myself a phantom thief, I wouldn’t need a map in the first place.”

“I mean, I guess that’s fair enough...”

Well, that explains why Sorya was so convinced I’d have a hard time getting to the storehouse. Getting there will be easy if we manage to stumble our way onto the right route, but who knows how long that’s going to take? At this rate, scaling a mountain might have been easier.

“No neeed to worry!” Captain Imremico’s voice rang out. Her boat was small enough that we could hear her just fine, and she’d presumably overheard our whole conversation as well.

Though if Canhein wants to call herself a phantom thief, I think she should try to be a little more discreet...

“In shooort, all you need is to memorize the route, yes? Well, my memory is seeecond to none. I paaassed the written exam for my boating license in only seeeven tries, you know?”

This time, I laid a hand on the captain’s shoulder.

“Wait. That means you failed six times, doesn’t it?”

“A true caaaptain must know no fear and fooorge ahead into the unknown!”

That sounds good out of context, sure, but I don’t think it’s very impressive in this situation!

“Yes!” exclaimed Canhein. “You get it, Captain Imremico! Even I’ve had moments where I couldn’t pick a lock to save my life and nearly lost heart, or got bitten all over by a guard dog. But I never gave up, and thanks to that perseverance, I’m still at it to this very day! The drive to keep going is more important than anything!”

I’d never say this out loud, but it feels like I’m witnessing two people bond over their mutual incompetence! Is this really going to work out...?

Then again, it's not like we'll be trapped in the waterways for eternity even if it doesn't, so whatever. Plus, Imremico did get her boating license eventually, even if it took her a few tries. That means she's a certified professional. Surely a pro can handle navigating a waterway without too much trouble, right?

One hour later...

"You knooow, I have a feeling we've been here before."

"That's because we're back where we boarded!" I shouted. "We've looped all the way around to the start again!"

Unsurprisingly, our venture through the waterways had proven to be a struggle. In all fairness, it wasn't just the captain's fault. The waterway branched off in multiple directions on a regular basis, so we had to constantly decide which to go next. Exploring the whole system thus required an infuriating number of trips. The captain's skeleton subordinates were handling the rowing, so we weren't *physically* tired, but failure after failure to reach our destination was starting to wear on my mental state.

"I'm starting to wonder if we'll even make it there today...," I grumbled.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! When one lives as long as us, it's only natural to get lost from time to time! That's the spice of life! There's no fun in a path without any forks in it! It's only by getting lost and wandering that we find our own answers to the questions that plague us! That's what it truly means to live, don't you think?"

That sounds really cool and all, but right now it's just irritating. "Hey, Canhein, you're a phantom thief. Don't you have any, I don't know, phantom thief skills or something?"

I was pretty bored with this whole situation, so I decided to turn the subject to Canhein herself. The cityscape I'd been so fascinated with when we first boarded the boat was already old news to me.

"Indeed I do," said Canhein. "I've sent out many a warning letter in my day, and whenever someone reads one, they always say the same thing: My penmanship is excellent!"

"That has nothing to do with being a phantom thief!"

“Every once in a while, I’ll meet someone who’s embarrassed by their clumsy handwriting, and I always say to them that what’s most important is to write carefully! Rough and rushed writing is a far greater problem than handwriting that’s careful but unskilled. So long as you pour your heart into your penmanship, you’ll improve in the long term!”

“I mean, yes, good handwriting’s better than bad handwriting, but are you sure you want your handwriting to be identifiable, period? Isn’t that a problem for a phantom thief...?”

“Most of the time when I write something, it’s a letter of warning, so it’s actually better if the reader can immediately tell it’s me! Plus, I refuse to run or hide. My home address is a matter of public record!”

“I don’t know if that’s a sign that you want to get arrested or a sign that you haven’t been doing any real phantom thievery...”

Canhein and I kept chatting until suddenly, I noticed that something was wrong. The captain was gone. Her skeletons were still rowing away, but Captain Imremico herself was nowhere to be seen.

“Huh? Where’d she go...?” I wondered aloud. “She didn’t fall off the boat, did she?”

“C-c-c-c-calm yourself! The flow of the waterway’s weak; she’s f-f-f-f-fine!”

“What kind of phantom thief freaks out the second something goes even a little wrong?!”

Captain Imremico was a mermaid, so I didn’t think a little dip in the waterway would pose any danger to her. More concerning was the question of *why* she’d disappeared.

There aren’t any dangerous monsters in these waterways, are there...?

Canhein and I glanced at the water in unison—and a moment later, the captain herself broke the surface with a splash!

“I saaaw some nice-looking fish, so I caaaught them!” Captain Imremico called out. She really did have a fish in her hands—one in each, in fact. I couldn’t believe she was holding something that wet and floppy with her bare hands.

“They’re niiice and lively, too, so they’ll be deliicious if we cook them right away!”

“Um, Captain? I’d really appreciate it if you’d let us know before you jump ship...,” I grumbled. “It’s not exactly fun to realize you’re sailing on a captainless boat...”

“Well, do you waaant one?” the captain asked, holding a fish out to me.

I mean, I’ll eat it, sure. That’s a whole different question.

I used a bit of fire magic to cook the fish on the spot, and Canhein and I dug in. The captain, for some reason, had salt and plates at the ready, which helped. I got the impression she treated her passengers to fish on the regular.

“Ooh! If this isn’t scrumptious!” said Canhein.

“Yeah, it’s great!” I agreed. “It’s so soft and flaky!”

“Weeeell, I am a mermaid! Caaatching a fish or two is a piece of cake,” the captain said with a smirk. “I’m not the caaaptain for nothing! Heh-heh!”

One little win, and she’s already acting full of herself.

“And that meeeans even if we don’t find the right route, it all cooomes out even!”

“No! No, it doesn’t!” *These fish being tasty doesn’t mean it’s fine if everything else goes wrong!*

I didn’t get the chance to question her logic any further, though. “I’ll go fiiind some more fish!” the captain said, diving back into the waterway before I could get another word in edgewise.

“She ran away! That’s not fair!” I shouted. *I don’t mind her being laid-back, but we really need to get to that storehouse! Please try to remember what we’re actually here for, Captain!*

The captain, however, reemerged from the water just a moment later.

“Hey, Captain...?” I said. “I’d really appreciate it if you’d make finding a path to the storehouse your first priority, and save the—”

“I just found a weeeird switch in the waterway!” said the captain, much to my

confusion.

“Please don’t change the subject! I’m saying that—”

“I’ll puuush it and seeeee what it does!”

And just like that, she dived back under the water.

“Uuugh, it’s so hard to deal with people like her...”

“You’ll get wrinkles if you keep scowling like that, you know? You should try to smile more! Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Nobody asked! Why am I the only one here who actually cares about reaching our objective?!”

Just then...

Tnk, tnk, tnk, tnk, tnk!

...our boat began to sway in the water.

“Wait, what?! What’s going on?” I shouted.

“Whooooooooa...! Ooooooh noooooo...! Are we sinking? Somebody, save us!”

“Little quick to panic, aren’t we?!”

Canhein had lost all composure, but a moment later, her gaze settled off to the side of the ship, perpendicular to the waterway.

Is she looking for a place she can jump to? It’s not like there’s a hole in the hull, so I don’t know why she’s freaking out like this in the first place.

“Look, to the side! A waterway that wasn’t there before is, uh...is there now!”

A waterway? But there wasn’t a branch to the side here before! There was just another wall—, I thought, but then I turned to look and saw that what had been a wall moments before had suddenly opened up, revealing a tunnel.

“Gaaaaaah! A hidden passage?! Am I seeing what I think I’m seeing?!”

Just then, the captain once again broke the surface of the water with a splash.

“I preeessed the switch, and a route opened up! I guess you reeeally do have to check every noook and cranny for this kind of thing,” she said, raising her hands overhead in a half-hearted display of defiant confidence.

Yeah, okay. She earned that one. But really...

“How was anyone other than a mermaid ever supposed to find that?! Secret passages shouldn’t be so hard to figure out!”

If it’d been just me and the phantom thief, we’d never have found the right path in a million years!

We passed through the secret tunnel and emerged on the other side, where we were greeted by a very different sort of scenery. Up until then, the city streets above the waterways had been filled with shops and passersby. This new part of the city, however, seemed to feature no stores at all, and no people, either. There were buildings, however—big ones. As far as I could tell, the whole area was full of nothing but storehouses.

“Ooh! This is it! This has to be it!” shouted Canhein, her eyes sparkling with glee.

In a corner of the area, I could see a storehouse featuring a logo that looked like a large skull and a naga. That, I figured, had to be Ten Thousand Dragons’ building.

“We made it! Thanks, Captain!” I said.

“Oh, I didn’t dooo anything much. Just triiial and error, that’s all.”

She was still smirking, but she was right: She really had just tried random options until something happened to work. I certainly hadn’t noticed her putting on a display of skillful helmsmanship or anything.

“And with thaaat, our job here is finished. The rest is uuup to you two.”

That’s right. Now we just have to deal with the storehouse itself.

“Oh, but heeere. Consider this a liiittle souvenir,” she added, handing me and Canhein a pair of what looked like small boxes. “They’re your captain’s speeecal-made fish lunch boxes. If you get lost in the storehouse, taaake a break and have something to eat.”

“Oh, thank you! That’s so thoughtful—I really appreciate it!” I said.

“Indeed!” agreed Canhein. “I’ll repay this favor someday, Captain! In fact, I’ll be sending a letter of thanks to you in short order, so I’d appreciate if I could

get your address!”

She knows sending a letter like that is just going to make her address even more well-known, right? Then again, I guess nobody’s out to arrest her right now, so it’s probably not an issue.



After Canhein and I said a relatively touching good-bye to the captain, we made our way into the storehouse. Canhein had the key on hand—apparently, Sorya had mailed it to her with the store’s formal authorization to go inside.

About a minute after we stepped into the storehouse, I came to a stop.

“Hey, Canhein? One of us has to say it, so mind if I do the honors?”

“Go right ahead.”

“The captain is long gone, so why’re the skeletons still here?!”

Indeed—the skeletons that had been rowing the boat had disembarked and followed along after us.

“Oh, the captain explained that. She said they were interested in storehouses, so she told them to go take a look. According to her, they’re not slow enough to hold us back and won’t get in the way.”

“Right, I don’t doubt that. It just feels weird to bid someone an emotional good-bye, only to have her skeletons tromp in after us...”

I guess we were saying good-bye to the captain and only the captain.

“Anyway,” I continued. “I know this is supposed to be a storehouse, but considering how big it is, we might as well call it a dungeon.”

The storehouse’s interior was dimly lit, and the passageways between the boxes were narrow and convoluted. It didn’t feel cavernous, per se, but it did sort of feel like we were exploring an ancient, deserted tower.

“Well, this storehouse does belong to one of the largest dealers in the antique business,” said Canhein. “It’s no surprise that it’s so huge! I wouldn’t have asked for the Witch of the Highlands’ help if I wasn’t expecting it to be at least a little dangerous!”

Is it just me, or is she bragging about a lot of weird things this time around?

“By the way, Miss Witch of the Highlands, I— Wait, what are these suits of armor?”

“Armor? I mean, they’re probably antiques, right? Which ones?” I asked, turning around...to find Canhein surrounded by what looked like suits of living armor! “We’re in trouble already?! Seriously?!”

“Hmph! The likes of you could never apprehend the great Phantom Thief Canhein... Ah, wait, no, put away the swords, please! I can’t handle the sight of blood, so can we settle this with a game or something where I won’t get hurt?”

The second the suits of living armor drew their swords, Canhein started groveling. *I guess it was a good idea for me to come along... Nobody wants a dead phantom thief in their storehouse.*

“All right, I’ll take care of these. Shouldn’t take more than a punch to break them,” I said, giving my arm a few swings to warm up as I stepped forward.

“Ah, Miss Witch of the Highlands, wait! Don’t!”

“Why not? Did you come up with a plan to take care of them yourself?”

Canhein grabbed what looked like a tag dangling from one of the suits of armor.

“Look! It says these cost two hundred and fifty thousand koinne! Living armor’s expensive, and if you break it, you buy it!”

“Those things are merchandise?!”

“Sorry to ask this, but could you figure out a way to save me without damaging them?! I’ll have to pay a ton of money for breach of contract if you destroy them!”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a phantom thief?!”

“I am, but right now, I’m under contract to clean this storehouse! There was a clause about not damaging any of the merchandise, too!” Canhein pulled out the contract in question, as if I was going to stop and read it mid-crisis.

Apparently, getting formal approval for your breakin (if we could even call it

that anymore) came with its fair share of difficulties. She had a point, though, so instead of punching the living armor to pieces, I put one of them in a full nelson.

“Now’s your chance!” I shouted. “Run!”

“Many thanks! Wait...*agh!* I’m pinned between two of the other ones now!”

What a weakling! This phantom thief’s pathetic!

When I heard the words *phantom thief*, I pictured a daring, capable criminal like You-Know-Who the Third, not someone whose only talent was her thickheaded stubbornness.

In fact, I’m starting to think that even Halkara would be more capable in a fight than Canhein... Maybe elves’ bodies are naturally weak... Come to think of it, I feel like whenever they showed up in games, they were always portrayed as being good at magic but bad at physical combat.

I took on the suits of living armor one by one, immobilizing them from behind and then gently laying them out onto the ground.

“This is such a pain... I could finish them off in an instant if I was just allowed to attack them,” I grumbled.

“Please don’t,” said Canhein. “I’m begging you, be merciful!”

“At this rate, you might as well just pay for Marquis Sore Loser’s relics and spare yourself the trouble!”

“W-well, I mean...I can’t! My pride as a phantom thief won’t let me!”

“Since when have you had any pride?!”

I’d seen plenty of people in my past life who’d destroyed their reputation for the sake of pride or who’d been too full of themselves to suck it up and apologize when they were clearly in the wrong, eventually just fading out of the public eye... But even with those people in mind, this seemed like a rare and extreme case.

“I’m well aware that I’m weak, but I’ll never, ever give up!” Canhein shouted. “Willpower’s all I’ve got! I’ll stay stubborn till the day I die, and that means as long as I’m alive, I’m still winning!”

“How big of a sore loser can you possibly be?!”

I guess that's just proof that the blood of Marquis Sore Loser flows through her veins. In that sense, maybe all of this was a genuine lifestyle choice on her part. I smiled.

“All right, then. Go ahead and be as stubborn as you want to.”

“Will do, but at the moment, I'm surrounded by another four sets of living armor...”

“Never mind! You're too weak for your own good!”

You could at least work on some agility, for crying out loud! What a mess. She's boxed in so perfectly, I don't know if I'll be able to get her out of there without damaging any of the suits of armor...

“I regret nothing! And having no regrets means I've emerged victorious!”

Stop acting like you're about to die! It's not that bad, dang it!

“I shall compose a verse to mark my passing: I have won *I say I won, so I won* I didn't lose, which by extension means I won / If you die smiling, doesn't that mean you won in the end?”

“You're a terrible poet! Having a verse like that mark your death would make you a laughingstock for all eternity...”

“What?! I can't have that! Someone ghostwrite a death poem for me!”

“Asking someone else to write your death poem would be even more humiliating than writing a terrible one yourself!”

This is hopeless. I might have to break a couple of them to open up an escape route. I can't let her get killed when we've barely walked in the front door, and there's no telling how many suits of armor there are. I can afford it, right?

Before I could put that plan into action, however, backup arrived in an unexpected form.

“A-all of you! You're fighting for my sake...?!” Canhein gasped as the skeletons converged on the living armor, grappling with them and preventing them from attacking her! With their help, she was finally able to escape from the circle of

armor she'd been trapped in.

"Nice work, skeletons!" I called out.

"Thank you!" Canhein shouted. "Thank you so much! Now we won't have to damage them after all! I won't have to buy any armor!"

Wow, you really hate the idea of paying for those things...

One of the skeletons managed to look away from the melee for just long enough to give us a nod. I figured it was trying to tell us, "We'll handle these guys, so you two should go on ahead!"

"I swear I won't forget this, skeletons... Don't you dare go and die on me!" shouted Canhein.

"Um, so, I know this is a pretty heated moment and all, but for the record—"

"Yes, I know! They're skeletons, so they're already dead! It's just good manners to say something like that when someone's sacrificing themselves!"

Part of me thought that logic was downright farcical...but on the other hand, this whole job had been a farce from the moment we got permission from the antique shop to rob their storehouse, so I couldn't muster up the energy to care.



Canhein and I proceeded deeper and deeper into the storehouse.

"You can tell this place is full of demon antiques," said Canhein. "I don't think I've ever felt so terrified before!"

"Yeah, if a normal person wandered in here, they might not make it out alive."

The living armor probably would have been too much for most people. Not a lot of storehouses required you to risk your life upon entry, so it seemed my initial impression that this was more like a dungeon was right on the mark. The one big difference was that the encounter rate was much lower here. We hadn't run into any enemies since the living armor.

Sure would be nice if we could make it all the way to Marquis Sore Loser's painting without running into any other nasties.

“Oh, right,” I said. “Didn’t Sorya—the owner, I mean—ask you to do something else while you were here?”

“Oh yes,” said Canhein. “She said the mimic population in this storehouse was on the rise and asked me to deal with them. There was a letter about it in the same envelope as the contract I signed. The contract also specified that the mimics aren’t to be considered merchandise.”

Right, that! Sorya wanted her to deal with a mimic infestation! “Yeah, that’s what I was thinking about. Mimics are monsters that you might find when you open treasure chests, right?”

I’d asked Shalsha to tell me about mimics after my conversation with Sorya, and she’d confirmed that my image of treasure chest-shaped monsters was accurate in this world.

“In that case, I guess we’d better not open any random chests...though actually, we can’t exterminate them if we don’t find them, can we? I don’t really like the sound of falling into a mimic’s trap on purpose, but I can’t think of any other way to pick them out.”

In the end, however, we didn’t need to bother looking for them. They found us—by which I mean we came to a part of the storehouse where the path was blocked off by a veritable mountain of treasure chests.

“Not exactly trying to hide, are they?”

“All right, then! Why don’t I go ahead and open one up?” Canhein said as she quietly stepped up to the treasure chests. Before she had the chance to touch any, one of them snapped open.

“Rawr! Rawr, rawr!” roared the treasure chest. I could now see it had rows of what looked like teeth inside it.

“Yikes!” I yelped. “Those look sharp! I wouldn’t wanna get bitten by one of those things!”

They really have made this place into their breeding ground, huh? Not that I know how mimics breed, of course. Guess we should take these ones out, to start.

I got ready to mop up the monsters with some ice magic. “No need to bother with a magic circle. I’ll just freeze them all up, nice and quick...”

Using ice magic would let me attack the mimics with pinpoint precision, leaving the rest of the storehouse’s contents as undamaged as possible—unlike, say, fire magic. Or at least, that was the plan...

“Actually, wait a second.”

...until I realized something and cut off my spell.

“Huh? What is it?” asked Canhein. “I’m pretty sure this whole mountain of chests is made up of mimics.” Her confusion was reasonable, considering that it probably looked like I’d randomly decided not to accomplish our big objective.

“Well, I mean, I would take them all out if they were swarming in to attack us, but look,” I said, turning back toward the chests. Not even one of them showed any sign of opening up and trying to make a meal out of us. “The mimics aren’t going out of their way to attack us, are they? I don’t really like the idea of striking the first blow here. They’re probably pests from the owner’s point of view, but I just can’t bring myself to casually exterminate them.”

