

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio

13

Average of 25
x 365 days
x 300 years
x (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
Illustration by Benio

13





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Boss
Beelzebub

Play Tester
Azusa

GODDESS
CHRONICLES

Now is
the time
I surpass
my sister,
the most
powerful—
**Let us
fight!!!**



**The Red-Dragon
Academy for Girls**
"I've Been Killing
SLIMES 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level."
SPIN-OFF

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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 13

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**



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I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level, Vol. 13

KISETSU MORITA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by Benio

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SLIME TAOSHITE SANBYAKUNEN, SHIRANAIUCHINI LEVEL MAX NI
NATTEMASHITA vol. 13

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PERSE-
VERANCE
EQUALS
POWER. I
ONLY DO
THINGS I
CAN STICK
WITH!

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.

LAIKA

A dragon-girl and Azusa's apprentice. She aims to reach the heights of power and is a good, earnest, hardworking girl. Gothic Lolita clothes, maid outfits, and other frilly things suit her very well (which embarrasses her). She is the main character in this book's spin-off, *The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls*.



GREETINGS,
SISTER.
LET US
CONVERSE
WITH OUR
FISTS!



...EVEN IF YOUR BODY IS HEAVY, YOUR HEART SHOULD BE LIGHT.

MOMMY, MOMMY! I LOVE YOU!

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.

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.



WELL, WHAT SHOULD I HAVE TODAY? ♪



MY NAME IS BEEELZE-BUB, AGRICULTURAL MINISTER OF THE DEMON REALM!

BEEELZE-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.



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.

WYNONA

A slime spirit born after Falfa and Shalsha. She's cautious and is distant with Azusa, whom she treats like a stepmother. She's already actively a top-rated adventurer, but she's oddly obsessed with the color white.



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.





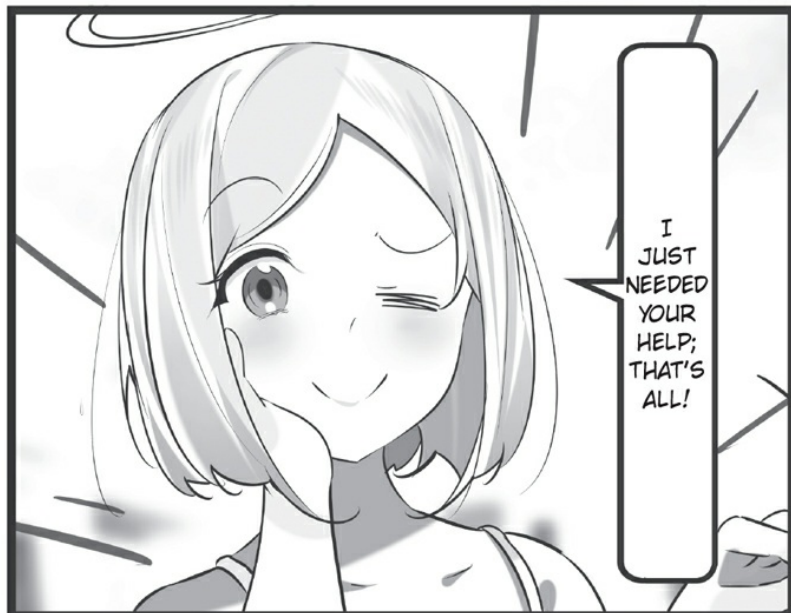
ANYFIN'
GOES, SO
LONG'S
IT'S GOOD.
GOOD
PEOPLE'RE
THE BEST
PEOPLE.

MUUM MUUM

Nickname: Muu. Sovereign of the ghosts' kingdom of the dead, as well as the ruler of an ancient civilization that is now destroyed. Though she had holed herself up after growing fed up with her wet-blanket people (the poltergeists), she made a return to society (?) after coming into contact with Azusa and Rosalie. She has an accent and loves banter.

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.



I
JUST
NEEDED
YOUR
HELP;
THAT'S
ALL!

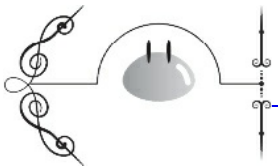


YOU
CHILD!
BECOME
A FROG!