I wasn’t so arrogant that I believed I could go through life without killing a single creature, and if somebody told me I was stroking my ego by sparing the mimics, I wouldn’t be able to argue with them. I’d earned my keep for hundreds of years by killing slimes, for crying out loud, and I’d also culled boars when they were threatening to throw the ecosystem out of balance.

Killing was killing, no matter what reasons I’d had at the time. The way I saw it, not even converting to vegetarianism would be enough to escape that reality. Plants were alive, too, for one thing, and as Sandra and Miyu proved, the line between plant and animal could get pretty blurry in this world from time to time. In short, I knew very well that where I drew the line between creatures that were and weren’t okay to kill was entirely arbitrary...

...but I still couldn’t bring myself to attack the mimics.

“I understand,” said Canhein with a nod. Apparently, she was a phantom thief with a heart of gold. “It’s natural that you’d hesitate to attack something that’s just sitting there, looking like a plain old box—”

Then one of the mimics sank its teeth right into Canhein's head!

"Ow! There was one behind me?! Why, you miserable little matchbox! Die! Die, damn you!"

"Never mind, they definitely attack people! Also, language, sheesh!"

Before I could react, Canhein had already yanked the mimic off her head and hurled it away. It promptly resumed acting like an innocent treasure chest. *It's a little late to try that again.*

"Apparently, they think biting *me* is perfectly fine...", Canhein grumbled.

I guess they're more or less wild animals, so maybe they have an intuitive sense for how strong their opponent is... I'm obviously the more powerful one, after all...

"But I was not defeated—and thus, I emerge victorious!"

Good thing she's so positive, I guess.

"For now, Miss Witch of the Highlands, I think we should proceed toward my objective, the painting by Marquis Sore Loser. We can think about how to deal with the mimics after we've obtained it, yes?" She must have realized I was conflicted, and personally, I was grateful for the suggestion. "Oh, and incidentally, I'd assumed it had been a while since anyone came in here, given the mimic problem, but this place doesn't seem very dusty to me at all. In fact, it's quite tidy."

"Now that you mention it, you're right. The floor's spotless, and the antiques look nice and clean, too." Overall, the place was much more well-maintained than I'd expected. "But yeah, let's head for Marquis Sore Loser's painting."

Once again, we made our way deeper into the storehouse...and this time, we found what seemed to be the painting we were looking for without any trouble. Canhein pulled it out from the piles of antiques, and at a glance, it was a totally average landscape painting. The only thing that stood out about it was that it seemed rather flat.

"Ooh, this is it! There's no mistaking it! This crude, unsophisticated brushwork! The utter lack of perspective! The choice of colors so profoundly

conservative, it lacks the slightest spark of creativity! This is a painting that a true aficionado of the arts would have nothing to say about whatsoever—the work of an amateur bringing every bit of their nonexistent talent to bear! This could only have been painted by Marquis Sore Loser!”

Canhein smiled broadly as a torrent of scathing criticism poured out of her mouth. *I know you're happy we found it, but isn't that a little much?*

“Good for you. Nice that it was so easy to find, huh?” I said. It would’ve been an enormous pain if we’d had to check through all the boxes one by one.

“Indeed! Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but I am a phantom thief. I’m well trained in the arts, so I was able to locate it in an instant!” said Canhein, suddenly full of confidence. “I could tell that the paintings in this section of the storehouse were all nearly worthless, and that meant Marquis Sore Loser’s painting couldn’t possibly be anywhere else! It wouldn’t even count as an antique if it hadn’t been painted by nobility!”

“You’re really dead set on dragging your ancestor’s name through the mud, aren’t you?” I wondered if Marquis Sore Loser would be proud to have someone take so much interest in his paintings. “Is it really that bad, though? I feel like I’ve seen way worse paintings than this, personally.”

In my past life, I’d never been able to tell the difference between the paintings I saw in personal exhibitions in the city and the ones in art museums that were supposed to be masterpieces. I’m sure an expert could’ve explained why they were worlds apart, but personally, if one of my daughters had produced Marquis Sore Loser’s painting, I would’ve thought she had incredible talent.

“A few years after Marquis Sore Loser unveiled this painting, it was discovered that it was a rip-off of another artist’s work.”

“He was a plagiarist?!”

“And needless to say, in terms of artistic quality, Marquis Sore Loser’s painting was inferior. When he first unveiled the piece, it was widely perceived as somewhat unimpressive for an amateur’s work, and when it was discovered that it was a rip-off, people were aghast that someone could copy another artist’s painting and yet somehow end up with something so mediocre. Worse

still, even though it was plain to see that the Marquis's painting was the rip-off, he laid into the original's creator and made all sorts of unreasonable demands..."

So he refused to accept that he'd lost, even after he copied someone, huh...?

"Thanks to this painting, he became known far and wide as a truly pitiful man. That cringe-inducing reputation, in a backward sort of way, actually enhanced the painting's value—hence why the antique dealers bothered to obtain it, I assume... In short, it's a mark of shame on my family's history, and so I have to steal it..."

"Okay. Go ahead and steal away..."

Not like I have any reason to stop her, considering she's stealing it with the current owner's permission.

We headed back the way we came, Canhein dragging the painting along behind her.

"Now that we've been all the way to the back of the storehouse, I have to admit I'm impressed by how well-kept it is," Canhein said on our way out.

"Right? I barely saw a speck of dust. Do you think they already have someone who comes in to clean the place up?"

In that case, was Sorya hiring Canhein to clean the place really just an elaborate way of giving the painting to her? Considering its lack of value, I could see her offering to give it away for free, but maybe she'd known that Canhein's pride as a phantom thief wouldn't allow her to accept it. She would've also known that if Canhein broke in on her own, she'd be attacked by living armor and mimics. That would explain why she'd called me in, using the story about the cleaning the place and controlling the mimic infestation as an excuse.

One thing's for sure: If an ordinary person got boxed in by those suits of living armor, they'd be lucky to get out of this storehouse alive... Anyway, it's only a matter of time before we get back to the mountain of mimics. I'll have to decide if I should take out monsters even if they have no interest in attacking me.

Before long, Canhein and I arrived at the place where the mimics had gathered—and there, we witnessed a behavior we hadn't seen before. The

mimics were silently moving around, so busily engaged that they didn't spare us so much as a glance.

"Huh. Well, that answers a lot of my questions about how mimics work."

"This storehouse is an ecosystem in its own right, isn't it, Miss Witch of the Highlands?"

That felt like a bit of an exaggeration to me, but on the other hand, she wasn't totally off the mark. In any case, we spent a little while just watching the mimics do their thing.

After a while, Canhein exclaimed, "Oh, that's right! I forgot about the lunch boxes the captain gave us!" We hadn't found a nice spot in the storehouse to stop and eat, and more importantly, we'd located our target item so easily that there hadn't been a suitable moment for it. "This seems as good a time and place as any to partake, don't you think?"

I wasn't about to argue with that. We cracked the lunch boxes open and dug in, watching the mimics all the while. It seemed that as long as we didn't get too close, they wouldn't attack us even if we weren't keeping a careful eye on them.

That said, something slightly odd did happen after we'd finished eating and continued on our way.



Canhein and I—as well as the skeletons who'd held back the suits of living armor—left the storehouse and climbed aboard the boat once more. The skeletons were a little worse for the wear, but apparently, that wasn't a huge issue for them.

"Well, I'm glaaad to see the two of you were successful," said Captain Imremico. "And you're leeeaving with more than just a painting, I see!"

"Yeah, we have a little more luggage than we originally planned for," I said. "The skeletons were a big help, by the way."

While we were in the storehouse, Captain Imremico had apparently been fishing. She'd caught an impressive haul, and a bucket in the corner of the boat was full of fish, still swimming around.

“By the waaay, how were your lunch boxes?” the captain casually asked.

“Oh, they were great! We ate with the mimics.”

“With the mimiics?”

Yep. That’s the truth, all right.

We made it back to the dock where we’d first boarded the ship and said our good-byes to the captain and her skeleton crew, pausing to thank the skeletons one more time. Then we boarded our wyverns and flew off toward the Vanzeld branch of Ten Thousand Dragons.

I’d never been there before, but the giant skull on their sign made it easy to find. I had to wonder why the store had *dragon* in its name, considering there was nothing draconic about its exterior whatsoever. It actually looked more like a haunted house. Then again, it was quite common for stores back in Japan to mash together unrelated words that just sounded sorta nice and call it a name, and when I thought about it in that light, it seemed perfectly normal.

Stepping into the shop felt like setting foot in a museum. The one big difference was that the merchandise was packed much more densely here. The point was to sell the antiques, not just to show them off, and the way they were displayed spoke to that difference in priorities.

Sorya was waiting for us in the store’s reception room. “Thank you for your hard work,” she said as we stepped inside. “I’m impressed that you managed to make it past the waterways.”

Yeah, that was no walk in the park... Was she expecting us to get so frustrated we turned back...?

“That branch’s storehouse is so inconvenient to get to that it’s been a very long time since anyone’s been inside it. I’m sure the dust alone was terrible, and I can’t imagine how many mimics you must have seen.”

“About that, actually—we decided that it would be better for the environment in the storehouse if we let the mimics be.”

Sorya’s eyelids fluttered behind the lenses of her glasses. She clearly didn’t know what to make of that. “I’d appreciate the details, please,” she said.

“The storehouse was spotless. Not a trace of dust to be seen.”

“What? But that can’t possibly be true...”

“It’s the mimics. They’ve been licking the floors clean. It turns out that mimics eat dust.”

Thinking back, there was basically nothing worth eating in the storehouse. Maybe there were a few mice or some bugs somewhere, but there certainly weren’t many of them—we hadn’t seen any traces of mice gnawing at the antiques, after all. That was what led me to a simple conclusion: The mimics had been feeding on the dust that built up on the storehouse’s floor.

If there hadn’t been any mimics in there, I had a feeling the storehouse would’ve been buried in dust. Sorya might determine that dealing with dust was better than dealing with mimics, of course—dust, after all, didn’t try to eat people—but I’d decided it would be better to wait and see how she reacted, as I now explained.

“I see,” said Sorya. “I think I understand the situation. We have enough people moving in and out of the main branch’s storehouse that mimics have never had the chance to infest it, so I had no idea they could be an effective means of controlling dust.”

To be fair, I think that mimics living in a storehouse is a bit of a special case.

“I think I’ll respect your decision,” she continued. “If those mimics really do eat dust, then we might even be able to train them to keep the main branch clean as well. That would certainly save us time and effort.”

I was relieved to see that Sorya understood where we were coming from. “Actually, about that,” I began.



At the same time, Canhein carefully held a treasure chest out toward Sorya... and moments later, it popped open to reveal a mouth.

“A few mimics followed us out of the storehouse. Would you like us to leave them here with you?” Canhein offered.

“If not, I figured we could just leave them in an abandoned house somewhere,” I said. Dumping mimics might have environmental repercussions, but I didn’t know if the demon lands had any rules about that sort of thing. If it was a problem, I certainly wasn’t aware of it.

It had happened right after we finished eating lunch. A few mimics had approached us from behind, hopping their way toward us. They hadn’t shown any signs of hostility, so we’d ignored them, and in the end, they’d followed us all the way outside. By the time we reached the boat, we figured the little guys were in it for the long haul, so we brought them aboard and then carried them on our wyverns.

Maybe that’s how mimics migrate to new homes.

“Well then, I’ll certainly give that a try,” said Sorya. “We demons have done very little research into mimic ecology, so this will be a valuable learning opportunity.”

If they subsequently discovered that mimics were more valuable creatures than previously assumed, that would be more than enough for me.

On our way out, Canhein handed over a payment of one hundred and fifty thousand koinne to me. We hadn’t actually killed any of the mimics, but it seemed that Sorya had paid her the full amount stated in her contract regardless. The Appraisal Knights were a generous order.

“Thanks to you, I’ve recovered another shameful trace of my family’s history,” said Canhein. “You have my gratitude.”

“No problem. Just don’t do anything too crazy, okay?” I replied.

“Worry not! So long as my family’s shameful history remains, I will never die!”

What an unpleasant thing to structure your identity around... But if it’s motivating her, I suppose that’s all right.



After that, it was time for me to head home to the house in the highlands with a little extra baggage in tow.

As soon as I got back, I picked out an unoccupied room in my house and posted a DANGER! DO NOT ENTER! sign on its door. I didn't think just opening the door would put anyone in danger, but I figured it'd be better to err on the side of caution. Then I brought the girls in to observe our new resident while I watched over the interaction, just to be safe.

"Oh, look! It's eating, it's eating! ♪"

"That's a behavior people would ordinarily never get to witness. This is a precious opportunity indeed."

The creature Falfa and Shalsha were carefully watching was a single mimic that hadn't wanted to stay behind at the antique shop and had instead followed me all the way home. I'd figured if it was that determined to come with me, I might as well take it home and leave it in one of our empty rooms. And the moment I set it down in its new home, it had started licking up all the dust its tongue could reach.

That settles it—they really do live on a dust diet.

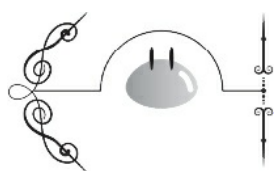
"Don't get too close to it, okay? It might bite you! We'll have to see if we can domesticate it going forward."

"This means we won't have to bother cleaning the empty rooms anymore, right? ♪" asked Falfa.

Yep. That's what I was after, all right.

The way I saw it, if the mimic kept the house clean and the house's dust kept the mimic fed, that was a win-win relationship for the both of us. Plus, it was a living creature, so it seemed like a good opportunity to teach the girls about raising an animal, just like getting them a pet.

And so one of our empty rooms was given to our new mimic housemate.



WE MET A HERMIT WHO WAS

FAMOUS FOR FASTING



“It sure has been a while since we’ve been here, hasn’t it?”

“It has, yes, though I must confess I find the weather a little too cold for my liking.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, Laika—let’s hurry inside!”

We had arrived at Mount Modadiana, a desolate, mostly treeless mountain home to the workshop of the Wizard Slime, aka Wizly. That workshop was right in front of us, and I’d come bearing plenty of gifts for its occupant. Wizly lived in a seriously inconvenient location, so I figured she’d appreciate them.

My hands were full of said gifts, so Laika knocked on the door in my place. A blond-haired girl—Wizly herself—opened it up barely a moment later.

“Yes, who is it...? Oh! Well, if it isn’t the Witch of the Highlands and her apprentice!”

I took a moment to appreciate how understated Wizly’s reactions were. Most people I knew tended to blow everything out of proportion, so it was a relief to interact with someone like Wizly every once in a while. The people of Flatta were a bombastic bunch on the whole...

“It’s nice to see you again,” I said. “You’ve done a lot for my (step-)daughter, so I wanted to stop by and say thanks.”

“Your daughter? Oh, you must mean Wynona! You didn’t have to come all the way here just for that, you know.”

Wynona was Wizly’s apprentice in magic. Granted, all this had happened long before I met her, but she was still my (step)daughter, and I felt an obligation to

thank Wizly for her help in whatever way I could.

I carefully set the parcels I was carrying down on the table. There wasn't all that much to Wizly's workshop aside from a table, incidentally. She barely had to eat, being a slime, so her lodgings didn't feature a kitchen, bed, or toilet. It was a very simple building all around.

"I had no idea what you'd like as a gift," I explained. "So I asked Smarsly, who said artifacts like these would be a good choice."

"Oh? Let me see... Ah, these are certainly some nice talismans! And this is a splendid amulet as well. Oh, and I see you brought a mana storage tool!"

Wizly opened the packages I'd brought one by one. *All right, I thought. That's our biggest objective complete!*

"I believe we can call this a success, Lady Azusa," Laika said as she turned to face me. I gave her a look signaling my agreement.

The question is, how will she react when she opens that box?

Wizly kept opening packages until suddenly, she came to a stop. "Oh! This is certainly a surprise," she said.

You don't sound very surprised to me...

The box she'd just opened contained none other than Smarsly itself. Just to be clear, we hadn't packed it up in a box against its will! It had asked us to take it to Wizly for a visit, and it had personally suggested that we carry it in a box. I offered to bring it along in a more normal way, but Smarsly had replied that it enjoyed being shut up in tight spaces to be alone with its thoughts every once in a while.

Less think tank, more think box, I guess. It wasn't like Smarsly was in any danger of suffocating to death, so I'd packed it into the box and carried it along with the others as requested.

Smarsly bounced excitedly. It seemed full of energy, which was nice to see. It was never easy to tell how a slime was feeling, but I'd found that as a general rule, hopping was a sign they were doing just fine.

"Oh, now this takes me back. I used to pack myself into boxes all the time as

well.”

“You’ve done that, too, Wizly?”

It wasn’t me asking this time—Laika beat me to the punch. Apparently, two out of four people in our group had been stuffed into boxes at some point in their lives.

Maybe this is just normal for slimes.

“Yes, I have,” said Wizly. “I was particularly fond of boxes that had been used to store sweets. Sometimes, you can just barely smell whatever treat used to be packaged in them.”

“That’s a less intellectual motive than I was anticipating,” Laika remarked. She seemed a little taken aback at Wizly’s reasoning, which was a lot more worldly than Smarsly’s.

Smarsly itself was still hopping away in front of Wizly as Wizly gave it the occasional understanding nod.

“I see, I see,” said Wizly. “That’s an option, certainly, but I can’t say I would recommend it. If you’re really certain, I can at least point you in the right direction. Hmm, hmm... You learned the value of meeting new people from an encounter with one of the three great sages? Fascinating.”

“...So, um—how are you two, you know, communicating?” I asked, interrupting the exchange. From what I could tell, all Smarsly was doing was hopping around.

“Oh, you can’t tell?” asked Wizly. “Right now, the slime I’m speaking with, ummm...you call it Smarsly, I believe?”

“Yeah. I know most slimes don’t have names, so I came up with something I thought sounded cool.”

“Lady Azusa? Are you truly under the impression that Smarsly’s name is ‘cool’...?”

Well, that’s not the reaction I expected from my apprentice. Hmm... Do I have weird taste in names?

You know what, I’ll unpack that some other time.

“You see,” said Wizly, “Smarsly was just saying, *If you know anything about the rest of the three great sages, please let me know. Meeting with the dryad sage Miyu-miyu Kuzzoco was extremely informative.*”

“How exactly did you get all of that out of a few jumps?” I asked.

Smarsly jumped again.

“Did you see how when Smarsly jumped just now, its body was turned slightly away from me, and it reached a middling height? That conveyed the meaning *If you know anything about the rest of the three great sages, please let me know.*”

“I don’t get it. This is all way beyond me.” *How could “the three great sages” be packed into a single jump? That’s not exactly an everyday phrase!*

“It’s a perfectly normal way of communicating for us slimes. Like, for instance... Oh, I know—Smarsly, would you show us an example, please?”

Smarsly hopped out of its box. It must have made it at least a half meter into the air that time. As far as hops went, it was a pretty impressive one.

“That meant ‘*Words only carry meaning when spoken to one with whom you share a tongue. That, in and of itself, proves language’s inherent limitations.*’ - The Collected Proverbs of Alcei, Volume 5.”

“You have got to be kidding me! It cited a book, by name, in a single jump?!”

“I was watching closely as well,” said Laika, “and I have to agree that seems simply impossible!” Both of us non-slimes were having a really hard time accepting this situation.

“Oh, to be fair, not even slimes can express proper nouns through jumping alone. Smarsly didn’t just jump, though—it also raised a very slight protuberance on its back half.”

Smarsly seemed to nod toward us. *I guess Wizly’s telling the truth.*

“For slimes in the know, that particular gesture instantly indicates that it was referring to *The Collected Proverbs of Alcei, Volume 5.*”

“Oh, that makes sense—not! It makes no sense at all! I can tell you two are communicating somehow, but...”

Is this sort of like how computers can autofill whole phrases from just a couple letters, if you set them up right...?

“It seems that when Smarsly met with the individual named Miyu-miyu Kuzzoco, one of the three great sages, it discovered that speaking with her granted it a wealth of information that reading books on its own could never have provided. That was an eye-opening experience, and now that it knows how much it has to gain from speaking with fellow scholars, it’s decided that it wants to seek out other sages, and so it asked me where it could find them.”

Once again, Smarsly seemed to nod in agreement with Wizly’s words. Incidentally, it didn’t really matter, but every time I heard someone say Miyu’s full name, it struck me how strange it sounded...

“Well, I certainly understand how Smarsly feels there,” I said. “But...well, I have a feeling that’s something of a big ask, for all sorts of reasons.”

“Why would you say that?” Wizly asked as she laid a hand on her table. There was only one chair in the whole workshop, so all of us were currently standing. In her defense, she couldn’t have expected many visitors way out here.

“Because if you go out and meet all of the three great sages you can find, you’ll run out in no time at all. It’s not like they’re that easy to stumble across, right?”

Now, I knew perfectly well that there were a lot more than three people who fell into the “three great sages” category. As it happened, if someone wasn’t confident enough to call themselves the greatest or second-greatest sage, they could just say they were one of the top three and get away with it. It reminded me of how back in Japan a list of the three greatest Inari shrines would always include the Fushimi Inari Shrine and the Toyokawa Inari Shrine, but when it came to the third spot, a bunch of different shrines would insist it belonged to them.

That said, the number of shrines vying for third place wasn’t in the hundreds or anything. There was a limit, even if that limit was a bit bigger than three. *And come to think of it, isn’t the phrasing the three great whatever’s a Japanese thing to begin with? I figure every culture around the world has something equivalent, though...*

At that point, Wizly walked over to her shelf and pulled out a book.

“Why don’t we look some up in the *Three Great Sages Encyclopedia*?”

“There’s a book about something that incredibly specific?”

“It lists every individual in the world who has claimed to be one of its three greatest sages—roughly three thousand of them, in total.”

“Never mind! With numbers like that, no wonder there’s an encyclopedia!”

“In this book, a team of five sagely reviewers have assigned a score from one to ten to each of the three great sages included, for a potential aggregate score of up to fifty points.”

“Isn’t it kinda rude to grade someone who might be one of the world’s three great sages on a point-based scale...?”

“As a side note, when asked to rate their own credentials, each of the reviewers gave themselves a perfect score.”

“So much for their credibility!” *That’s the worst thing you could do in a position like that!*

“Well, I won’t pretend the system’s perfect, but thanks to them, we at least have a basic number we can use to get a gist of all our options. Most of the sages who scored in the forties have already passed away, so we can skip over them. It’s hard to speak poorly of the dead, after all—you know how it goes.” As Wizly spoke, she started flipping through the book’s index.

Nothing about this seems even slightly sagely.

“On the other hand, the sages who scored around ten points are mostly cringey posers, so there’s no point whatsoever in seeking them out. Take this individual, for instance, who founded a company that made a killing, then put out an autobiography in which they referred to themselves as a sage. That’s their only claim to the title.”

“Why would they even include someone like that in the book...?”

I guess that means company founders like writing autobiographies in this world, too. If Halkara ever tries writing one, I’ll have to remember to make her stop. She’s free to do whatever she wants, of course, but I know for a fact that if

she publishes anything like that, she'll end up so humiliated she'll want to tear her own hair out.

“Um, Miss Wizly...?” said Laika. “I think we understand that some of the sages won’t be helpful to us, so perhaps we should move on to learning about the ones who are actually worth visiting?” She looked as exhausted as I felt. This had been a draining digression.

“Yes, of course!” replied Wizly. “The most reliable sages are those who rank in the thirties. There’s Millhent the Frugal, for instance, and then there’s Sortorhein the Inspired, Laika the Bashful, Nansetes the Pessimistic...”

“One of those names sounded awfully familiar!” *She definitely just said Laika, didn’t she?!*”

“P-please calm down, Lady Azusa!” said Laika. “My name isn’t especially rare. I’m certain it’s just a coincidence.”

Wizly flipped through the encyclopedia. “Let’s see here... Ah, found her! She lives in the province of Nanterre, it seems, so she’s right nearby! It says she’s *A graduate of the Red-Dragon Academy for Girls. She came to be called Laika the Bashful due to her endearingly bashful performance as a café waitress. Her dedication to self-improvement is commendable.*”

“That’s literally just our Laika!”

“Aaaaaaugh! How did this even happen?! I don’t understand! When have I ever called myself one of the three great sages?!”

Laika buried her face in her hands as she wailed. *I feel you, girl!*

“Um, well,” Wizly muttered awkwardly, “one of the reviewers gave her a perfect ten out of ten. They wrote *I want to spread the word about her far and wide. I’ll cheer her on, no matter what she does next.*”

“Sounds like that reviewer’s just a fan.” *And this encyclopedia’s credibility is plummeting further and further by the second!*

“Well, that’s just how it goes. They put as many people as possible into books like these, in the hopes that the sages themselves will want to buy them. Encyclopedias are quite expensive, so every single sale is important.”

I'd prefer not to learn any more about the dark side of the publishing industry.

“Even the eccentric company founder got in. I think they were hoping they'd get lucky and he'd buy a few dozen copies to pass out to his subordinates.”

“First things first: Can we all agree that anyone involved in publishing that book doesn't deserve to call themselves a sage?”

It seems like everyone in this world will do anything for money, doesn't it? Lately, I've been running into stuff like this a lot.

“Now, now,” said Wizly. “Some of the people listed are reasonable, I assure you! Take, um... Ah, here's one! *Moryake the Abstemious. Total score: thirty-four out of fifty. An asphalt spirit who lives in the desert, quietly devoting herself to long-term fasting.* How about her?”

This one actually sounds pretty decent. The part about her being an asphalt spirit had me a little curious, but my understanding was that asphalt could occur naturally and was used even by ancient civilizations back on Earth, so it probably wasn't that strange to find it in this world, too.

Smarsly jumped higher than ever before and landed on the tabletop.

“Oh, is that so?” said Wizly. “Smarsly says, *Sounds good!* I'm glad to hear it.”

“Okay, see, that's simple enough I can actually buy it being communicated through a jump!”

Seriously, that was nothing like those full-blown sentences from before!

“Let's read a little more of her entry, shall we? *Those who wish to meet with Moryake should inquire with a spirit acquaintance or the Desert Talent Agency. Visiting her without an appointment risks disrupting her ascetic training and is strongly discouraged.*”

“Why would a talent agency have anything to do with someone practicing ascetic fasting in a desert...?” Laika asked, cocking her head curiously.

You're asking the right question, Laika.

“I bet so many people started showing up out of nowhere to see her, she decided to tell them to go talk to her agency to get them off her back!” I suggested. “That way she could train without any interruptions! Yeah, that's

gotta be it!”

I wasn’t totally sold on my own logic, but I didn’t want to disappoint Laika. I could tell she was a little interested in the sage already. They seemed to share a drive for self-improvement, after all.

Smarsly jumped so high, it almost touched the ceiling.

“You’d like to speak with her, then?” asked Wizly. “I have to say, Smarsly seems very lively today!”

I actually understood that one. Smarsly’s priority was clearly to go out and meet more sages. Laika also seemed interested in talking with a sage devoted to her training, so I figured the three of us could go to meet Moryake the asphalt spirit together.

And if we’re meeting a spirit, I should first get in touch with Momma Yufufu. She’s so well-connected in the spirit world that even if she can’t get us in touch with Moryake directly, I bet she’ll know something to put us on the right track.



We left Wizly’s workshop and made straight for Momma Yufufu’s house.

“The asphalt spirit? Hmm. What was she like, again?” Momma Yufufu muttered. Judging by that reaction, she barely remembered the sage we were looking for.

“I guess spirits live for such a long time, you’ve probably met more of your kind than you can count, right? No wonder you can’t remember all of them,” I said. “Sorry for asking such a weird question, Momma Yufufu. We’ll just talk to the talent agency like we’re supposed to.”

“Oh, there’s no need to apologize, Azusa! Wait a moment—there’s a book that might have the information you need in it.”

A moment later, Momma Yufufu returned with a book entitled *Spirit Encyclopedia*.

“There’s a book like that for spirits, too?”

“Ah, here she is! *The asphalt spirit: Aligned with the element of earth. Not very sociable*, it says.”

We obtained an incredibly unhelpful piece of information!

“‘Not very sociable’? That’s less a description and more an insult,” I muttered.

“This was bound to happen, I’m afraid. This book was written by spirits, for spirits, and carelessness runs rampant among our kind. This printing technically came out a little over a century ago, but the text hasn’t been edited at all for more than a millennium.”

Once again, my one big takeaway was that the vast majority of spirits were extremely irresponsible.

“That must mean Falfa and Shalsha aren’t included yet, huh?” I said. “I guess not having anything written about you is better than having something really weird written about you, though.”

“There’s something seriously wrong with me having an entry in the encyclopedia of sages while Falfa and Shalsha aren’t in the encyclopedia of spirits,” Laika grumbled.

Apparently, she was still dwelling on the fact that she’d been added to the book of sages without her permission. It’d be one thing if people called her a sage on a regular basis, but nobody in Laika’s immediate vicinity—from her family to the people of Flatta to Laika herself—had ever done so...

Anyway, Laika looked so worn-out that Momma Yufufu decided to make a nice, meaty meal for us, presumably to cheer her up.

“An orange juice–based sauce goes remarkably well with meat!” Laika remarked. “It’s faintly sweet and so refreshing.”

“Momma Yufufu’s cooking always has such a perfectly homey touch, doesn’t it?” I agreed. “It almost feels like I grew up eating this every day.”

“Well, the two of you are welcome back home any time you wish,” said Momma Yufufu.

Smarsly, who had come along with us, started shuffling around on a piece of fabric with letters written on it—sort of like a keyboard—that it had laid out on the ground. Apparently, it had something to say.

“What’s that, Smarsly?” I asked. “Let’s see... *Being a literal mother is by no*

means a prerequisite to possessing a motherly nature, huh? Yeah, you might have a point there."

I was pretty sure a droplet spirit like Momma Yufufu didn't have any blood relatives, after all.

Smarsly wasn't done writing just yet.

"Oh, there's more? A picture is worth a thousand words. We should go to the desert and make our own judgments. Yeah, sounds good to me. Why not meet that spirit for ourselves?"

That had been my plan from the beginning, of course. Smarsly wanted to meet more sages, and I wanted to make that happen.

But for now, Smarsly headed home to the demon lands aboard a wyvern—though rather than riding, it was once again packed up into a box. Apparently, it was safer for it to fly that way, since it was less likely to get dropped en route.

It's almost like its luggage, rather than a passenger...



Some time later, we went to the Desert Talent Agency's office and easily received permission to visit Moryake the asphalt spirit. Later still, we received a letter from the agency that detailed the dates she'd be available to meet with us. The letter also included a request that we find a magic streaming celebrity to bring along, if at all possible. Apparently, the idea was that they'd stream our meeting with the sage.

I could practically see the question marks floating above Laika's head—three of them, by my count—when she read that part of the letter. "Why would a magic streamer need to accompany us? Magic streaming is that moving image service largely utilized by the demons, isn't it? I can't see how that could have any real connection to the sage's training."

Recently, the demons had started using technology from the ancient kingdom of the dead to become whatever-tubers. Their streams still played on their own in my house every once in a while, but since I could mute and minimize them whenever I wanted nowadays, I barely ever actually watched them. That hadn't been the case in the early days—the streams had been more or less

compulsory, which was super obnoxious. It had taken a while for them to develop into the kind of “service” Laika was describing.

“To be honest, I don’t think there’s any connection between streaming and her training at all,” I said. “The spirit might have only started working with the agency to stop people from visiting her out of nowhere, but the agency will want to make some money from the arrangement. I’m betting that’s their goal with all this.”

I knew if I were a talent agent, making money off my talents would probably be my highest priority. The question, then, was why magic streaming? But it made sense that a talent agency would be in the know regarding demon technology. I’d heard their streamers had a fair number of viewers and listeners in the human lands, too.

“We have to go back to Vanzeld Castle to pick Smarsly up anyway,” I said. “So I might as well pay *her* a visit while I’m at it.”

Even if I keep quiet, it always turns out she knew about everything anyway, so why not seize the initiative and be the one to involve her for once?



I climbed aboard Laika and set out for Vanzeld Castle. Once we arrived, barely a moment after we stepped inside to meet with Smarsly...

“Elder Sisteer! Leave it to me—I have the most subscribers out of all the top-ranking channels, so I’m just the streamer you need!”

...I found Pecora and Smarsly both standing at the ready, waiting for us.

“You could’ve at least given me a chance to ask first!”

“Sorry, but you were too late! The Desert Talent Agency already contacted me and asked if I could work a sage who’s famous for fasting into one of my streams!”

“So the agency made a move before I had the chance...?”

Clearly, the talent industry was a force to be reckoned with. They’d probably already looked into the state of magic streaming and learned I had a connection with Pecora.

“My subscriber count is in the millions, after all! That sage might already be famous for fasting, but I’ll make her more famous than ever!”

“Wait, in the millions?! That many?! That really is amazing!”

“Magic streaming devices have gotten cheaper lately, which has helped a lot. You can get your hands on one for only a hundred and fifty thousand gold these days!”

That still sounds like a pretty big chunk of change, but I guess it’s not that crazy compared to buying a computer.

“And you need a magic streaming device if you want to control the volume and stuff yourself,” Pecora added.

“Right! That! You kept streaming into my room, and I couldn’t even lower the volume! It was awful!” I’d had no choice but to watch Pecora’s streams back in the day. I didn’t have one of those devices, so there was no way around it. “Also, the sage we’re visiting just wants to quietly train in the desert, so we shouldn’t make her too famous... But I guess it’s not that easy, is it? I’m sure the talent agency wants her to stand out as much as possible. What a dilemma...”

Considering she was living like a hermit in the desert, I felt safe in assuming she didn’t want to stand out. Her agency, however, would have conflicting priorities, and I wasn’t sure what to do about that.

“Oh, I’ll take care of it,” said Pecora. “If the sage doesn’t want to show up on stream, I’ll respect her wishes! I have to be responsible, considering my follower count. I wouldn’t want them to drag her to oblivion, after all!”

So the concept of cyberbullying has made the jump to this world? I’ve been alive for three hundred years, but it feels like civilization’s been advancing in leaps and bounds these past few years alone.



And so I set out for the asphalt spirit’s quiet desert abode, accompanied by Laika, Smarsly, and the demon king—though in this case, it would probably be more accurate to call her Pecora the ultra-popular magic streamer. The trip would be too tiring for Laika to fly us the whole way, so we took wyverns instead.

We touched down in the first town we came to in the desert, where we swapped out our wyverns for camels. I'd recently visited another desert, which had been remarkably different from this one.

Turns out there's more than one type of desert. This one is just as hot, though...

"Hey, are you doing okay, Smarsly? Not going to melt, are you?" I asked.

Smarsly was small enough that it hadn't needed a whole camel to itself, so it had bounced up onto mine and was now riding right in front of me. It sort of wibbled in my direction, which I took to mean it was doing just fine for the time being.

"I would have been able to take us directly to the sage, Lady Azusa," Laika noted. She seemed to be doing better than ever thanks to the heat.

"I know, but she's doing the whole hermit thing, right? I thought a huge dragon showing up and landing next to her home might upset her. I'm betting she'll be a little touchy, so we should tread lightly at the beginning."

This whole excursion had taken a lot of time to prepare for, and the last thing I wanted was for the spirit to get upset and send us home.

"Plus, it's not that far of a trip this time! The camels will get us to her just fine," I added.

Smarsly, meanwhile, spent the whole trip constantly glancing around. Traveling through a desert must have been a real novelty for it.

After two hours of riding through the desert, a small stone building came into view on the horizon.

"That must be where the hermit who's famous for fasting lives!" said Pecora, who was acting like a total tourist by that point.

"Well, it's not like there are any other buildings around. That must be the place," I said.

Smarsly hopped excitedly atop my camel. It was definitely looking forward to this meeting.

The question is, what's she going to be like?

We brought our camels to a stop and approached the building. I knocked on its door.

“Um, excuse me? Is this the local hermit’s home?” I called out.

I barely had to wait a second before the door opened.

“It is, yes. You are indeed speaking with the asphalt spirit, Moryake.”

A short-haired spirit girl stepped out to greet us. The way she was dressed seemed a little shabby to me, though on reflection, spending all your time fasting in the desert would do that to a person.

“We came here to— Actually, no, it’d probably be better to let Smarsly speak for itself,” I said. I laid out the slime’s keyboard-like piece of fabric on the ground, and it immediately started hopping from letter to letter.

“Oh really? You wish to see how a desert hermit lives her life? Very well, then. If you desire to witness my fast, then witness it you shall.”

Her fast, huh? I guess that is what she’s famous for, but is fasting really something you can make a show out of? What is there to watch...?



It's not like we have weeks to stick around and keep an eye on her, and even if we did, wouldn't that be incredibly boring? That said, my initial impression is that she seems calm and reasonable, as far as hermits go. Maybe she's not all talk.

Laika seemed to have high expectations for the spirit as well. In a sense, the house in the highlands was similarly removed from the hustle and bustle of city life. My home's location could have easily been the location of a monastery, and you could say that Laika was leading something of an ascetic lifestyle herself.

※ I said something along those lines to Shalsha once, and she told me, "It's true that our home resembles many people's image of a monastery, Mom. However, monasteries can be built in a variety of locales. Broadly speaking, there are remote monasteries, rural monasteries, and urban monasteries. Out of those three categories, only remote monasteries tend to be built in quiet, secluded places like this. Furthermore, the demographics of our household mean it would be more accurately called a convent rather than a monastery." That whole explanation went straight over my head, though, so I continued to think of Laika as something like an ascetic monk.

At that precise moment, we heard a very loud voice completely unsuited to the solemn atmosphere around us.

"Hello, hellooo! Pecking at your heart and pecking at your eyes, it's Provato Pecora Ariés, on the scene! And boy oh boy, do I have a fun stream in store for you tonight! Don't touch that dial, viewers!"

She's in full-blown whatever-tuber mode!

"Pecora, no! This is really, really not the time for that! At least say hello to her first!"

"Huuuh? But giving the audience the feeling that they're really watching you live is so important! Anyway, today, we'll be paying a visit to a certain hermit whose fasting regime has made her famous! I wonder what sort of fasting techniques she'll share with us? I'd sure love to learn some diet tips while I'm here!"

For a second, I wondered why Pecora was acting like the camera was already rolling—and then I noticed Fighsly off to the side, pointing some sort of weird artifact straight at her!