THE GODDESS NINTAN

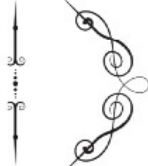
A goddess long worshipped in this world. She is a troublesome one, always looking down on others and turning people she doesn't like into frogs, but after losing a fight to a human (Azusa, who broke the level cap), she softened a bit.





WE CELEBRATED ROSALIE'S 200TH

DEATHIVERSARY



Muu was over to hang out with Rosalie again, so I took them to a town that was a bit out of the way in Nanterre Province.

After dropping us off, Laika went straight to another town to do some shopping, but she was going to come back when she was done.

I was tagging along because it was a little risky to leave Rosalie and Muu alone. Word would get around if Muu's body physically fell apart like it had last time.

Incidentally, it was Rosalie who had suggested coming to this town.

At a glance, there was nothing special about it, nor had Rosalie ever been here before. I had been wondering why we'd come all this way, but the answer was soon clear.

"Cor blimey, that's a disaster, innit? That'd make anyone stick around."

"My thoughts exactly. Just coming here from home was a preferable experience."

Rosalie and Muu were mingling with others, chatting up a storm. It was nice to see them so excited.

I was keeping an eye on them from a bench a little ways away.

I was glad there were places for people to relax. As a rule, I didn't join in on these conversations. Strictly speaking, I couldn't.

Then Muu turned to look at me. But it was a bit eerie, because only her head turned 180 degrees. It creeped me out...

“Oi, why don’t ya get off ya behind an’ come join the chin wag?”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but no thanks.”

“You nevah struck me as the timid type! The old biddies back ’ome would come right up an’ join in.”

Don’t treat me like an old lady! I still look seventeen.

And my reluctance to engage wasn’t because I was shy.

“You know...I can’t see anyone besides you and Rosalie.”

“That so? Lots o’ the lads ’ere don’t mind a livin’ person. Come on ovah.”

“I mean, I mind, so...”

That’s right—Rosalie and Muu were surrounded by graves.

The reason Rosalie had chosen this town was because it had an expansive graveyard.

Graves didn’t always guarantee the presence of ghosts (the majority of them were already “passed on,” as we’d say), but some still had regrets in this world, and so they had come to chat with those who remained.

As a living person, I wasn’t really sure how communication between ghosts worked, but observation alone told me that it wasn’t all that different from how living people communicated.

“Huh. Honestly, you’d ’ave more to talk ’bout wiv ’em than me—I was born in ancient times. Most o’ these ones ’ere are even youngah than us.”

That second “us” was specifically referring to me.

I was a three-hundred-year-old witch, so I suspected there were lots of ghosts younger than me.

What Muu had said made sense, but I remained hesitant.

“What are you talking about anyway? Local dishes?”

“How to forcibly make ghosts who cause problems for ovvah ghosts pass on to the next world; y’know what I mean?”

“Well, I have nothing to contribute there!”

That topic was genuinely for ghosts only!

Well, the living and the dead were basically like different species, and it was perfectly normal for different species to prefer different topics of conversation.

Everyone who lived in the house in the highlands had to accept such differences in order to thrive.

But I might want to think twice about making *too* many new ghost friends, considering how horribly I handled spooky business.

And that was why I stayed on the bench, watching.

I thought that it was enough for the dead to enjoy each other's company.

Rosalie, too, was more animated than she normally was back home.

I didn't think she was suffering there, but it must be like spending time at her parents' house, while being in this graveyard was like hanging out with friends her own age.

It would be strange for someone to act the exact same way around both their family and their school friends, so I didn't see anything wrong with that.

Here, Rosalie could enjoy herself like the ghost she was (whatever that means?).

I could hear what Rosalie and Muu were saying all the way from the bench if I concentrated.

"Oh yeah, that's right. This'd be the year."

"Well, aren't ya glad you 'ad some mates from back 'ome tell ya? You'd bettah remember those fings. It only happens once in a lifetime, so you'd'a regretted it if ya forgot."

It sounded like they'd gotten their hands on some information. Ghost communication was just as important as I'd thought.

But what was once in a lifetime?

I mean, strictly speaking, their lifetimes were already over...

I knew ghosts could only "ascend" (or pass on) once, but that wasn't something they'd talk about so casually.