Okay, so she really is on camera after all... And come to think of it—

“Since when were you here, Fighsly?!”

“I didn’t detect her presence at all,” said Laika. “If she used some sort of martial technique to avoid my notice, then it’s an impressive one indeed...”

Laika may have been impressed, but I was downright confused.

“Huh?” said Pecora. “Oh, we had a lot to prepare for this stream, so she came out yesterday to pregame the place.”

So she was already here! And what do you mean, “pregame the place”? Is that some sort of magic streaming industry slang? You mean she got here yesterday to set up, right?

“Oh my. It’s Pecora herself... You’re a real celebrity,” said Moryake. “I’d like your autograph later, if possible. I’ll have to make an extra effort to show off the grandeur of my fasting.”

I’m starting to get the sense that she’s more famous as a streamer than she is as the demon king...

“She lives in seclusion, but she still wants a celebrity’s autograph...?” Laika muttered skeptically. “That’s a surprisingly worldly desire.”

Oh no. I think our hermit’s mask is already starting to slip.

“Well then, I have prepared everything I need to display my fasting in the next room, so let us begin at once! You shall witness as I emerge victorious against my own hunger!”

With that, Moryake stepped into the next room. The rest of us filed in after her.

“What do you think she needed to prepare before she could fast?” I whispered to Laika.

“I’m afraid I haven’t a clue,” she replied.

The moment I stepped into the room, my eyes fell upon a table...

...that was so covered with extravagant dishes, it looked like a full-course meal laid out all at once!

“This looks more like a feast than a fast!” I shouted, unable to stop myself. “I’m no expert, but doesn’t fasting mean only eating plain bread, water, and salt, or foraging for berries, or something? This is downright lavish!”

“Ooh, excellent callout, Elder Sister! I can always count on you to point the finger at absurdity! You didn’t even hesitate!”

That was a very weird thing for Pecora to compliment me on, but this was no time to get sidetracked, so I ignored her.

“No, no, please, do not misunderstand. This is a fast, I assure you,” Moryake said as she sat down before the full-course meal.

“I shall now sit before this glorious feast and not eat a single bite, withstanding temptation for three hours! Behold the might of ascetic fasting!”

“Way to waste food!”

I mean, that does explain why she had so much to prepare, but in three hours, all that food will be stone-cold, and— Huh? Wait. She said “for three hours,” right...? Yeah, she definitely did, so does that mean...?

“Are you going to eat all that after the three hours are over...?” I asked.

“But of course. It would be truly wasteful to discard food that was prepared with such care. The blessings of the heavens are to be consumed in full, down to the last crumb. That is the proper way to live.”

“You could’ve just not cooked it!”

“Ooh, now what do we have here?” said Pecora. “This is an impressive assortment of scrumptious dishes indeed! I’m starting to feel a little hungry myself!” By now, she had fully shifted into her magic streamer persona.

Just then, Fighsly stepped up to the table and added another dish full of food to it.

“Oh? It’s okay for me to eat that one? Thanks so much! ♪” said Pecora. She

then started chowing down in front of Moryake without missing a beat. “Mmm! ♪ It’s seasoned differently from most demon food, but it’s still very tasty! ♪”

Figsly was still pointing the mystery artifact at Pecora, presumably filming the whole scene. Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, Moryake the hermit was clenching her teeth.

“Delicious! It all looks so delicious, but my fast has only just begun! If I eat now, my training will have been for naught! Endure! Endure, O flesh of mine!”

“Could this possibly get any stupider?!”

“If I just stay strong for a mere three hours more, I will be able to eat my fill! Hunger is the greatest of spices! Until then, I must endure!”

“I knew you were going to stuff your face the second the three hours were up!” I exclaimed. “I don’t know what this is, but it sure isn’t fasting!”

“This is my monumental thousandth fast! I shall not be vanquished!”

She sounds an awful lot like people from my past life who kept trying to quit smoking but couldn’t keep it up. They’d say things like “This is the seventh time I’ve managed to quit,” but they hadn’t really managed to quit at all... Then again, it’s not like she asked us to come out and visit her. This was our plan from the start, so what right do we have to complain about her eccentricities...?

I was, however, worried that Laika—and even more so, that Smarsly—would be disappointed by the so-called sage. I glanced over at Laika and saw an icy expression on her face.

Oh... That’s worse than disappointment. That’s the look you give someone when you’ve stopped caring about them entirely.

“I see now, Lady Azusa, that to live a well-ordered life is difficult indeed,” she said, her tone dull and her expression vacant. “All it takes is the slightest hint of conceit to turn a sage into a fool. I understand well how vital it is that I keep my own pride in check.”

“I don’t think the problem’s quite that deep, in her case... But yeah, that’s a good attitude to have,” I agreed. I made a mental note to never, ever go around self-identifying as a great witch.

What about Smarsly, though? I hope it's not so disappointed it melts away on the spot...

I made eye contact with Smarsly (or the slime equivalent of eye contact anyway), and it immediately started hopping around on its keyboard cloth.

"Um, let's see... The way she's turned breaking her ascetic vows into its own kind of ascetic practice is fascinating...? That's...an extremely generous take."

Smarsly wasn't done typing yet. Judging by how light and easy its movements were, I got the sense it wasn't too upset.

"Rest assured that I'm not disappointed at all, huh? Well, if you say so. I'll take your word for it, Smarsly."

Our lifestyles were just too different for me to imagine what was going on in Smarsly's mind. But if it was okay with how this had turned out, then that was good enough for me. It seemed to appreciate that we were less than impressed with the person we'd come all this way to visit, yet it still thought she was fascinating.

Maybe it's pleased to have the chance to study a weird, offbeat hermit. I guess in that light, this could be a valuable experience in its own way.

Pecora cleaned her plate, and almost immediately, Fighsly returned with another piping-hot serving of food for her.

"Here's the next course, Your Majesty!" said Fighsly. "This one's the fasting hermit's favorite dish: an oven-baked cheese gratin! It's fresh out of the oven, so be careful!"

She'd left the artifact resting on the table—I figured that meant she was currently filming from a fixed angle. I was pretty impressed by her work ethic, considering she was serving as both cameraman and director.

"Oh, well doesn't this look delicious?! 🎵 What do you think, Miss Hermit? Tell our viewers how the dish looks to you, please! 🎵"

"Aaagh, I would shovel that whole thing into my mouth right now if I could! I wouldn't even care about the burns! But I shan't! I am in the midst of my training! I must not eat so much as a morsel for another two and a half hours! I

shall not drool excessively! I shall clear my mind and think of nothing!”

It seems like they're enjoying themselves, at least...

“Ooh, just look at that cheese pull! ♪ Nothing tastes better than cheese gratin when you eat it right in front of someone who’s fasting! This is at least three times tastier than it would usually be!”

That's just plain evil! She's really in character as the demon king!

At that point, Pecora turned to look straight into the camera.

“This, dear viewers, is pure bliss!”

I could practically see the words *pure bliss* pop up in front of her face in big block letters. There’d probably be some reverb on her voice, too.

Figsly ended up bringing portions of the cheese gratin to me and Laika as well.

“Here you go! I had a feeling you’d be bored during the recording, so I thought you’d like something to eat,” she explained.

So she's straight-up calling it a recording now... It's hard to believe we ever had a halfway decent reason to be here...

The cheese gratin was really tasty, though, and it seemed to cheer Laika up quite a bit. A good meal made it hard to stay negative.

“Were you the one who made this, Figsly?” Laika asked. She held good cooks in the highest of esteem and was the sort of person who would call out a restaurant’s chef after a particularly good meal to pay her compliments.

“Yeah, that was me. We’re in a hermit’s hut in the middle of the desert, so I had to make do with ingredients that keep well. Cheese has a pretty long shelf life, you know.”

I guess you can't casually go out for groceries in a place like this, but I'm still not convinced any real ascetic training happens out here...

Dessert came next. Pecora was served a pudding-like dish, a spoonful of which she held in front of Moryake’s face.

“Come on, say ‘aah’! It’s delicious, I promise! ♪”

“I shan’t! If I eat, it means my fast has failed!”

Your time frame for this fast’s success or failure is way too short! Anyone could spend a few hours without eating!

After dessert, Pecora started personally putting together a dish atop the table.

“The key to this dish is cramming as many chili peppers into it as you possibly can! If chilies don’t grow where you live, then just catch a wyvern and fly somewhere where you can get your hands on some.”

Pecora threw pepper after pepper into a cooking pot. My eyes were stinging just being nearby, and it looked like Laika was in the same boat...

“Lady Azusa, I’m crying!” she exclaimed. “I can’t stop the tears! I’ve never seen an attack quite like this before!”

“I’ve heard that spicy food stimulates your pain receptors instead of your taste buds, but this is taking it a step too far!”

Tears were dripping down Moryake’s cheeks as well.

“This is painful, yes, but the pain has dulled my appetite! Less than half the time limit remains! I shall persist, and I shall prevail!”

I don’t even know what’s happening here anymore!

During the second half of the fast, Pecora had Moryake’s top five favorite foods brought out in order. It was a pretty devious plan, but the hermit pushed through and endured, every step of the way... Not that her efforts were particularly impressive, in my opinion. It would probably be harder to find someone who truly couldn’t hold out.

In the end, Moryake wound up covering her eyes with her hands. “If I can’t see, then my appetite can’t be stimulated! I shall use blindness to my advantage and overcome this trial! My spirit shall never falter! My mind is as still and clear as the surface of a placid lake! My fast shall succeed!”

Your spirit’s done plenty of faltering already!

“They say that when delicious food is laid before one’s eyes, one cannot help but drool at the sight of it. Today, I have experienced for myself how true that

really is!”

That would sound a lot more impressive if it wasn't super obvious.

“Um, Miss Pecora?” said Moryake. “I would very much like to distract myself at the moment. Perhaps we could make small talk?”

“Oh, but the whole point of fasting is to gain a sense of self-satisfaction through adversity, isn't it? If you're going to ruin that for yourself by diminishing the adversity, you might as well just eat something now! That way you'll be satisfied in a totally different way! 🎵”

Leave it to the demon king to offer up a devil's temptation!

At long last, the time limit—which was excruciatingly long by Moryake's standards and barely noticeable for anyone else—was just about to come to an end.

“Okay, five seconds left!” said Pecora. “Five, four, three, two, one, zero! Your fast is complete! Congratulations!”

“Once again, I have emerged triumphant!” Moryake shouted as she pumped her fists. For the record, that was not a gesture I ever expected to see from a hermit. “And now, I shall eat! Mmm! Delicious! Truly delicious!” she said between mouthfuls as she dug in on the spot.

“And that's all for our broadcast today! Don't forget to subscribe, everyone! 🎵”

Figsly pressed some sort of button on the artifact, and the light it had been emitting went out.

“Phew! That's a wrap, Miss Hermit,” said Pecora. “Great work! I think this should really get your name out to the masses.”

“Many thanks. I'm certain the Desert Talent Agency will be thrilled,” said Moryake, offering Pecora a polite and proper bow.

“So I was thinking that if this stream gets a good reaction, we can play a game in the next one where we each pick out a bunch of foods we love and one food we hate, then take turns guessing which of the other's foods they can't stand! What do you think?”

“Ah, yes, that sounds fine...”

Oh? Our resident hermit doesn't sound so enthusiastic, all of a sudden. Is she the sort of person whose personality shifts when she's on camera? I've heard that a lot of celebrities who act like full-blown entertainers on TV are actually pretty quiet and subdued in their day-to-day lives.

Moryake let out a lengthy sigh, then muttered to herself, “Ugh... Is there any point in me doing these things...? Nay, I think not.”

For just a moment, her expression was as vacant as Laika's.

Smarsly started hopping around on its keyboard cloth. “As expected,” it wrote.

Huh? Does that mean it's figured something out about her?

Moryake stepped over to Smarsly and sat down on the floor in front of it. “You must have thought this most laughable, did you not, honorable Smarsly? Truth be told, I feel the same way. It would appear I have chosen poorly in following this path.”

“Um, excuse me,” said Laika, a look of astonishment crossing her face. “Should we take that to mean everything you just did was an act?”

“It was indeed, honorable sage of the dragons.”

Oh, so she recognizes Laika as a fellow sage.

“I'm no sage! I'm not worthy of such a title... But, well, if that was an act, then why...?”

Smarsly moved across its keyboard once more, answering in the hermit's place. To sum it up, the slime's explanation went roughly like this:

- A piece of literature from the demon lands listed the asphalt spirit as a famous hermit.
- That piece of literature was very old, however, and there seemed to be no records of that spirit from more recent dates.
- Within the last hundred years or so, an individual calling herself the asphalt spirit entered the public eye under the direction of the Desert

Talent Agency.

- That individual could have claimed the name of the asphalt spirit despite being totally unrelated to her, or otherwise could have been the asphalt spirit herself, simply choosing to try something new for a change.
- Smarsly wanted to confirm which of those theories was true.
- Smarsly now felt certain that she was, in fact, the real spirit.

Laika looked downright mystified.

“So you mean to say that this woman really was a distinguished hermit in the past?!”

Moryake heaved a sigh. “I’m afraid agreeing with you would mean calling myself ‘distinguished.’ Moreover, ‘a famous hermit’ is an oxymoron—a denial of the very nature of the word. If a hermit is famous, you can be certain their practice is nothing more than a publicity stunt.”

Couldn’t have put it better myself!

“For many a long year, I lived hidden amid the desert sands. Some walked the desert in search of me, hoping to hear what words of wisdom I had to offer, and it was on their account that I was stricken with doubt.”

“Doubt? How so?” asked Laika. This sort of thing interested her, so there was no need for me to butt in.

“I am an asphalt spirit—close in nature to the dirt and the sand. Thus, is it not natural for me to live in a desert? And if it is natural for me to live here, then does it not seem wrong to call me a hermit for doing so?”

““Now that you mention it...!”” Laika and I exclaimed in harmony. It’d be one thing if she were an ocean spirit living in a desert, but for an asphalt spirit, this was more or less her home turf.

“Time and time again, I was told how incredible and admirable it was that I had lived in the desert for so very long. But to me, this is simply natural. And so I began to worry that my reputation had become overinflated through no virtue of my own...”

Her self-perception didn’t line up with the high value society had placed on

her, putting her in a fix. I could certainly relate to that—it was something I’d experienced as well.

“And so several hundred years ago, I traveled all the countries of the world on foot in an effort to reexamine myself. My wanderings, however, were fruitless, and around a hundred years ago, I returned to this land. That’s when the people from the talent agency sought me out.”

She’s lived a more impressive life than I thought.

“The talent agents said this: ‘A new age is dawning, and in this new era, hermits will need to be connected to society more than ever before. Won’t you join our firm as one of our talents? We’ll handle all your interview appointments!’”

“You must have smelled like money to them. I know how that feels,” said Fighsly with a confident nod.

Of course she could relate.

“That, in and of itself, was not a problem for me. Many came to me seeking to speak with a hermit, and one trait hermits share with the common folk is the irritation they feel when visitors arrive without warning. I had wished for a means to limit those visitations, and being able to direct people to my agency would make turning them down much easier, so I agreed to sign on with them.”

Something about associating the words *hermit* and *talent agency* felt wrong to me, but then again, I couldn’t fault her logic.

“However, I felt terribly obliged toward the agency. They gained nothing from our arrangement, and so for the past several decades, I have been trying out new ways to present myself. Hence the display you just witnessed.”

I tapped Laika’s shoulder.

“Hey, Laika? Looks like the description in the book Momma Yufufu showed us was right after all.”

“Come to think of it, it did say that she wasn’t very sociable, didn’t it?”

It had completely slipped my mind thanks to the high-energy persona she’d had going when we first arrived, but it was likely the asphalt spirit’s true nature

was much more solitary.

“And that’s why you decided to make up the fasting shtick and see if it would sell, right?” Pecora said as she chewed a piece of bread. I felt certain she’d been taught table manners, but she was gleefully talking with her mouth full, regardless.

“Exactly,” said Moryake. “And I did indeed spend fifty years subsisting on bread, water, and salt long ago, but what of it? Does limiting the food I eat make me worthy of praise? If so, then all those who have died of starvation are the greatest sages to have ever lived. The very thought is absurd. And so now, I simply eat the same way everyone else does.”

I get it. Sounds like she’s tried out a whole bunch of different lifestyles over the years.

“And yet,” Moryake said, before pausing to take a long, deep breath.

“I find my current lifestyle vacant and unfulfilling. What is the point of fasting a hundred times, or a thousand...? Is that truly amusing to witness?”

“Yeah, you can’t take stuff like that too seriously!”

It was a tough situation, all right. If Moryake wanted to be popular, she had to follow the current trends, and the way I saw it, you couldn’t be cynical or insincere about stuff like that. Besides, most of the people who jumped onto trends enjoyed them knowing perfectly well that they weren’t meant to last...

Moryake stood up from her seat.

“Now then, honorable Smarsly, I’m sure you have grown bored of hearing my life story. Let us talk of other matters. I shall guide you downstairs. The rest of you may follow, if you so choose.”

I didn’t see any particular reason to refuse, so I followed Moryake down the staircase.

I reached the bottom of the stairs—and found myself in a library practically overflowing with books! For some reason, Smarsly was acting very strangely. It was bouncing like crazy, but that part wasn’t particularly unusual. The strange thing was that it was bouncing onto and off the bookshelves, careening around

the chamber like a bouncy ball someone had hurled with all their strength. A loud, sharp *bam* resounded each time the slime smacked into one of the walls.

“What’s going on, Smarsly?” I asked.

“Oh, so you do understand! This room holds a multitude of tomes and manuscripts from an old human nation. There may well be books here that not even the honorable Smarsly has read before,” said Moryake. She sounded a little pleased by Smarsly’s reaction and must have been happy to find someone with an appreciation for her interests.

I turned to glance at Pecora. This seemed like a good moment for us to make ourselves scarce and give the two sages some time to themselves. Pecora met my gaze and nodded.

All right! Looks like we’re on the same page—

And then for some reason, Pecora closed her eyes and started leaning toward me!

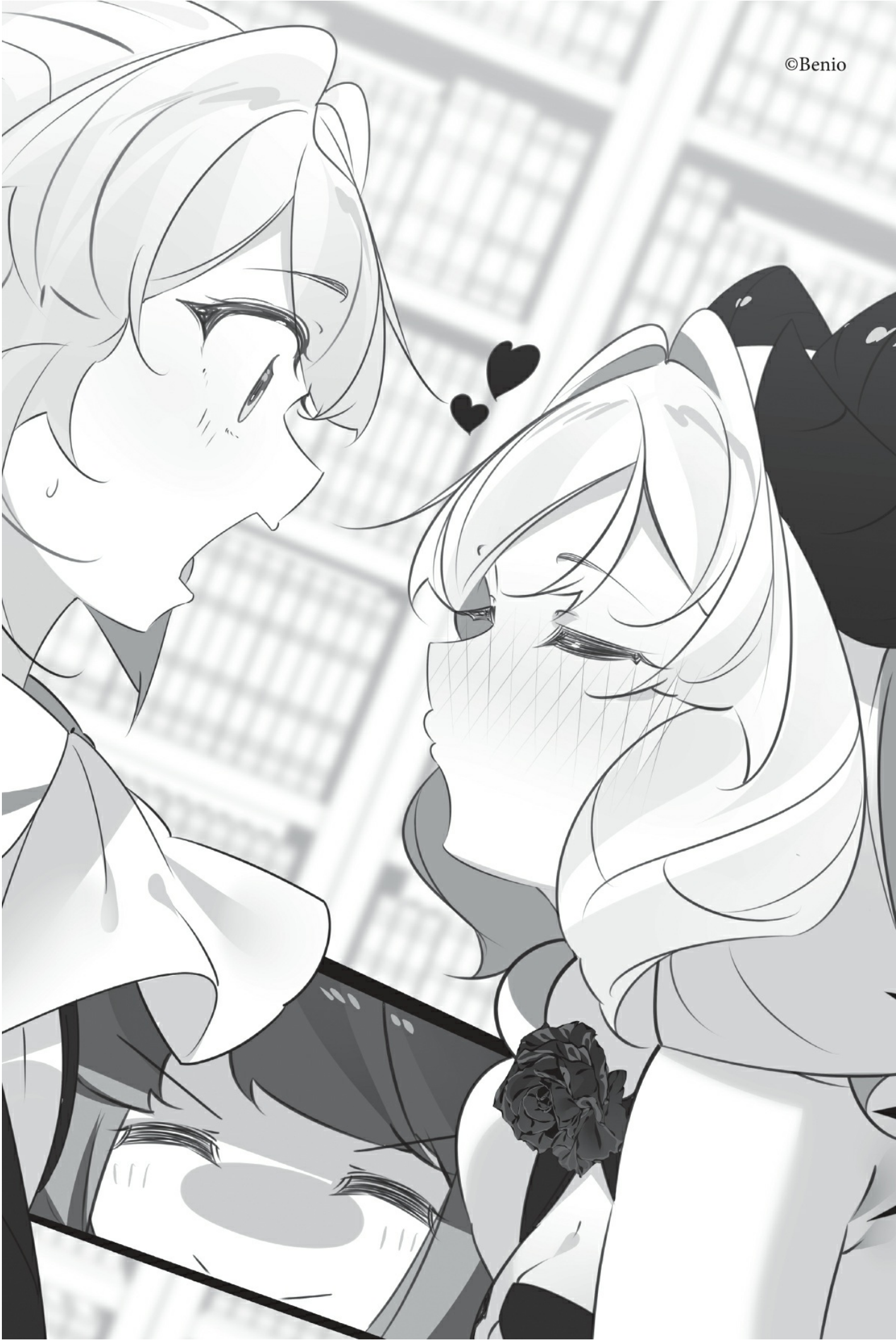
“Nope! Stop! You’re definitely picking up the wrong signals!”

“Aww, really? But I was so sure you wanted to share a sisterly kiss!”

“As if! Also, how could this possibly be the right time for that?! There are so many people in the room with us!”

At that point, Laika quietly slid between me and Pecora. “No, Miss Pecora. Absolutely not,” she said. I couldn’t see her face, but from her tone of voice, I could tell she was smiling. Not a nice smile, though—this was one of the scary ones.

“Hmph... I suppose it would complicate things, so I’ll refrain for now,” Pecora grumbled and stepped away again.



Laika just made the demon king retreat—she really has gotten stronger. Though, on second thought, maybe what just happened between them didn't have much to do with strength.

While we were distracted by that nonsense, Moryake and Smarsly had struck up a detailed conversation on some specialty topic.

“Oh, the biography of Saint Dalisensor? That one is a forgery, yes. In fact, I have another, even older biography of a completely different person right here, and you'll note that its first half is exactly the same as that one, word for word.”

Boing, boing!

“The *Fifty Precepts of Yalsenjic* as well, indeed. They were written two hundred years after Yalsenjic passed away by a flagrant impostor who falsely claimed to be the same individual. You can tell something's wrong with that one because primary sources from that era say nothing about the precepts whatsoever.”

Boing-boing, boooing!

“Yes, it's all but certain that the *Goddess Nintan's Book of Liturgical Sincerity* was a forgery as well.”

Boing-boing, boing-boing!

Why are they only talking about forgeries?!

I had no clue what was so interesting about such things, but Smarsly looked as excited as could be, so I had to assume it was really engaging for those in the know. I couldn't help getting the impression that Moryake was talking *at* the slime rather than *with* the slime, but I had faith that the exchange really was a two-way street...somehow.

Later on, Moryake treated us to some proper hospitality...in the form of a plate piled high with what looked like sand.

“So, um, I don't suppose you have any, you know, food...?” I asked hopefully.

There was an old custom back in Japan where you would offer houseguests a particular dish—rice with tea poured over it, basically—as an indirect but clear way of asking them to go home. My best guess was that this was a similar

gesture, but if so, I would've preferred something edible, at least!

"Actually, that's a newly developed product meant to evoke the lifestyle of a hermit living in the desert: sugar that looks exactly like sand!"

"Sounds pretty low effort, huh?" Some types of brown and raw sugar already look more or less like sand.

I gave the sugar-sand a tentative lick and found that it really was sweet.

"I must say," said Moryake, "I'm impressed by the knowledge of one of this world's three great sages! The honorable Smarsly's scholarship is a thing to behold."

She'd settled into a personality so different from the one we'd first encountered, it was sort of hard to believe they were really the same person. Maybe it was natural for people who lived for a ridiculously long time to have that sort of multifaceted character. On the other hand, I knew a number of people who'd lived for ages—Godly Godness, for one—who didn't give off that sort of vibe at all, so maybe that was just a misconception on my part.

"Perhaps the best thing for me to do is to return to my hermit ways and live as I always have, without forcing the matter. I've come to believe I should emulate the honorable Smarsly. I must be as the sand itself: a lump of matter, at rest within the landscape, simply existing."

If that's how Smarsly looks to you, I'm pretty sure that's just because it's a slime...

"I had thought that simply being a hermit was not enough, so I invented the fasting act and assumed a false persona, but no more! I shall return to living quietly as the simple asphalt spirit that I am."

I guess if someone in the Three Great Sages Encyclopedia is having a crisis, meeting a fellow sage might be just the thing to help them reach a breakthrough.

"Perhaps I'll start using asphalt to stick all sorts of objects together next?"

"That'll just lead to different rumors about you being a weirdo, so I'd recommend finding something else..." *Yes, I've heard that many cultures have*

used naturally forming asphalt as an adhesive in the past, but if you overdo it, people might start calling you the glue spirit or some other awful nickname!

“Well, in any case, I plan to simply take my time and live as I will, for now. I have no reason to obsess over being a hermit, but I have no need to flee from the role, either.”

Laika nodded ever so slightly in agreement. She seemed encouraged to see Moryake cast aside her doubts. Laika was a truth-seeking type as well, so she could probably relate.

Just then, a voice rang out.

“But that’s such a waste!”

Fighsly had stood up from her chair and shouted at the top of her lungs. Now she was stomping over toward Moryake.

“Wh-what’s a waste...?” Moryake stammered.

“You’re raking in the cash with your fasting hermit persona, right?! How could you come up with a moneymaker like that and just give it up?! It’s a waste! You gotta make all the dough you can when you have the chance! By the time you catch yourself thinking you should’ve made more when you could, it’s already too late!”

Yep, that’s exactly the objection I’d expect from Fighsly.

“But I have no particular attachment to money...”

“If you don’t need it, then don’t use it. You can still have it! What if you find something you really want to buy a hundred or two years down the line?! Maybe you’ll find some legendary book or whatever, and if you don’t have any money when it happens, you’ll be out of luck! There are plenty of things in this world you can’t do without cold, hard cash on your side!”

She was actually making a pretty well-reasoned point, and Moryake was quickly caving to the pressure. As a scholar, I figured she could deconstruct any number of less logical arguments in an instant.

“I’m a martial artist, you know?” Fighsly continued. “Even I’ve had moments when I ask myself what the heck I’m doing out in a desert, working as the

demon king's magic streaming assistant. But I do it anyway because I know that having the ability to handle all sorts of jobs will give me the marketable skills I need to get ahead anywhere!"

Now she's just straight-up monologuing.

"If your goal is to take life as it comes and live as you will, then don't quit when you're making money! Keep at it until you're sick and tired of it! Everyone will forget all about it in no time once you give it up, and then you can go back to being a normal hermit, just like that!"

"Don't you think that argument's founded on some questionable assumptions?" asked Moryake.

"All I'm saying is that when you have a chance to rake in the cash, you should take it!"

Fighsly had drawn in so close to Moryake, she was practically looming over the poor sage. Moryake, bent over backward, paused for a moment, then slowly replied.

"...All right. I'll keep being a weird fasting hermit, for the time being."

"That's more like it," Fighsly said with a bright, cheerful smile.

I can't believe I just witnessed Fighsly talk circles around an eminent hermit...



A few days later, the video of Pecora going to meet the fasting hermit was published by way of magic streaming. It got an impressive number of views, even compared to Pecora's usual view counts, and word on the street (or rather, in the air, considering said word had been spread by wind spirits) had it that more visitors were making the trek to meet with Moryake than ever.

Momma Yufufu was the one who shared that particular rumor with me when I went over to her place for a visit.

"Watching that video reminded me that I'd met with the asphalt spirit after all! It came back to me the moment I saw her face," Momma Yufufu said, sounding like she'd just learned an old classmate of hers had become a celebrity since their last meeting.

I had no idea if this turn of events would make Moryake happy, but if worse came to worst, all she had to do was withdraw from her talent agency, so I figured things would work out just fine. Plus, she could consult with Smarsly if she ever had any really pressing worries. I had a feeling Smarsly would make a point of visiting her from time to time now that it knew where she lived.

“Oh, right, that reminds me! I brought a present back for you, Momma Yufufu.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

I pulled out what looked like a bag of sand.

“It’s sugar meant to look like sand. It’s supposed to evoke the lifestyle of a desert hermit.”

Momma Yufufu used some of that sugar right away to whip up a perfectly sweet and delicious rolled omelet for us.

The End



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Case Files of the Great Detectives
Falfa & Shalsha

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio



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※ This story is an edited version of the script of the third drama CD, contained in the special release edition of Volume 9.

SCENE 0

Azusa steps into the house in the highlands' kitchen.

AZUSA

Uuugh, having to walk all the way from the medicine-making room to the kitchen for water is such a pain. I should really start bringing in all the water I'll need before I get to work... Now that I'm here, though, it's weirdly quiet in the dining room today. It's been a long time since it felt so deserted in here. I know Rosalie said she was going out to Nascúte today, but where could everyone else be?

HALKARA

Ugh... *Sniffle...*

AZUSA

Huh?! Is someone here?

Azusa searches around the room.

HALKARA

Ugh... The paaain...

AZUSA

Aaaah! Halkara's lying on the ground! That jar must've hit her on the head!

Falfa and Shalsha hear Azusa's voice and come running.

FALFA

What's wrong, Mommy?!

SHALSHA

It sounds like there's been a terrible accident.

AZUSA

Ah, Falfa, Shalsha! That's right, it's terrible! It looks like Halkara got hit on the back of the head by a jar, somehow...

FALFA

Halkara...? Th-that's awful!

SHALSHA

It seems likely the jar was thrown at her from behind.

HALKARA

U-ugh... H-helhp mheee...

Sound of a flash of inspiration.

SHALSHA

This smells...like a case.

FALFA

That's right! Let's solve this mystery together, Shalsha! We'll be just like the characters in these books!

SHALSHA

Ah! Sister, are those...The Child Detective of the Sweets Shop?!

FALFA

That's right! They're about a child detective whose parents run the local sweets shop! The detective solves all sorts of murder cases, and their parents reward them with sweets at the end of every story! It's a super-popular series!

AZUSA

That sounds pretty kid-friendly, except for the part about the murders. It's kind of hard to tell who the intended audience is, huh...?

SHALSHA

Shalsha has read the series as well, of course. *The Case of the Overbaked Cookies*, in which the sweets shop's employees die one after another under mysterious circumstances, was particularly well-written.

FALFA

Falfa was so surprised when I learned the murderer was disposing of all the evidence by eating the cookies they used to kill people!

AZUSA

Isn't it weird to have sweets be the murder weapon in a series where sweets are also how the detective gets paid...?

FALFA

We'll catch the bad guy, just like they do in the books!

SHALSHA

Understood. We have the bodies of children but the minds of university students, so Shalsha is certain that this task isn't beyond us.

AZUSA

I mean, all of that's true... You might really solve this one.

HALKARA

B-before that... Healing magic... Pleeeeashe...

The story's title is read out loud.

SCENE 1

AZUSA

Phew... All right, I cast some healing magic on Halkara and sent her to bed for now.

LAIKA

It's a relief to know her life isn't in danger. I was in the kitchen just moments ago and didn't even see her...

AZUSA

Oh really? Well, she fell behind the table in a kinda hard-to-see spot. Anyway, she'll be up and about before too long, so let's just let her rest for now.

BEELZEBUB

You say she was hit in the back of the head by a jar? Who could have done such a thing?

AZUSA

No clue. We haven't figured out who the culprit is yet.

LAIKA

It could be, then, that one of us committed this atrocity. Much as it saddens me to even consider the possibility...

BEELZEBUB

I couldn't have said it better myself. And to think they'd use the jar I brought here as a souvenir, of all things! Why not hit her with a saucepan or a vase, like a sensible would-be murderer?! Have some decency!

AZUSA

That's the part you're upset about?!

BEELZEBUB

It is well within my rights to be upset about it! They've weaponized the goodwill of a demon and used it for evil! How demonic of them!

AZUSA

Is this a bit? Are you hoping I'll point out how silly that sounded?

FALFA

Everyone, be quiet, please!

AZUSA

Huh? What? Did you figure something out, Falfa?

BEELZEBUB

But of course I'll listen to whatever my darling girls have to say! My lips are sealed.

AZUSA

How many times have I told you not to call them your girls? Falfa and Shalsha are *my* daughters!

BEELZEBUB

How is it fair that you get both of them? 'Tis greedy, pure and simple!

AZUSA

So what, you'd rather separate them? That'd be so sad! No way am I handing my daughters over to someone who doesn't have their best interests at heart!

BEELZEBUB

As I've said many, *many* times, I would gladly take both of them!

AZUSA

And as *I've* said many, *many* times, it's not happening!

Time passes.

SHALSHA

...It took all of you a full fifteen seconds to quiet down.

AZUSA

You sound like a principal lecturing her students at a school assembly, Shalsha...

SHALSHA

That's because Shalsha was quoting a teacher who appears in The Child Detective of the Sweets Shop.

AZUSA

So you really were trying to act like a teacher!

SHALSHA

In the second volume, that teacher gets bludgeoned to death with a lump of sugar. The murderer eats the sugar lump afterward, destroying all the evidence of their crime.

AZUSA

Do all these mysteries hinge on the criminal eating the evidence...?

FALFA

Listen, everyone! Halkara has been hit on the head with a jar by a mystery attacker!

SHALSHA

Considering the circumstances, it's safe to assume the perpetrator is someone who was here in the house at the time of the crime. In other words, this household is effectively a locked room!

AZUSA

Except that the front door's open. It's literally not locked.

FALFA

But the mystery will be much better if it's a locked room, Mommy!

BEELZEBUB

'Tis true indeed! You're absolutely correct, Falfa.

AZUSA

Let me guess: Now you're trying to be the cool aunt who spoils someone else's kids...

FALFA

Falfa and Shalsha are going to solve this mystery together!

SHALSHA

You can call us the Great Detectives Falfa and Shalsha.

LAIKA

Should I take this to mean the two of you want to play detective?

FALFA

We're not playing! We're real detectives!

SHALSHA

We will unveil the truth, no matter the cost. Shalsha will stake the names of countless nameless slimes on it.

AZUSA

Didn't you just say the slimes were nameless?

FALFA

Stop nitpicking, Mommy!

SHALSHA

That's right. All's well that ends well.

AZUSA

I don't think detectives are supposed to be so haphazard...

FALFA

Anyway, just leave it to us!

SHALSHA

Shalsha and Falfa will reveal the truth, no matter how well it's hidden.

FALFA - NARRATION

And so Falfa and Shalsha turned our room into an interrogation chamber and started calling in the suspects one by one.

SCENE 2

Interrogation of Suspect #1: Beelzebub.

Falfa and Shalsha call Beelzebub into their room.

BEELZEBUB

Okaaay, Falfa and Shalsha, I'm coming iin! Oh, I see you've moved your desk to the center of the room! And you've placed a lamp upon it as well. 'Tis quite fitting for an interrogation chamber indeed.

Beelzebub sits down.

FALFA

First, Falfa would like to hear your side of the story, Miss Beelzebub.

SHALSHA

Tell us the plain, simple truth. The gods are watching, and they'll know if you lie.

BEELZEBUB

The gaze of your gods means little to a demon such as I, but very well. I shall offer you my full cooperation!

Oh, of course! In demon society, it's traditional for interrogators to offer their suspects a dish known as *kadzudahn* before the interrogation begins. Shall I make some for us? The *dahn* part of *kadzudahn*, incidentally, means "desert." In other words, offering the dish signifies that the suspect has nowhere left to run!

FALFA

Not this time, Miss Beelzebub.

SHALSHA

Shalsha and Falfa are taking our search for the culprit seriously.

BEELZEBUB

I—I see... Very well, then. I shall be serious as well.

FALFA

Then to start, here's your first question: Miss Beelzebub, will you tell us about the jar that was used as a weapon in Miss Halkara's assault?

BEELZEBUB

I brought it here with me as a souvenir. 'Tis known as a Jar of Grief. If you press your ear to it, you'll hear a noise that sounds just like the grief-stricken lamentations of the abyssal dead. It's made of metal, by the way, and wasn't broken when it hit Halkara's skull.

SHALSHA

Something about that seems very strange to Shalsha. Why would you decide to bring a weird, creepy jar like that as a souvenir?

BEELZEBUB

Weird and creepy...?! Those jars are lucky charms for us demons! 'Tis said that the wails of the dead drive away any who would approach you with wicked intentions! Thus, it is a ward against evil spirits and is in no way weird or creepy!

FALFA

Interesting. “The jar isn’t weird or creepy”—there! Falfa wrote it down.

BEELZEBUB

Oh, so you’ve thought to take notes? Excellent!

SHALSHA

Shalsha would like to move on to the next question. How would you rate the offensive capability of that jar?

BEELZEBUB

Uh... Well, erm, that seems a strange perspective to take. The jar is not a weapon—it was not meant to be thrown at anyone. Thus, I do not have a clear answer regarding its offensive capability.

FALFA

“Offensive capability: unknown”! Falfa wrote it down.

SHALSHA

Well then, Shalsha will move on to the final, most important question.

BEELZEBUB

Very well... What would that be?

SHALSHA

Miss Beelzebub, where were you and what were you doing at the time Miss Halkara is presumed to have been attacked?

BEELZEBUB

I placed the jar on the table when I arrived, then immediately went to your room to play with the two of you. We have been together since early this morning—in other words, the two of you are witnesses who prove my innocence.

Falfa and Shalsha gasp.

FALFA

...It’s true. Falfa and Shalsha were both playing with her the whole time.

SHALSHA

...It's the perfect alibi. There's no debating it.

BEELZEBUB

And I, for one, would be more than happy to resume our playdate! What shall we do next? I brought all sorts of games with me! And you know, you could play all the games you want, whenever you want, if you became my children!

SHALSHA

Beelzebub isn't our perp, Sister.