“Well, it’s not like I have any descendants or anything, so it isn’t a big deal.”

“C’mon, Rosalie, don’t go on wiv that gloomy nonsense in fronta me! I’ll make it ’appen. We’ll ’ave a big get-together. A shindig! Be a right bubble!”

Muu was getting excited over some kind of event. I wondered what it was.

A little while later, Muu approached me.

It took her such a long time to get to me, however, that I ended up carrying her part of the way... It was still difficult for her to get anywhere quickly using her own strength. She could move however she wanted with her magic, but she didn’t have any real desire to use it.

Rosalie moved over to the bench, too. Muu was so slow that waiting for her to finish her chat with me and coming back would take too long.

“What was that all about, Muu?”

“We were chattin’ wiv the ghoulies ’round ’ere an’ we got jawin’ ’bout our birth years, an’ then we realized that it’s Rosalie’s anniversary this year.”

“What? You mean some hundredth year since your birth?”

Rosalie seemed a bit shy about it, so I was probably right. We needed to celebrate.

“Aww, so close, mate, so close! You’ve basically got it! Barely touchin’ it!”

“Then if I’m wrong, what is it?”

“The correct answer is...Rosalie’s 200th deathiversary!”

“That’s very...dead!”

Rosalie was looking at Muu, as if begging her not to make a big deal out of it. Maybe she was a bit embarrassed to be the center of attention.

“It’s not that important. Any ghost would get there eventually. Two hundred’s just a passing point for someone like me. It’s not like I’m a saint or a hero.”

“Sure, that’s true. We couldn’t just celebrate every plebe, eh?”

She was right—if there was a special day for everyone’s two hundredth death anniversary, the whole world would be celebrating all the time.

“But there are a bunch of people who know you, Rosalie. Just the people in the ’ouse in the ’ighlands plus all your acquaintances outside is a big enuff number. And since you’re my mate, I could even throw you a big gala fit for royalty!”

She was right.

Rosalie was already very lucky to be celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of her death.

“Which means...” Muu turned to me. “We’ll ’old this shindig in the Thursa Thursa Kingdom! ’elp me make a guest list.”

“Is this a party the ghosts throw themselves, then...? I was under the impression that it was the living who celebrated for the dead...”

Though, I supposed there was no reason it had to be one way or the other.

“Got it. I’ll do everything I can. And you’re fine with us holding a party for you, right, Rosalie?”

“S-sure... I guess it’s a once-in-a-lifetime thing, as long as it’s not too extravagant...,” Rosalie said, scratching her cheek.

Maybe this kind of situation was just as embarrassing for the dead as it was for the living.

Asking someone else to throw your two hundredth death anniversary party was probably just as difficult as asking someone else to organize your own birthday party.

And so we made plans to hold a celebration commemorating two hundred years since Rosalie’s death—truly a once-in-a-lifetime event.



Even though I said I was going to help, there was only so much I could do.

First, I had to get the invite list ready. Muu couldn’t do that alone.

And there was one more thing only I could accomplish: I had to use my magic to get a new outfit ready for Rosalie.

“All right, here I go. What do you think?”

I changed Rosalie's clothes into a glittering dress.

I'd gotten a lot better at the spell that let ghosts—specifically Rosalie—change their clothes.

It wasn't like I could change any old ghost's clothes, though. Rosalie had gotten really good at imagining what she wanted to wear and bringing it to life, and that probably helped.

"Isn't this a little too much for me? It's so extravagant..."

"I don't think it's too much at all. You're the star of the show, you know."

The outfit was a lot more poofy and big than the ones I'd dressed her in before.

It kind of resembled a wedding dress.

"I know it's embarrassing, but I think you should really go all out. If you decide three years down the line that you wish you'd done this or that for your 200th deathiversary party, it'll be too late."

"Hmm... Well then, if anything, I wish the outfit had more of a focal point."

"A focal point? Feel free to elaborate. We can still make edits and do a lot of fine-tuning."

If Rosalie herself didn't like the dress, then this would all be for nothing.

She turned to show me her back.