FALFA

You're right. Her alibi is airtight.

We'll play more games with you after we've solved this mystery, Miss Beelzebub. For now, please step outside.

BEELZEBUB

Nooo! The pain of rejection... Ah, that reminds me! I have just the thing—but, hmm, where did I put it? Oh, where was it?

SHALSHA

This is no time for games. We hope you understand.

BEELZEBUB

Ta-daaaa! An assortment of sweets I bought just for you!

SHALSHA

...Sister, they say you can't fight on an empty stomach.

FALFA

Yeah, and also that eating sweets makes your mind work faster! Snack times are important!

BEELZEBUB

Indeed, indeed! Eat up and grow well... Actually, no need to grow. You're as cute as can be just the way you are!

SHALSHA - NARRATION

The sweets Miss Beelzebub gave us were delicious. Next, we called Laika into the interrogation chamber.

SCENE 3

Interrogation of Suspect #2: Laika.

Falfa and Shalsha call Laika into their room.

LAIKA

Excuse me, I'm coming in now... Thank you very much for having me...

FALFA

You don't have to treat this like an interview, Big Sis Laika.

SHALSHA

Stay calm and answer our questions clearly, and everything will be just fine.

Laika sits down.

LAIKA

I would certainly like to remain calm, yes, but after what happened to Miss Halkara... Well, I'm afraid it may be difficult for me to keep my composure. Who could have committed such a horrible, cowardly act...? And to attack her from behind, no less! I'm so furious, it feels like I could spit flames at this very moment!

FALFA

Don't breathe fire, please! You'll burn the house down...

SHALSHA

And if the house burns down, we'll suffer even worse damage than Halkara just did. Please restrain yourself.

LAIKA

Ah, my apologies! I let my temper get the better of me.

FALFA

In *The Child Detective of the Sweets Shop*, the culprit of *The Case of the Overbaked Cookies* burned the store down at the end of the story, but the crime we're investigating today isn't that large in scale.

LAIKA

Am I to understand that the story somehow continues after the sweets shop burns down...?

SHALSHA

They rebuild the store in the next volume, so it all turns out okay! That's the volume where all the real estate agents in town start mysteriously dying one after another.

LAIKA

Are we certain there isn't some terrible curse placed upon that sweets shop...?

Time passes.

FALFA

All right, Big Sis Laika. Falfa wants you to tell us what you were doing when Miss Halkara was attacked.

SHALSHA

Shalsha wants to know that, too. At the end of the day, there can only be one true story.

LAIKA

I was in the medicine-making room, helping Lady Azusa with her work. I believe Lady Azusa will be willing to confirm that.

SHALSHA

And did you ever leave that room and go into the dining room?

LAIKA

Ummm... I—I did, yes. I went to the kitchen to fetch water, so I passed right by the dining room on my way.

Sound of a flash of inspiration.

FALFA (IN A SLIGHTLY BELLIGERENT TONE)

Oh *really*? So you passed by the dining room and didn't notice whether Miss Halkara was inside?

LAIKA

Well, I...I couldn't see her, since she was on the ground. I never even imagined she would be lying on the dining room floor, so it didn't occur to me to check...

FALFA (IN A SLIGHTLY BELLIGERENT TONE)

Hmm. That seems weird, though. You're acting like you knew that Miss Halkara was *already* lying there when you went to fetch water, but if you didn't see her, then how could you know whether she'd been attacked or not? Very, very *weird*!

LAIKA

...Who are you trying to imitate, exactly?

SHALSHA

Falfa is imitating the speech patterns of the main character of *Pulpatany Doublon: Ace Detective*, a novel considered by many to be a masterpiece. Pulpatany Doublon talks in a very belligerent manner.

LAIKA

I—I see... B-but in any case, I swear I didn't do it!

FALFA (IN A SLIGHTLY BELLIGERENT TONE)

But you could've done it. You had the opportunity, and you've got no alibi to prove you didn't, do you? Plus, it's always the straitlaced ones who end up being the perps for this sort of crime. That means the most straitlaced person in the house in the highlands is our criminal, and that's you, Big Sis Laika!

SHALSHA

Sister, you're being too aggressive. We have to supply evidence that proves she's guilty first.

LAIKA

A-as I said before, I didn't do it. I have nothing against Miss Halkara and no reason to attack her!

FALFA (IN A SLIGHTLY BELLIGERENT TONE)

Well then, let's ask you another question: Was that jar heavy?

LAIKA

It was, yes. It was no trouble for a dragon like me, but it was heavy enough that you or Shalsha would have had difficulties lifting it.

FALFA (IN A SLIGHTLY BELLIGERENT TONE)

Oh-*ho*? Now tell me—why do *you* know how much that jar weighs, *eh*?

LAIKA

Ah!

SHALSHA

You know how much the weapon weighs. That could be seen as conclusive evidence against you.

LAIKA

It's not what you think! I just happened to see the jar on the table and decided to try lifting it, that's all... Oh, but wait. That means when I saw the jar, Miss Halkara hadn't returned home and been hit by it yet, doesn't it...?

FALFA (IN A SLIGHTLY BELLIGERENT TONE)

Hmm? Thought you said you couldn't see her because she was on the ground. Seems you're contradicting yourself, doesn't it?

SHALSHA

When a suspect's story contradicts itself, it's best to assume that some aspect of that story was untrue.

LAIKA

Wait a moment, you two, please! I only said I couldn't see her at first because I was caught up in the moment, that's all... It's true, I swear! Please believe me...

FALFA (IN A SLIGHTLY BELLIGERENT TONE)

Sorry, but it's a detective's job to figure out who can and can't be trusted, y'know?

SHALSHA

Shalsha advises you to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It's not too late for you. If you apologize now, this can all go away.

Laika shoots to her feet.

LAIKA

I swear on the name of every deity in this world that I have not harmed so much as a hair on Miss Halkara's head! *Huff, huff...*

Time passes.

FALFA

...Well, if she's willing to go that far...

SHALSHA

It's difficult to believe she could be lying. The true criminal must be someone else.

LAIKA

So you believe me? I'm so glad to hear it.

FALFA

Well, of course! You've never lied to Falfa, after all.

SHALSHA

If we judge your case based on whether you're a liar or not, then the answer is clear. Thus, we declare you innocent.

LAIKA

And I assure you that I'll continue to live as sincerely and conscientiously as possible to maintain that trust!

FALFA - NARRATION

We knew from the start that Laika was too honest to commit that kind of crime. It was time to call our final suspect into the interrogation chamber. The woman who found the body: Mommy!

SCENE 4

Interrogation of Suspect #3: Mommy.

Falfa and Shalsha call Azusa into their room.

AZUSA

Okay, I'm coming in now! Ooh, you really nailed the look of an interrogation room, huh?

FALFA

Sorry, Mommy, but we can't let the fact that you're our mommy and we love you hold back our investigation.

SHALSHA

We can't allow ourselves to consider extenuating factors.

AZUSA

Is it just me, or is that the sort of thing a judge would say before passing down a verdict...? Well, anyway, I was the first to the crime scene, so I'll tell you everything I know. I was making medicine with Laika and realized I needed water. I'd just sent Laika for water a little while before, so now it was my turn, and I went to the kitchen to get some. That's when I heard someone groaning in the dining room. I went over to see what was going on and found Halkara collapsed by the table, with that jar lying on the ground nearby!

FALFA

Noting that down, noting that down! By the way, Mommy, what do you think about the theory that the jar was the weapon? Are you sure that's right?

SHALSHA

Ah! Shalsha hadn't considered that there could be a different weapon, but it's true! The jar could have been a red herring all along! You're amazing, Sister!

FALFA

Heh-heh! Falfa is a great detective, after all!

AZUSA

Yeah, um, considering the size of the bump on Halkara's head and the damage to the jar, I think it's pretty safe to assume it's what hit her. I checked that when I was healing her.

FALFA

Okay, then I guess we can say the jar was the weapon after all.

SHALSHA

Yes! Shalsha feels like we're drawing closer to the core of this case. Why did the perpetrator use the jar as their weapon? Nobody knew that Miss Beelzebub would bring it here this morning, and her leaving it on the dining room table was a matter of random luck.

FALFA

So then... Oh! The criminal just happened to see the jar and seized their chance to attack Miss Halkara with it! This...was a crime of opportunity!

AZUSA

Ooh, good sleuthing, you two! You're sounding like the real deal!

FALFA

We're not playing make-believe, Mommy!

SHALSHA

We have to find the perpetrator, for the sake of law and order in this household.

AZUSA

Okay, I know. Sorry for teasing you.

SHALSHA

This is just like in The Child Detective of the Sweets Shop, when the protagonist has to work as hard as they can to find the culprit and bring peace

back to their town after fifty people mysteriously turn up dead.

AZUSA

What a terrifying town! Everyone who lives there should move! Anyway, have you found any good clues about who might have attacked Halkara?

SHALSHA

Shalsha thinks...the time has come for me to focus.

AZUSA

Huh? Why'd you close your eyes, Shalsha? Are you sleepy? Is it nap time?

FALFA

No, that's not it, Mommy! Shalsha's meditating. She closed her eyes to help her focus so she can deduce the truth behind this incident.

AZUSA

Since when has that been one of Shalsha's abilities?!

SHALSHA

Shalsha's mind is clear. Shalsha's mind is clear... Shalsha's mind is clear... Shalsha is thinking about nothing, nothing at all...

AZUSA

How's she going to figure out who the criminal is if she's not thinking...?

FALFA

Mommy, you shouldn't distract her.

AZUSA

Right... I'll be quiet...

Sound of a flash of inspiration.

SHALSHA

...Shalsha knows who did it!

AZUSA

What, really? That's amazing, Shalsha! Your mom's so proud of you right now!

SHALSHA

The culprit...is you, Mom!

AZUSA

Whaaaaaat?! Me?!

FALFA

You should know it's bad to hit people, Mommy! You have to say you're sorry to Miss Halkara later, okay?

AZUSA

But I didn't do it! And I don't think attempted murder is something you can smooth over with an apology, either.

SHALSHA

Allow Shalsha to explain the trick that nearly let you get away with it. This may take some time, but please listen until the end.

AZUSA

Okay, then. I'll listen, and after you're finished, I'll make my case and point out any parts that don't line up. I want to help you two solve the case, but not if it means taking the fall myself!

SHALSHA

When you went to the kitchen to fetch water, you saw Miss Halkara in the dining room. You experienced a sudden moment of rage, hit her with the jar you grabbed from the nearby table, then pretended to find her body and called everyone in to see it. That's it.

AZUSA

That barely took any time at all! And there wasn't even a trick! Why would I have a sudden moment of rage anyway? I've never snapped for no reason before!

SHALSHA

Humans just snap sometimes.

FALFA

Mm-hmm! You can never be totally sure what they'll do next. That's why the people in novels always say stuff like "He was such a nice, quiet person. I can't believe he'd do something so terrible..."

AZUSA

I really don't think "You can never be totally sure what they'll do next" has quite that extreme of a nuance, usually...

SHALSHA

As for what might have set you off, for instance...it could have been Miss Halkara's chest!

FALFA

Ooh, that makes sense. Mommy does always say that she wishes she had a chest like Miss Halkara's.

AZUSA

Wait, wait! Th-that's not... Well, okay, so I might be a little jealous of Halkara's boobs, sure. And yes, sometimes I wonder what possible biological factors could have caused her to be that big. That's all true, but I wouldn't hit her with a jar over it!

SHALSHA

Shalsha still has more evidence. Laika came to the kitchen before you, and she said she didn't do it. That means the only person left without an alibi who could have committed the crime...is you, Mom!

AZUSA

Whaaat?! Objection! Objection! Laika doesn't have an alibi, either, does she?!

FALFA

Laika said she would never do something like that, so she's innocent.

AZUSA

Why do you trust Laika but not me?! This is totally unfair! Here, I'll do it, too —I'd never, eeeever do something like that! And I didn't! And anyway, the door wasn't even locked, so anyone could have sneaked inside the house for all we know. Like, I'm not *saying* Rosalie did it, but she's a ghost, so she could've easily come home quietly, floated the jar into the air, and dropped it on Halkara's head.

FALFA

Making a ghost the culprit in a mystery is against the rules, Mommy.

SHALSHA

A nonsensical plot twist like that would get your story laughed out of the room.

AZUSA

But I mean, ghosts are real! We live with one, even! And magic's totally real, too... Anyway, there must be something I can do to make you stop treating me like a criminal... All right, I know just the thing! Your mom has a trick up her sleeve for times like these!

FALFA

Falfa thinks you should just fess up and apologize, Mommy.

SHALSHA

How can you look your daughters in the eye unless you confess your crimes?

AZUSA

I'm literally looking my daughters in the eye right now!

Azusa stands up.

AZUSA

All right, you get to go first, Shalsha. Get ready for a squeeeeeze!

Azusa hugs Shalsha.

SHALSHA

Mnh... Are you trying to knock me out with a choke hold, Mom? Are you

continuing your crime spree?

AZUSA

No, I'm giving you a hug! And just so you know, if you admit that I'm not the culprit, I'll keep hugging you for as long as you want!

SHALSHA

Ugh! You drive a hard bargain...

Time passes.

SHALSHA

Mom didn't do it.

AZUSA

Thanks, Shalsha! I guess my innocence is set in stone now!

FALFA

You can't let the culprit win you over, Shalsha! A real detective stays strong, even in the face of bribery! Just think—they only eat sweets in The Child Detective of the Sweets Shop after the case is already solved!

SHALSHA

...We ate Miss Beelzebub's sweets just a little while ago.

FALFA

Ah! You're right, we did!

AZUSA

Okay, Falfa, your turn! If you admit I'm not the culprit, I'll give you all the hugs you want!

Falfa dashes over to Azusa.

FALFA

Falfa loves you, Mommy!

AZUSA

Yep, yep! You two are just the cutest! Super-ultra cute!

SHALSHA

But now our investigation's back to square one.

FALFA

Who could the real culprit be?

There's a knock on the door.

HALKARA

Falfa, Shalsha, are you in there? I'm all better now, so I thought I'd come tell you what I know!

FALFA

Shalsha!

SHALSHA

Right. Shalsha understands.

FALFA

You're the victim in this murder case, Miss Halkara, so please—tell us what really happened!

HALKARA

I can do that, of course...but I'm not really a murder victim, you know. I'm alive and well.

FALFA - NARRATION

Falfa and Shalsha decided to listen to the victim's story. It seemed it was finally time for the truth behind the mystery to be revealed.

SCENE 5

Falfa and Shalsha listen to Halkara's story in their room.

HALKARA

Boy, that jar sure did fall right on me! I didn't even know they made jars that hard. I'm pretty sure I saw my late grandma waving to me from a field of flowers for a minute there! But that's when I realized something was weird, so I

told her “Sorry, Grandma, but I’m still alive!” Then she vanished, and the next thing I knew, I was awake again.

SHALSHA

In other words, the jar really was the weapon.

HALKARA

A weapon? That’s going a little far, I think! Though I guess it did nearly finish me off.

FALFA

Finish you off? What do you mean, Miss Halkara? Had you already been attacked when you were hit with the jar?

HALKARA

Well, I was already lying on the ground when it fell off the table and hit me on the head.

FALFA & SHALSHA

Whaaat?!

SHALSHA

So then... Maybe the culprit knocked you down first, then set the jar up to fall on you to make it look like an accident!

FALFA

If that’s what happened, then everyone’s a suspect again!

HALKARA

Oh, no, no, not at all! I’ll explain the whole thing, okay?

The victim’s testimony reveals the truth.

HALKARA

I had today off, so after lunch, I decided to wander into town and do some shopping. While I was out, I found myself in a pub and decided to grab a drink, because why not?

FALFA

That definitely sounds like you, Miss Halkara.

HALKARA

But that's when the strangest thing happened!

SHALSHA

The strangest thing? Did you encounter some sort of paranormal phenomenon?

HALKARA

I was only going to have one drink at first, but before I knew it, I'd powered my way through six!

FALFA

You have no self-control!

HALKARA

I already tipsy, but I decided to head back to the house in the highlands anyway. You wouldn't believe how long that walk feels when you're a little drunk! But, well, I made it back just fine. I was way too tired to make it to my room after I got back, though, which is how I ended up taking a little nap on the dining room floor.

SHALSHA

Shalsha doesn't think that sounds very hygienic.

HALKARA

Oh, it's fine! Alcohol's a disinfectant, after all! Hee-hee—get it? But really, though, I was trying my best to stand up! One of the table's legs was right next to me, so I tried to use it as a handhold to pull myself up. That must have gotten the table wobbling, though...

FALFA

And that's what knocked off the jar!

HALKARA

You've got it! Something smacked me right in the back of my head, and I was down for the count! Thank goodness my teacher happened to pass through the kitchen and notice me.

FALFA

...Well, I think this mystery is solved, Shalsha.

SHALSHA

It was a long, hard struggle, Sister.

HALKARA

Huh? Why are you two looking at me like that? You're scaring me!

FALFA

This means, in short...

SHALSHA

The culprit...

FALFA & SHALSHA

...was you, Miss Halkara!

HALKARA

Huh? What do you mean, "the culprit"? I don't remember doing anything bad today...

SHALSHA

Your crime is lacking the self-control to keep one drink from turning into six.

FALFA

And also making a bunch of trouble for the rest of us!

SHALSHA

You're under arrest.

Falfa and Shalsha bind Halkara's hands with rope.

HALKARA

Huh? Wait, what are you doing with that rope, you two? Why are you tying my hands together?

FALFA

Falfa has taken the criminal into custody!

SHALSHA

Take her to the dining room. We'll make an example of her.

HALKARA

Wait, no, I'm sorry! I'll confess! It was really eight drinks, not six!

SHALSHA - NARRATION

The criminal was unmasked, and peace returned to the house in the highlands...but there was no telling when another terrible incident would occur and wipe the smiles off our faces. The Great Detectives Falfa and Shalsha would keep fighting to protect the people's happiness from the forces of evil.

SCENE 6

House in the highlands - living room.

AZUSA

Hmm... So let me get this straight: The reason you fell over is because you drank too much again, right?

HALKARA

Yes, Madam Teacher... I'm terribly sorry for causing you and everyone else so much trouble... This was all my fault, and I'm ashamed of myself...

AZUSA

Well, you apologized and everything, so I think we can call all this water under the bridge.

FALFA

That's right! Hate the crime but love the criminal!

SHALSHA

Incidents like this are scary because we don't know how they happened. Once we find out the truth, they're usually pretty stupid.

LAIKA

I have to agree that this was a disappointingly banal explanation.

BEELZEBUB

I never thought the jar I brought as a souvenir would get *used* like this... Though perhaps used isn't the right word here.

HALKARA

That jar was so much harder than I thought it *would* be...

BEELZEBUB

Hmm. Perhaps it would make a surprisingly suitable weapon.

AZUSA

I don't think I like the idea of decorating my house with potential weapons... But anyway, I think we can all agree this case is closed! How about all of us get together for a nice dinner tonight? We have lots of drinks—with and without alcohol—and Rosalie should be back from Nascúte by this evening, so she'll be able to join us.

FALFA

Yaaay!

SHALSHA

Shalsha likes this idea.

HALKARA

It's drinkin' time!

AZUSA

You've already had enough today, Halkara, so none for you.

HALKARA

B-but nooo... I can hold a few more drinks, really! I promise!