"Could you embroider a message back here? Something that says **I've finally made it to two hundred years past death after living and dying in disgrace and causing you all so many problems. But I'm gonna barrel ahead along this VICTORY ROAD like a runaway horse, so THANK YOU!**"

"I think that's a bit too much for a focal *point*."

This wasn't supposed to be an over-the-top sweet sixteen.

©Benio



“But, Big Sis, I want to express my gratitude to everyone. I’ve only stuck around for two hundred years because of you all.”

She was a ghost, so she would have made it to her two hundredth even without all of our support, but that wasn’t the point.

“I know what you’re trying to say, but you should use your voice and tell everyone out loud. It’s kinda weird to show your gratitude to all your guests by turning your back on them. It might even seem a little rude.”

“You’re...probably right.” She seemed to understand. “I should have the embroidery on the front, then. Maybe you could write **UR ALL THE BEST, THX XOXO—**”

“Writing it on the front isn’t any better! Besides, I don’t know anything about clothes like that, so I can’t make them.”

I’d never worn that kind of outfit in my past life, and I didn’t have any friends who would have, either. What could I do?

Afterward, I got Laika’s and Halkara’s thoughts on the matter and settled on a dress that was decently fancy but that Rosalie could agree to compromise on.

It took a bit of pushing on my part, but I managed to sell her on a dress that was both beautiful and elaborate.

Deep down, Rosalie wanted to wear a pretty dress, too. I’d sensed it the previous times I’d dressed her up. However, she had a hard time saying it out loud—even more so now that all eyes would be on her.

I know I’d probably hesitate if I were in her shoes.

However, accounting for her reservations about such things had made the process a little difficult.

Once I had solved the dress conundrum, my job was done.

Muu was organizing the event herself, so there was nothing for me to check on. The only thing left was to take the whole family to the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.

We were finally making our way, as a family, to the Thursa Thursa Kingdom

for Rosalie's two hundredth death anniversary party.

As we were flying, Laika asked, "Will I be able to fly into the Thursa Thursa Kingdom, Lady Azusa?" She was currently in dragon form.

That was a good point—they usually had measures in place to prevent people from entering.

"It should be fine. Apparently, they've made it temporarily accessible. They said you could land near the ruins."

"Understood. I will continue under the assumption that I can enter directly."

We neared the kingdom without any trouble.

"Hey, Big Sis? Was that statue there before?" Rosalie asked me. When she pointed it out, I spotted what looked like a massive stone statue.

If I was to compare it to something from my previous life, it reminded me of the Great Buddha of Ushiku, one of the tallest statues on earth.

I knew Muu liked to go overboard, and I found myself wondering what she'd done this time.

Knowing her, it'd probably have the face of some strange mascot character...

Once we got closer, however, I realized what it was.

It was a statue of Rosalie!

The massive Rosalie had both arms raised in the air. Why was she posed like she was about to get attacked by a bear? Couldn't the artist have gone with something a little daintier...?

"Hey! What the hell was Muu thinking?! I didn't hear anything about this!" Rosalie's face was bright red.

If the same thing had happened to me, I'd be pretty angry.

"We'll be landing soon, everyone... Hold on tight, please."

Laika followed Flatorte's descent, and we landed in the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.

When we reached the ground, Muu and her minister, Nahna Nahna, were

waiting for us.

“Hey, you made it! Today we’re celebratin’ someone’s 200th deathiversary!”

“We built that statue as a surprise—Her Majesty’s idea. I simply did as I was told,” Nahna Nahna greeted us, skirting all responsibility on the matter.

“Muu, seriously?! Don’t do things like that! At least keep it small! There’s a point where it gets *too* big!”

“But what’s the point if it’s not massive? At that size, anyone can see how amazin’ it is. You gotta leave an impact on the viewer.”

“I’m not trying to leave an impact. Who were you expecting to wow with that?!”

Ah, they didn’t see eye to eye on the matter.

“Look, ya life lasted less than twenty years, yeah? An’ not only that, ya spent most of it cooped up in ya ’ouse, right? You didn’t really ’ave any great accomplishments in life, so words alone ain’t enough to express what you’ve done. That’s why I’m aimin’ to overwhelm with sheer size.”

“I’m not here to look back on accomplishments! I just wanted a little celebration!”