LAIKA

Miss Halkara... I would appreciate it if you would at least make a token effort to resist temptation.

AZUSA

Oh, and they always have sweets after they solve a case in The Child Detective of the Sweets Shop, right? So I was thinking we could go down into Flatta and pick some sweets up for ourselves!

FALFA

Hooraaay! Falfa loves you, Mommy!

SHALSHA

People need rewards as encouragement. Shalsha is very grateful.

BEELZEBUB

Well, in that case, I shall have to bring an even more massive assortment of sweets with me the next time I visit!

AZUSA

Better that than another creepy jar anyway...

BEELZEBUB

Hmm? Speaking of which, the Jar of Grief that hit Halkara is slightly dented, isn't it...?

AZUSA

Oh no. I hope that thing wasn't really expensive. Then I'd feel bad about it getting damaged.

BEELZEBUB

Nay, 'tis not an issue of expense...

LAIKA

Then is there some other reason why it being damaged is a problem?

BEELZEBUB

You see, a Jar of Grief...is said to curse those who do it harm.

HALKARA

Huh? Wait... You don't mean...?

A deeply cursed aura manifests.

HALKARA

Um, excuse me, everyone? Why are you looking at me like that...? Oh, come on, I'm fine, see? Just look at me! I don't look cursed at all, do I? ...Ugh! My chest! My chest, it hurts!

LAIKA

Her face is turning blue! Wait, no—purple!

HALKARA

Aaaugh! My chest! My cheeest!

BEELZEBUB

It's the curse! It's taken hold of her!

AZUSA

First off, never bring us anything cursed as a souvenir again! Ugh, I've gotta dispel this right away...

HALKARA

My chest is being compressed... It's like some invisible force is squeezing it...!

AZUSA

Oh, your chest is getting compressed, huh? Maybe we should let the curse do its thing after all.

HALKARA

What is that supposed to mean, Madam Teacher?! Do something about this, please!

LAIKA

Perhaps since the jar was dented, its curse is attempting to dent Miss Halkara's chest in the same manner? An eye for an eye, as they say. It's only fair.

HALKARA

No it isn't! Help me, please!

Time passes.

FALFA

Hey, Shalsha?

SHALSHA

What is it, Sister?

FALFA

Falfa thinks detectives might be pointless in a world with real curses.

SHALSHA

Nothing is certain in this world. A phrase taught by a certain sect comes to mind: "All worldly things are impermanent, and all with form is emptiness."

AZUSA

Oh? Are the two of you done playing detective, then?

SHALSHA

Powerless though we may be, we can at least clasp our hands in supplication. Let us offer up our prayers for Miss Halkara's sake.

FALFA

Falfa agrees. Get better soon, Miss Halkara! Get better soon! Pain, pain, go away!

HALKARA

Um, prayers are nice and all...but if possible, I'd really like you to use some anti-curse magic on me, too, Madam Teacher!

The End



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★ ★ ★
**Laika's Lessons: A Day of Learning from
the House in the Highlands' Inhabitants** ★ ★ ★

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**



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※ This story is an edited version of the script of the fourth drama CD, contained in the special release edition of Volume 12.

SCENE 0

House in the highlands - garden.

LAIKA

Hah! Hah! Hiyah! Taste my fist!

Sound of a boulder breaking.

AZUSA

Ooh, dang, Laika, that was incredible! It takes one heck of a punch to break a boulder that big in one hit! Nice one!

LAIKA

Not at all, Lady Azusa. I have yet to so much as scratch the surface of the power that you wield.

AZUSA

Hmm, I dunno. In terms of pure power, I think you might be in a pretty good place already...

LAIKA

I'm afraid that is not the case. Allowing myself to be satisfied with this level of ability would be nothing but arrogance. Such complacency slows one's movements.

AZUSA

I get where you're coming from, but don't you think it'd be good to try something other than martial arts every once in a while? Maybe broadening your horizons would be helpful! You never know.

LAIKA

...Ugh. Truth be told...I've recently come to a similar conclusion. I've begun to suspect true strength cannot be achieved by pursuing power alone...

AZUSA

Oh really? Well, in that case, why not have some of our family members

suggest new ways for you to train? You could start with... Oh, actually, Beelzebub's stopping by today, so why not her? ...She really does come over to see Falfa and Shalsha all the time, doesn't she...?

LAIKA

That's brilliant, Lazy Azusa! Maybe asking others for ideas will help me find the answers I seek! I'll make everyone into my teacher! Thank you so much for the suggestion!

AZUSA

Laika always takes everything so darn seriously, huh...?

AZUSA - NARRATION

And just like that, Laika went out to learn a lesson from everyone she could find.

SCENE 1

House in the highlands - garden.

BEELZEBUB

So you hope to compensate for your weaknesses by having a wide variety of instructors teach you how to improve in areas where you falter? 'Tis a most admirable road you've chosen to walk.

LAIKA

Yes, and I would greatly appreciate it if you would teach me something, Miss Beelzebub! I'm certain a demon like you has knowledge that would benefit me!

BEELZEBUB

Hmm, perhaps...but I wouldn't think a lecture on demon agriculture would do much to carry you toward your goals... Demon knowledge, though...

Just one thing comes to mind...and I see that materials of the perfect length have conveniently fallen nearby. To start, Laika, take these.

LAIKA

Two sticks from a tree? What should I do with them?

BEELZEBUB

Hold them in your dominant hand and use them to snatch me out of the air.

Beelzebub turns into a fly.

LAIKA

Ah! You became a fly!

BEELZEBUB

They call me Lord of the Flies for good reason! Turning into one is the simplest of tasks.

LAIKA

I see now—it would indeed take incredible concentration to catch a flying insect between two sticks! And I've heard it said that a legendary swordsman once caught a fly between a spoon and a knife!

BEELZEBUB

That sounds less than sanitary... But in any case, have at you!

Sound of a fly's buzzing.

LAIKA

I must sharpen my mind...and focus... Hah!

Sound of a fly's buzzing.

BEELZEBUB

Not even close!

LAIKA

Hiyah!

Sound of a fly's buzzing.

BEELZEBUB

Still far from your goal! You'll grab little but air like that.

LAIKA

Focus, focus... Hah!

Sound of a fly's buzzing.

BEELZEBUB

Your strikes are stiff and clumsy!

LAIKA

I've got to picture moving the sticks like they're part of my hand... Hiyah!

Beelzebub spends some time buzzing around in fly form.

BEELZEBUB

What, giving up already?

No, you wouldn't. Not you. You're gathering all your spirit for your next attempt, aren't you?

LAIKA

...Please excuse me. My concentration faltered, and I nearly resorted to breathing fire.

Beelzebub returns to human form.

BEELZEBUB

What?! Hell's bells, *no*! Breathing fire's dangerous, and against the rules, at that! Absolutely not! Look, you scared me back into my usual form!

LAIKA

...It seems this training method is more stressful than I anticipated. I've felt the urge to breathe fire when irritated before...but this time, I only barely managed to keep it under control.

BEELZEBUB

You're making it quite clear that I'll be burned to cinders if we keep this up, so this training method is now off the table! Never again!

LAIKA

Oh! How about a different style of training? You turn into a fly, and I'll see if I

can hit you with my flame breath while you try to evade me.

BEELZEBUB

Are you truly in such a hurry to incinerate me?!

AZUSA - NARRATION

It looks like Laika's going to learn from Halkara next.

SCENE 2

The woods near the house in the highlands.

HALKARA

Honestly, Laika, I'm really impressed by your attitude about all this! I wish I could extract some of that motivation of yours, bottle it up, and have my company sell it!

LAIKA

I would rather not have anyone drinking my extract... By the way, Miss Halkara, *what* did you bring us out to this forest for?

HALKARA

I can't teach you anything about martial arts, so I thought I'd show you how to forage for mushrooms...! Well, that's what I'd like to do, but it'd be a disaster if I picked something poisonous by mistake, so I'm planning on showing you how to gather medicinal stones today instead. That's the sort of knowledge that might come in handy if you ever have to set out on a sudden adventure!

LAIKA

Absolutely, yes! A functioning knowledge of medicine is sure to lift me to still greater heights! I appreciate your guidance!

HALKARA

Okay, let's get this lesson underway! Oh, and look—there's one already! I've got a keen eye for more than just mushrooms, I'll have you know! Take a look at this stone. If you grind it into a powder and mix it with medicinal herbs, it enhances their effect!

LAIKA

I see! I'll write that down...

HALKARA

Oh, and there's another one! You might have heard of this one—it's a Philosopher's Stone!

LAIKA

It's what?! The Philosopher's Stone is the stuff of legends, and you found one lying around in a forest?!

HALKARA

Wait, no... This is actually a College Dropout Who Wanted to Be a Philosopher But Couldn't Cut It's Stone. If you grind it into a powder, it slightly relieves benign discomfort.

LAIKA

That doesn't sound particularly useful...

HALKARA

The world's full of items that don't seem very useful at first glance! You just have to accept that some things are always going to be a little questionable and make do with what you can get. Ooh, is it just me, or did I say something pretty wise just now?

LAIKA

...Yes, I suppose that is a valid perspective.

HALKARA

All right, let's keep moving along! There are all sorts of great stones just waiting to be found in these woods! Oh? It looks like someone else is here!

Falfa rushes over.

FALFA

Big Sis Laika, Miss Halkara! Hello!

HALKARA

Oh, if it isn't Falfa! You must be playing in the woods today, huh?

FALFA

Falfa heard you talking about stones and decided to come join in!

HALKARA

Oh? Are you interested in stones, too, Falfa? In that case, go ahead and ask Professor Halkara anything you want to know! Unlike mushrooms, there's no way we'll end up eating a bad one by mistake, so I guarantee this lesson will be almost totally safe!

FALFA

Okay! Um, so, this rock's a different color than all the other rocks around here, right?

LAIKA

Now that you mention it, it does rather stand out.

HALKARA

Huh? That rock doesn't have any medicinal qualities, though.

Professor Bumotralli's theme song plays.

FALFA

Well, it looks different because it was formed during a volcanic eruption! It was sent flying by a big volcano a long, long time ago and fell here!

LAIKA

Oh really? I had no idea!

FALFA

You can see other signs of the eruption in this forest, if you look closely. Okay, let's go over there where we can see the nearby fault next!

LAIKA

Certainly! I'm very interested in geology!

HALKARA

Waaait! We're drifting into a whole different academic field!

FALFA

A scientist called Professor Bumotralli wrote a whole book about the geology of this area, you know!

LAIKA

You're very knowledgeable about such things, aren't you, Falfa? This is most enlightening!

HALKARA

Wait up, you two! Don't leave me behiiind!

Don't steal my student, please! What happened to Professor Halkaraaa?!

AZUSA - NARRATION

So Halkara's lesson was sort of a disaster... After that, Laika headed over to see Rosalie.

SCENE 3

A woodland far away from the house in the highlands.

LAIKA

We've flown quite a fair distance, Rosalie. What exactly do you intend to teach me here?

ROSALIE

You'll understand when we get just a little deeper into the woods! Come on, Sis, let's keep moving!

LAIKA

These are nothing like the woods by the house in the highlands, are they...? It's so gloomy here...

ROSALIE

You've got good instincts, Sis. Take the opportunity to soak in some of that gloom! We've still got a ways to go!

LAIKA

...Ugh. It's so dark, you'd think it was nighttime... I'm not even sure what direction we're traveling in anymore...

ROSALIE

Ahhh, yeah. I hear adventurers have gotten totally stranded in these woods before. Though when you think about it...that also means they're the perfect place to hide out if you don't want to be found.

LAIKA

Surely you don't mean bandits have taken up residence here? If there are criminals hiding out in these woods, we have to find them and bring them to justice!

ROSALIE

Oh, we're almost there! The center of the woods is just up ahead.

LAIKA

Understood! I will take point!

Laika advances into the depths of the woods.

LAIKA

Huh? That's strange... I can't sense any other people around, but something's off... And wait—huh? It's not especially cold, so why am I getting chills...?

ROSALIE (IN A SCARY VOICE)

That's because you're sensing the presence...of *ghooosts*!

LAIKA

Eek! Don't say things like that, please! You're scaring me!

ROSALIE (IN A SCARY VOICE)

But it's truuue! Don't you see how the bark on that tree looks just like a face? That's the exact place where someone hung themselves!

LAIKA

I said stop it, please! I...c-can't deal with those sorts of stories...

ROSALIE

Then isn't that a weakness you have to overcome? You're strong, Sis, but you're also a scaredy-cat. That's why I thought taking you to a forest that's famous for being the site of lots of suicides would make for the perfect training.

LAIKA

I see nothing! My eyes are closed! I can't see a thing!

ROSALIE (IN A SCARY VOICE)

Oh, but don't you know? If you close your eyes, you'll be powerless to defend yourself against wandering spiiirits! Have you ever had sleep paralysis before? It's the same thing!

LAIKA

Aaagh! Just stop! I mean it!

ROSALIE

Sorry, Sis, but you have to stay strong! I'm doing this for your own good!

A ghostly presence manifests.

LAIKA

Am I imagining it, or did I just hear a voice? I mean, besides ours...

ROSALIE

Oh, that was one of the *ghosts* bound to this place. They were cheering you on, too!

LAIKA

That's the last sort of encouragement I need right now!

A ghostly presence manifests, accompanied by a ghostly voice.

LAIKA

Huh...? This time, I could have sworn somebody was saying my name...

ROSALIE

All the ghosts are shouting your name to cheer you on! They're making a whole chant out of it.

LAIKA

Gaaah! Please don't! Just stop! Don't mind me, I'm begging you!

ROSALIE

Pull yourself together, Sis! They're just ghosts! The worst they could possibly do is curse you a little—they're total weaklings!

LAIKA

That's exactly what I'm afraid of! Please don't curse me!

ROSALIE

This is hurting me as much as it hurts you, Sis, but it's a trial you have to overcome if you want to obtain true strength!

LAIKA

...U-ugh...

ROSALIE

Oh! Are you finally building up a resistance to them, Sis? Did you realize there's nothing to be afraid of, when you really think about it? What's the big deal, right? It's just a couple of ghosts.

LAIKA

...I'm so terrified, I could breathe fire at any second.

Laika snaps.

Rosalie panics.

ROSALIE

No, that's not allowed! The fire restrictions in this forest are super harsh!

LAIKA

Oh, I know! I can't be scared of the forest if there isn't a forest to be scared of, right?

ROSALIE

Wrong! No! That's the sort of thought process that makes gods of destruction decide to end worlds!

LAIKA

I'm well aware that destroying nature is a terrible act, but breathing fire as a response to fear is a natural physiological reaction. We're predisposed to producing flames to protect ourselves in times of danger.

ROSALIE

Okay, I get it! I'll take you somewhere without any ghosts! Just no fire breathing! Even the ghosts are scared now!

LAIKA

I'd have to open my eyes to walk, though, and I'm too scared to do that... I might let a burst of fire out if I tried...

ROSALIE

Okay, then keep them closed! No problem! I'll guide you! Ah, now turn right! Three steps ahead, then left! Follow the road for a little while... Okay, there's a three-way junction just ahead, and you'll want to turn right!

AZUSA - NARRATION

Ghosts sure are scary, huh? Anyway, Laika made it back to the house in the highlands in no time.

SCENE 4

House in the highlands - living room.

FLATORTE

You're afraid of ghosts, Laika? Red dragons really are a bunch of cowardly weaklings. I, the great Flatorte, still stand far above you and your kind!

LAIKA

Th-that's not... It's a personal problem that only applies to me! I am not a weakling, and red dragons are certainly not weaker than blue dragons!

FLATORTE

Keep telling yourself that. I, the great Flatorte, am strong in all aspects except being smart!

LAIKA

That doesn't seem like something you should declare out loud, especially not with such pride... You essentially just called yourself an idiot...

FLATORTE

Acting like you're not stupid is the same as declaring that you're afraid of people thinking you're stupid. If you admit you're stupid, then being called stupid isn't even an insult!

LAIKA

Ugh! Why did that actually sound deep...?

FLATORTE

And that's why I, the great Flatorte, refuse to study anything at all!

LAIKA

Never mind. You're just an idiot. I see there's nothing for me to learn from you.

FLATORTE

I'll teach you the secrets of cold breath.

LAIKA

It's physically impossible for me to learn to use that. I know you don't have anything to teach me...especially considering how many times we've already sparred.

FLATORTE

Okay, then what if I teach you about music?

Flatorte brings out her lute and starts playing a tune.

LAIKA

Oh, that's right. I'd forgotten you are a proficient musician.

FLATORTE

All right, sing along after me. **Ra-ra-ra-ra-ra!** 🎵

LAIKA (OUT OF TUNE)

Ra-ra-ra-ra-ra! 🎵

FLATORTE

That was a little off. Try it again. **Ra-ra-ra-ra-ra!** 🎵

LAIKA (SLIGHTLY LESS OUT OF TUNE)

Ra-ra-ra-ra-ra! 🎵

FLATORTE

Still not perfect, but I, the great Flatorte, will accept it. Next. **Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons!** 🎵

LAIKA (OUT OF TUNE)

Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons! 🎵

FLATORTE

Listen carefully and imitate me. **Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons!** 🎵

LAIKA (SLIGHTLY LESS OUT OF TUNE)

Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons! 🎵

FLATORTE

All right, you're getting better and better. **Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons!** 🎵 **Mighty, mighty, supercool and mighty, as powerful as they come!** 🎵

LAIKA

These lyrics sound like they were written by an infant... You've lived for hundreds of years, technically, even if you wasted most of them. Aren't you embarrassed to sing something like this?

FLATORTE

The lyrics don't matter! They're just filler! Now sing!

LAIKA (OUT OF TUNE)

Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons! 🎵 Mighty, mighty, supercool and mighty, as powerful as they come! 🎵

FLATORTE

Stay in tune! Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons! 🎵 Mighty, mighty, supercool and mighty, as powerful as they come! 🎵

LAIKA (SLIGHTLY LESS OUT OF TUNE)

Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons! 🎵 Mighty, mighty, supercool and mighty, as powerful as they come! 🎵

FLATORTE

Much better! Now together!

FLATORTE & LAIKA

Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons! 🎵 Mighty, mighty, supercool and mighty, as powerful as they come! 🎵 Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons! 🎵 Mighty, mighty, supercool and mighty, as powerful as they come! 🎵

FLATORTE

Good! Much closer to decent than you were at the start.

LAIKA

You have a remarkable talent for music yourself, Flatorte. Thank you very much. You've proven yourself a teacher.

FLATORTE

I, the great Flatorte, accept your praise and am ready for more of it!

LAIKA

...But that song's lyrics are idiotic. Please come up with better ones.

FLATORTE

I don't actually think those lyrics are cool, okay?! It's just for practice! We'll go with a real song next time, so prepare yourself!

AZUSA - NARRATION

I thought I heard some sort of weird song, and it turned out to be another part of Laika’s training... Anyway, she went on a field trip to a faraway town with Falfa and Shalsha next.

SCENE 5

The town of Bridatta.

LAIKA

We’ve come quite a long way to reach this town, haven’t we?

FALFA

Big Sis Laika, do you see the box Shalsha’s holding? It has your assignment for this field trip in it!

SHALSHA

Shalsha just bought the box at the general store.

LAIKA

Understood. I’ll open it up, then. Let’s see... *Find out how the town of Bridatta developed?*

FALFA

That’s right! Today, you’ll be learning how this town came to be the way it is.