“Why?! It’s ya 200th deathiversary! You’ll regret it if ya don’t go all out for these once-in-a-lifetime milestones! It’d be better to go too far an’ wish you ’adn’t than to not go far enough an’ wish ya ’ad!”

“So you know you went too far!”

She was right... It was almost a nuisance at this point.

That was when Nahna Nahna stepped in.

“Additionally, the eyes of the statue...”

A red light shone out of statue Rosalie’s eyes.

“...Light up.”

“That has nothing to do with me!”

“It alerts us to six PM, seven PM, eight PM, nine PM, ten PM, and eleven PM. It’s

very convenient.”

“Totally irrelevant!”

“Well, only ghosts are going to be seeing it here, so it’s not like it matters.”

As I watched them converse, a thought occurred to me.

I was very lucky not to have had such a statue made of me...

Just then, I felt an odd chill.

“Elder Sister, Elder Sister~”

Pecora had approached me. I guess demons were attending, too.

They did have relations with the Thursa Thursa Kingdom, and they were acquaintances of Rosalie’s, so it wasn’t a surprise to see them here.

The problem was, now Pecora had seen something I wished she hadn’t.

“You know, we could build a statue like that of you in Vanzeld Cast—”

“If you do, I’ll never talk to you again.”

Despite the result, Muu had built the statue with good intentions. Pecora, however, did everything with evil intentions.

“Right, let me take ya to where the action’s happenin’. Come on, follow me.”

Muu had said the words, but it was Nahna Nahna who ultimately ended up carrying her. I really thought she should go ahead and use her magic to get around, but it seemed her pride wouldn’t let her.

The whole family had started to move, but I noticed Flatorte seemed lethargic for some reason.

“What’s wrong, Flatorte? Tired from flying?”

“We’re in the kingdom of the dead, Mistress. It’s hard to get excited knowing there probably won’t be very much to eat...” However, seconds later, she started sniffing the air. “Hey! Something smells good! They must be cooking!”

“Of course. We made sure the livin’ could enjoy themselves, too. We’ve got both you lot and the demons ’ere, after all.”

As we approached our destination, we found a gate.



ROSALIE'S
200TH DEATH
ANNIVERSARY PARTY

~GETTING A HEAD START TOWARD 300~

The positivity was nice, but something was off...

Beyond the gate was a proper setup, including accommodations for the living.

The ghosts were standing in rows, manning what looked like food stalls.

At almost every stall, there were hot plates lined with little depressions and filled entirely with...*takoyaki*.

“We’re making tons of gems of the crimson devil. It’s a gem of the crimson devil party!”

Wasn’t it an Osakan thing to make *takoyaki* at house parties?!

That said, the gems of the crimson devil went over well with all the guests.

The fillings weren’t limited to octopus—some had cheese and others ham, so there was something for everyone.

“How many have you had, Laika? I, the great Flatorte, have had two hundred and eighty!”

“A party like this does not call for a competition of numbers—we must think only about eating each piece as graciously as possible. I have had two hundred and sixty.”

As usual, the dragons were eating an absurd amount of food...

The girls and I munched on our gems as we took Sandra to a spot of dirt that seemed like it was full of nutrients; she couldn’t eat, so I wanted to make sure she didn’t get bored. It was tough being a mom.

“Yes, this is good earth. I’ll stay here until the event starts.”

“Okay. Come find us later, Sandra.”

When we returned to the area where they were serving the gems, I noticed the arrival of other demons and spirits I knew, including Godly Godness and

Nintan.

This really was a full-blown party.

“Tis quite festive, no? Almost difficult to believe this was once a forgotten kingdom.” Beelzebub came over, holding a plate full of gems.

“Yeah, that’s true. I mean, I put the guest list together, but I didn’t think we’d get such a good turnout.”

As I looked across the venue, I saw Pecora chatting with Nintan, and Canimeow the moon spirit doing the same with Eno, the “Witch of the Grotto.”

This 200th deathiversary party was really bringing people together.

Beelzebub elbowed me, a cheeky look on her face.

“What do you want, Beelzebub?”

“You have real charisma. Without Azusa, the Witch of the Highlands, we never would have had a party of this caliber.”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think? All this proves is no one had anything better to do. Or that a lot of people were interested in the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.”

There were probably a lot of demons who had heard of the kingdom but never visited.

“All these people are here because they trust you. And the Thursa Thursa Kingdom opened their doors to them because they trusted your judgment.”

Why was I getting so many compliments all of a sudden? Something was fishy.

“...I’m not giving you my daughters.”

“That is not the point!” Beelzebub protested. “I am genuinely offering you my highest praises! Do you not trust me at all?!”

My reaction was based on her usual behavior, so there wasn’t much I could do.

“But if I said I was sending Falfa and Shalsha to live with you, you’d agree right away.”

“I would say yes, even if it meant the whole world turned on me,” she said, face earnest. That was exactly why I couldn’t trust her.

As we chatted, a light fell on the stone stage—probably a kind of ancient magic.

Nahna Nahna took Muu and ascended the platform.

“Thank you all for coming today to Miss Rosalie’s 200th Deathiversary Celebration. I am certain our dearly departed would be delighted to see just how many people are in attendance.”

Wait, Rosalie is here, you know! Don’t talk like this is a funeral!

“The sheer number of her close friends and family present today is simply a testament to how active she was in life.”

She met all these “close friends and family” after her death, not in life!

This eulogy-style speech was turning the whole celebration on its head!

Nahna Nahna wasn’t smiling, but she was definitely joking. She had to be...

“First, a word from Her Royal Majesty, Queen Muum Muum, former sovereign of our country, on behalf of the departed’s friends on her two hundredth deathiversary.”

Nahna Nahna placed Muu down on the stage and left.

Once she was alone on the stage, Muu’s expression turned stoic. A queen was a queen, after all.

I could tell that Rosalie was looking right at her.

“Lessee ’ere then, the gems of the crimson devil you ’ad today were fantastic, made wiv the ’ighest-quali’y flour, the ’ighest-quali’y leeks, an’ the ’ighest-quali’y octopus thanks to the ’elp of key supportin’ members.”

“Don’t start off talking about the food!”

I couldn’t help but comment...

But—

Muu looked at me and gave me a thumbs-up, her expression saying *Nice one!*

I guess she was giving me her approval for interjecting.

Come on; stay on track.

“Well, Rosalie’s a mate. And to be honest, she’s a valuable companion to me, considerin’ ’ow long I’d been cooped up alone.”

This was more like it. She was finally getting serious.

“I bet there’s a lot of ya ’ere who are thinkin’ ‘Just two hundred years? I been dead much longer than that.’ I bet most of you lot from the Thursa Thursa Kingdom fall under that category. I’m the same, me. Two ’undred years pass while you’re yawnin’, really—wait, that’s a pretty long yawn.”

Oh no, she was starting to banter with herself...

“But when you live a meanin’ful death, you can experience so much in those two hundred years. So the fact that we’ve got all these people ’ere for your two hundredth means you’re right chuffed, aren’t ya, Rosalie?” Muu turned to look at Rosalie. “I bet you’re thinkin’ ’bout ’ow ’appy you are. You’ll be thankin’ all these people ’round you as ya keep on bein’ a ghost. You know, there’s way more ghoulies out there who don’t get a two hundredth deathiversary celebration.”

There was a heat glinting in Rosalie’s eyes as she nodded.

I guess ghosts cried, too.

But it wasn’t real water, so it vanished once it hit the ground.

“Me own two hundredth deathiversary—two hundred years in general, really—passed in the blink of an eye, so I won’t say this is a replacement for me own, but I want to go all out in celebratin’ my mate’s two hundredth. Both the dead and the livin’—enjoy! This will be the greatest funeral in ’istory! Funeral? I mean party! Thanks for listenin’!”

It wasn’t a bad speech at all.

But then a red light washed over the venue.

It was still a little early for sunset. A murmur rippled through the crowd.

The Rosalie statue’s body had lit up!

Not only that, we could now see the words **WORLD'S BEST ROSALIE**.

"Come on! This is so embarrassing I could die! Why is this happening?!" Rosalie protested, her face bright red. She was under the statue's light as well.

"That's all right! You're already dead! May as well give wha'evah ya want a shot an' experience all the regret an' embarrassment ya like!"