SHALSHA

We’ll walk around and unveil the truth together.

LAIKA

In other words, we’ll be studying the geography and history of the area? I see.

SHALSHA

First, look at this map of the town.

Laika studies the map and her surroundings.

LAIKA

...I see that there are two deep valleys flanking the town.

FALFA

That's right! We'll be going to the town's edge to look at one of those valleys next. But first...

SHALSHA

We'll try one of Bridatta's most famous local products: Bridatta bread.

LAIKA

This is remarkably springy for bread, isn't it? It's delicious.

SHALSHA

It's famous for being far chewier than standard practice dictates bread is supposed to be.

FALFA

All right, let's all eat together while we walk!

Laika, Falfa, and Shalsha move to the edge of town.

FALFA

Munch, munch, munch. Look—see how both sides of the valley, *munch, munch, munch, munch*, are made of hard bedrock, *munch, munch*, down to its base?

LAIKA

Munch, munch, munch. Ah, I see! I wonder how the valley formed in the first place?

SHALSHA

It's hard to tell, *munch, munch*, when you should swallow this bread, *munch, munch*.

FALFA

Munch, munch, the truth is, the place where the valley is now used to be made, *munch, munch, munch, munch*, of layers of soft earth! *Munch, munch.* A river used to flow through the area, and that river, *munch, munch*, eroded the soft parts away, leaving only the bedrock. *Munch, munch.*

LAIKA

Oh? And I suppose that made it into, *munch, munch*, the optimal location to build a fortified city, *gulp*... There. I finally finished my bread.

FALFA

Okay! Next, we'll go back into town and see how it was made! But first...

SHALSHA

We'll try another of Bridatta's most famous local products: Bridatta caramels.

LAIKA

Oh, this is so sweet! It's delicious, but...mnh...it's very chewy, isn't it?

SHALSHA

It's famous for being far chewier than standard practice dictates caramel is supposed to be.

FALFA

And since it's so sweet, it gives you a nice energy boost!

Laika, Falfa, and Shalsha move to the center of town.

SHALSHA

Shalsha is knowledgeable about Bridatta's history, *chew, chew*, so I'll take over to teach this lesson.

LAIKA

Chew, chew, understood. Please teach me, *chew, chew*, Shalsha. These caramels don't seem to dissolve at all, do they?

FALFA

Their slogan is apparently "One piece lasts three hundred days"! *Chew, chew*.

LAIKA

Surely that must be an exaggeration...? *Chew, chew*.

SHALSHA

Well then, *chew, chew*, at this moment, we stand in Bridatta's largest...*chew*,

chew...and most thriving shopping district, *chew, chew*.

LAIKA

Ah! The caramel's stuck to my teeth! I can't get it off!

SHALSHA

Is there anything in particular you notice, *chew, chew*, when you look at this street? Any characteristic traits of the town, for instance?

LAIKA

Yes, there are. For one thing, central streets through towns are typically straight, but this one is distinctly curvy.

SHALSHA

Ugh... Shalsha's caramel stuck my teeth together.

LAIKA

Eating these caramels is quite the trial, isn't it...?

SHALSHA

You're very quick on the uptake, Big Sister Laika. This street has more features than just curves, though. Try thinking a little more.

LAIKA

What could they be? Hmm...

FALFA

You're just like a real history professor, Shalsha! 🎵

SHALSHA

Don't just look up and down the street. Look at the streets that intersect it, too.

LAIKA

The streets that intersect it? We're at an intersection now, but... Oh! There's a slight incline on both sides, whichever way you turn! This street must be the lowest point in the town.

SHALSHA

That's exactly right. This street was built to follow the bed of what used to be a small river that ran through this area.

LAIKA

Ooh! I believe I'm starting to understand how this town was built!

SHALSHA

The path of the river changed, and the river itself began to dry. Its former bed became the street we're now walking on. That's why it's so curvy and meandering.

LAIKA

You'd never know it just walking around, but every town has a distinctive story behind it, doesn't it? This has been very informative.

SHALSHA

When you study history, you learn to recognize all sorts of things, even in towns you've never been to before... Shalsha would be happy if you asked for another lesson sometime.

FALFA

You're so enthusiastic today, Shalsha!

SHALSHA

You are, too, Sister. There's much to learn from the study of geography. Shalsha understands very well that there are limits to what one can learn sitting at desks and reading books.

FALFA

Yeah! You have to go out and get loots of fresh air, too!

LAIKA

...I see. Both of you have found connections between your fields of study and the real world. And by association, your daily lives have become connected to your studies as well. I feel I've gained a wealth of new information today!

FALFA

Falfa's happy to help, Big Sis Laika!

SHALSHA

It is only through the accumulated studies of many different fields by many different people that new ideas can be born. Recently, that concept is gaining traction in modern scholarship.

LAIKA

Well, then! We came all this way, so shall we walk a little more through the shopping district?

FALFA

Yeah! Walk time, walk time! 🎵

SHALSHA

Many philosophers have experienced sudden flashes of inspiration while out on walks. The act of walking helps keep one's brain active.

FALFA

Ah! Falfa just saw something!

LAIKA

What is it?

SHALSHA

Another of Bridatta's most famous local products: Bridatta skewers.

FALFA

They're made from mutton that's so hard it's almost impossible to bite through and are simmered in a salty-sweet sauce!

LAIKA

...Don't you think this town has far too many signature foods that take ages and ages to eat?

SHALSHA

And that is why mealtimes in Bridatta are far longer than standard practice dictates they should be.

AZUSA - NARRATION

Apparently, that mutton did, in fact, take a really long time to eat. After that, Laika gave the girls a ride home. They arrived back at the house in the highlands that evening.

SCENE 6

House in the highlands - garden.

LAIKA

Lady Azusa! I've just finished spending the day learning a lesson from each of our family members!

AZUSA

Boy, you really took this whole thing seriously, didn't you, Laika? I have a feeling it gave you the push you needed, though, judging by the look on your face.

LAIKA

It did, yes! I've learned that it pays dividends to learn all sorts of things from all sorts of sources rather than single-mindedly focusing on my usual training alone! I'm certain I'll be able to apply those lessons to my regular training as well!

AZUSA

Your drive for self-improvement is so overdeveloped, I'm really curious how the heck your parents raised you!

LAIKA

...But there's one thing that would truly complete my day... That being, well...

AZUSA

Hmm...? You're kinda fidgeting, Laika. What's up?

LAIKA

I would like to finish this day by learning a lesson from you as well, Lady Azusa.

AZUSA

Ooh, I get it now. But hmm. You and Flatorte already spar together all the time... And considering how your day went, I should probably teach you something only I know about... But you've helped me out with my medicines so much in the past that you already know a good bit about those, right?

LAIKA

Then what can you teach me, Lady Azusa?

Time passes.

AZUSA

...All right, I have a plan. I'll set you up with my own special-made training regimen!

LAIKA

Thank you very much! I will endeavor to complete it to the best of my ability!

AZUSA

Okay, then first up: to the garden! You'll pull out all the weeds you find growing there as quickly as you can!

Laika prepares to weed the garden.

LAIKA

I see—this is an exercise to help me learn to attack more rapidly from a bent-over position, isn't it? Understood!

AZUSA

Ready? Go!

LAIKA

Hah! Hah! Hah!

Laika begins high-speed weeding.

AZUSA

Looking good, looking good! Don't just use your lower body, though—make sure all of your muscles are engaged!

LAIKA

Hiyah! Hiyah! Hiyah!

Laika begins ultra-high-speed weeding.

LAIKA

I've finished!

AZUSA

That was so fast! You took care of that way quicker than I envisioned, and it looks great!

LAIKA

Only because I was able to focus so intently. I tried tracking the weeds not only with my sight but with all five of my senses.

AZUSA

Sorry, but I have no idea what you mean.

LAIKA

Rosalie's training helped me learn to sense the weeds' presence. As a result, I was able to tell where all of them were to some extent, even when I couldn't see them.

AZUSA

Wow, you're a master weeder already!

Laika and Azusa move into the living room.

AZUSA

Okay, we'll hold our next training drill in here.

LAIKA

Understood! And as you requested, I've brought a rag that I moistened with

water!

AZUSA

Great. Now use it to wipe the walls!

LAIKA

At once!

AZUSA

Ready? Go!

LAIKA

Hah, hah, hah! Hah, hah, hah! Hah, hah, hah! Hah, hah, hiyah!

Laika rapidly wipes down the walls.

LAIKA

I've finished!

AZUSA

No way. How is that possible?! This is a pretty big room, right?!

LAIKA

To tell you the truth, Rosalie is aware of which parts of the walls are dirtier than others, since she's constantly flying, and she passed that information along to me. As such, I was able to move with precision, wasting no movements and targeting the blemishes with perfect accuracy!

AZUSA

Rosalie again?! And uh...honestly, I was hoping you'd wipe the parts that aren't visibly dirty, too... But eh, whatever. Next task's in the kitchen!

Laika and Azusa move into the kitchen.

LAIKA

I see there's an enormous pile of dishes by the sink. If I may hazard a guess—

AZUSA

That's right! Your next training drill is washing all those dishes!

LAIKA

I must say, this seems substantially less difficult than wiping the walls was.

AZUSA

N-nah, no way! Better get to it, and be sure to use plenty of soap to get through those tough grease stains! Go!

Laika washes the dishes.

LAIKA

Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons! 🎵 Mighty, mighty, supercool and mighty, as powerful as they come! 🎵

AZUSA

Didn't expect you to start singing while you washed. And what a weird song!

LAIKA

Dr-ra-ra-ra-ra-gons! 🎵 Mighty, mighty, supercool and mighty, as powerful as they come! 🎵

AZUSA

Yep, that's an earworm, all right!

LAIKA

I've fi-ni-sheeed!

AZUSA

What is this, a musical?!

Time passes.

LAIKA

Now, what will my next training drill be, Lady Azusa?

AZUSA

Geez, you really are fast, huh? There's not much else left to do, honestly. I already folded the laundry...

LAIKA

Um, Lady Azusa? This is a rather difficult subject to broach...

AZUSA

Yeah? What is it?

LAIKA

You've just been passing off household chores as training drills, haven't you?

AZUSA

Yep, you've done it again, Laika. I knew you'd catch on... I bet you knew right from the start, didn't you?

LAIKA

Um, Lady Azusa, I certainly have no objections to doing the chores, but I would like to properly train as well! Please, give me a real, special training drill!

AZUSA

...Laika, I think you have the wrong idea about this.

LAIKA

Huh? How do you mean?

AZUSA

Training doesn't always have to be something special. In fact, sometimes just living your day-to-day life is the best sort of training there is. Doesn't that ring a bell?

Laika gasps.

LAIKA

You're right! I see now... And to think I only just learned from Falfa and Shalsha about how one's studies are linked to one's daily life... It only follows that daily life is also connected to one's training! How could I be so foolish?!

AZUSA

(Yep. She takes everything super seriously, all right...)

LAIKA

Thank you so much for this lesson, Lady Azusa!

AZUSA

(She's also pretty easy to pull a fast one on, huh...?)

LAIKA

I'm sorry, did you just say something?

AZUSA

Nope. Not a thing.

All right! All else aside, you really did your best today, and I think that merits a reward.

SCENE 7

House in the highlands - dining room.

FLATORTE

Meat! So much meat! It's a festival of meat!

FALFA

Meat, meat!

SHALSHA

Little indulgences are necessary from time to time.

BEELZEBUB

I see beef, pork, chicken, mutton, and boar. 'Tis rather impressive you managed to prepare such a wide variety of dishes.

AZUSA

Okay, everyone! You can eat your fill, but be sure not to finish anything that Laika hasn't had the chance to try yet! She's the star of the show tonight!

LAIKA

No need to worry, Lady Azusa. I've already sampled every variety on offer.

AZUSA

You don't even *eat* in half measures!

BEELZEBUB

The spread would have been even more impressive had you added some dishes with spice.

AZUSA

If I made anything spicy enough for your standards, nobody else would be able to eat it.

BEELZEBUB

I'll have to remember to drop off a personal assortment of hell-spices for myself to partake of whenever I eat here.

AZUSA

I'm not sure I want anything with *hell* in its name lying around the house...

ROSALIE

I've been wondering about this for a while, Big Sis—is eating really that much fun?

AZUSA

It's kinda hard to explain in a way that would make sense to you, but basically—yeah, it is.

ROSALIE

But all you're doing is putting corpses into your body, right?

AZUSA

That's way too literal of a description! And wait, you ate, too, back when you were alive, didn't you?! Ghost humor makes no sense to me... Anyway, Laika helped out with all the chores and spent the rest of the day focused on self-improvement, so I thought it'd be the perfect chance to splurge a little and treat her, that's all.

LAIKA

So they really were just chores.

AZUSA

W-well, yeah, but chores can be training, remember...?

HALKARA

If we've got something to celebrate, then that means we should party hardy!

FLATORTE

Halkara's barely touching the meat at all! She's only been drinking.

HALKARA

Elves are basically vegetarians, so booze suits me better than meat does! Ha-ha-ha-ha!

AZUSA

I don't mind you drinking, Halkara, but cut yourself off before you barf all over the place, okay?

HALKARA

No need to worry about that! After all, I'll be barfing in the bathroom before I have the chance!

AZUSA

What are you, ancient Roman nobility...?

Time passes.

LAIKA

...I just want you all to know that I'm truly happy living here in the house in the highlands!

ROSALIE

Okay, but you've been living here the longest out of all of us except for my big sis, haven't you?

FALFA

Yeah! That's right! You've been here the longest!

SHALSHA

And being the most experienced out of all of us in this lifestyle, there's much we would like to learn from you. You're our mentor.

LAIKA

What? No, no, stop that! I can't handle this seniority talk! It's embarrassing!

HALKARA

Mentor, mentor! ♪

FLATORTE

If treating Laika like she's my mentor makes her uncomfortable, then I, the great Flatorte, will have to do so!

LAIKA

Lady Azusa, help! Tell them to stop teasing me!

AZUSA

Okay, guys, no overdoing it! I think that's plenty. But I could learn something from you, too... I often think I should try to be more serious, like you are. Maybe I'll treat you like my mentor every once in a while.

LAIKA

Please don't!

BEELZEBUB

You all get along awfully well, don't you...? I, for one, am more than satisfied spending only one night here every three or so days.

AZUSA

Isn't that still pretty often?

BEELZEBUB

You would have me see my daughters even less than that?!

AZUSA

Stop calling Falfa and Shalsha your daughters!

The End



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AFTERWORD

Hello, this is Kisetsu Morita.

It feels like it was yesterday that I wrote about Sandra joining the family, but it turns out it's been an awfully long time, now that I look at it... It's kind of incredible that this series has managed to carry on for so long in such a laid-back, low-stakes manner. I really appreciate that people recognize it as part of that slow-paced slice of life subgenre.

That's not to say there hasn't been some change in the house in the highlands lately! In this volume, a pet (well, sort of) joined the family in the form of a mimic. What sort of changes in the family's dynamic will its newest member bring? The mimic will be making an appearance in the next volume, so you can look forward to finding out then!

Now then, this series has already reached its fifteenth volume, and coincidentally, the label it's published under will also be hitting its fifteenth anniversary this year. Now, that's a cause for celebration!

Fifteen years—that's the same amount of time it took for Hideyoshi to go from inheriting Nobunaga's domain after the Honnoji Incident to lying on his deathbed. Okay, maybe that's a slightly dire comparison to make, but what I'm trying to say is that it's a span of time in which the course of history can be turned on its head!

Apparently, a web event featuring works from both GA Bunko and GA Novels called GA FES 2021 will be happening toward the end of this month. I'm told that information about the *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years* anime will be announced during their presentation, so please look forward to it!

Recently, I saw a picture of all the characters together, and it made me realize that Azusa's hat takes up way too much space. The drawing I saw had the characters lined up in three rows, with her standing way in the back, and I

couldn't help but think of how the tallest people in a group always end up getting shuffled to the back automatically when the time comes to take a group photo (lol).

Next up: The special edition of the next volume, Volume 16, will include this series' sixth drama CD! How do we already have six of those...? Preorders should already have begun, so if you're interested, you can go ahead and place your order now! As for the CD's story, it's a real curveball featuring the inhabitants of the house in the highlands paying a visit to the real-world Azusa Aizawa! It's due for release in April of this year!

Speaking of drama CDs, Volume 15 included scripts for the third and fourth drama CDs as bonus material. This seems like as good of an opportunity as any to discuss them a little, so I think I'll do just that!

Drama CDs, by their nature, allow for a lot of audio-based gags that you just can't pull off in a novel. Falfa's weird detective impression, Laika and Flatorte's dragon song, and Beelzebub buzzing around as a fly are all good examples of that. All of those aspects of the stories were originally intended to be presented through audio, and expressing them through writing can never quite convey the exact same effect... So when you read them, please do your best to imagine the sounds!

Also, drama CDs provide the opportunity to tell stories of a nature that can't be told in the main volumes (or, to be precise, that I have no intention of ever telling in the main volumes). I'm referring specifically to the fact that unlike the main story, the drama CDs aren't told exclusively from Azusa's perspective.

It feels a little silly to come out and say this in the afterword of Volume 15, of all places, but bonus content aside, every novel in this series has been told from Azusa's first-person perspective. We don't get to see what the other characters are doing when she's not around. To rephrase this slightly, we never get to jump into another character's perspective—Azusa, the main character, is all we get. That's why I decided to deliberately focus on other characters' perspectives for the drama CDs.

Drama CDs are products, of course, so I can't do something like write a story about Falfa and Shalsha playing together that doesn't feature any of the other

characters... But I still do my best to write these stories in a manner that distinguishes them from the main series. The sixth drama CD will tell a story that could never, ever occur in the main series. I hope you'll buy the special edition and see for yourself... Wait, when did this section turn into an advertisement?!

Now then, it's time for some announcements regarding the non-novel side of the series. First, Yusuke Shiba's manga adaptation is due to have its eighth volume published this March! It feels like we've been getting one volume of the manga after another lately. This time around, Sandra will be making her first manga appearance! The house in the highlands family will keep doing their thing in their usual laid-back way, and I hope you enjoy it!

Now onto the anime. It's scheduled to start in the spring of 2021, and all sorts of preparations are currently in progress! There isn't much for the original series' author to do (at the end of the day, I'm just the author—not an anime creator myself), but from the perspective of a viewer, I really hope it turns out well and eagerly await its broadcast. It's in your hands, good people of the production committee!

Also, Kaede Hondo, who plays Laika, and Sayaka Senbongi, who plays Falfa, have a radio show called *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Minutes* that broadcasts online for one minute every day! It's called a radio show because it's broadcast at a particular time every day, but those broadcasts are being uploaded to YouTube, so you can listen to any episodes that have already been released. If you're interested, please check it out!

Finally, some thanks. Thank you to my illustrator, Benio, who still has to deal with new character designs a full fifteen volumes in! Thank you once again to Yusuke Shiba, who's in charge of the manga adaptation, and thank you to everyone involved in the anime's production! Finally, I give my greatest thanks to all the readers who have supported this series and kept it running for so long!

Killing Slimes has ended up being a pretty long series, but its run time is just a drop in the bucket compared to Azusa's three hundred years killing slimes. I hope to keep it running for longer still, and I hope you'll stick with me every step of the way!

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