"You're the one embarrassing me and making me feel regret!"

I knew they were friends, but they were on such different pages!

Nahna Nahna appeared again and carried Muu off the stage.

It seemed even she had been overcome with emotion; her eyes were watering.

"That one has quite the heart at the end of the day," Beelzebub said, impressed. I'd been thinking the same.

"Yeah. The statue was a bit much, but it does demonstrate some real motivation and decisiveness."

Then Nahna Nahna, master of ceremonies, called out, "Next we have our star of the day, Rosalie, on her two hundredth deathiversary."

Everyone clapped.

All the spirits started making ghostly tapping noises in celebration.

"I'm going to have to talk, aren't I...?"

Rosalie seemed nervous, so I gave her a gentle nudge in the back.

My hand went right through her, though. Obviously.

"It's all right. Just express your gratitude, and everyone will understand. We're all on your side here."

"That's what I was thinking on the way here, but then I saw that statue. Now I'm beginning to think I may have some enemies disguised as friends..."

That statue really was an unwelcome favor!

"But there's no point in getting upset about it. I'm gonna go up there and give it my all, even if it kills me!"

“That’s the spirit, Rosalie!”

She floated up to the stage.

“Uh... Hi, I’m Rosalie. Um... The two hundred years since my death sure have gone by quickly, huh...? I’m going to keep giving it my all... Uh... And being a good ghost...”

It wasn’t very often that the subject of a two hundredth death anniversary could give a speech themselves, so I wasn’t sure if she was going about it the right way.

“I’ll do my best so we can celebrate three hundred years the same way... Though, maybe by then some of the living people here will already be dead...”

That was an ominous thing to say, but this wasn’t a wedding, and today was all about her anyway...

“Th-thank you all for everything! I didn’t organize this party, but have fun today!”

For her final lines, she shut her eyes and yelled.

Well said, Rosalie. Well said.

I gave her heartfelt applause.

Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra (who had come back) all applauded her with big smiles.

Here’s to the next one hundred years, Rosalie.

So now the most important part of the event was over...but then MC Nahna Nahna announced what was next on the program.

“Next, the Royal Choir of Thursa Thursa will sing a song celebrating Rosalie.”

I felt a strange pressure, then I realized all the ghosts present were surrounding us. So they’d decided to show themselves...

“The Royal Choir of Thursa Thursa is our country’s sole professional choir, masters of the unique way spirits manifest their voices. Today they will be performing select pieces from the opera *Glory and Downfall*: ‘Decline,’ ‘Repent,’ and ‘All Returns to Earth.’”

It must have been obvious to everyone present, but those were some ominous song names.

And then the choir began to sing.

“Ooooooh... Ooooooh... Aaaaaah... Uhhhhhh...”

A shiver shot down my spine.

“The music and voices are even more horrifying than I had imagined!”

Even Beelzebub’s expression had clouded over.

“This music sounds like a curse. Even the most cheerful would lose their energy hearing this.”

“So even demons have the same reaction.”

“’Tis not as though demons enjoy dreary music. Some songs do indeed have dark lyrics, but the fast-paced melodies have quite the opposite effect.”

She was right—this music could hardly be considered rousing.

The rest of my family looked similarly depressed.

Even Laika and Flatorte had stopped eating their gems of the crimson devil.

“I have lost my appetite... How despondent I feel...”

“I don’t wanna eat anymore... I think I wanna throw up instead...”

It seemed the music was super effective against them.

But I figured the event would liven up again once the song was over.

...Or so I thought, but the song was still going thirty minutes later.

“Ooooooh... Ooooooh... Aaaaaah... Uhhhhhh...”

A leaden atmosphere had settled over the entire crowd.

The kids were leaning up against a tree, asleep, and Halkara sat huddled in the tall grasses, almost like she was hiding.

This music was way too powerful!

This was getting out of hand, so I went to Muu to tell her just that.

“Hey, Muu? Can’t you do something about this...?”

“I don’ fink I care ’bout the event no more...” Muu’s eyes were glazed over.

It was even having an effect on the ghost queen!

Then Nahna Nahna staggered over to me.

Her head was bowed so deeply I couldn’t see her face; she was like a phantom right out of a horror story.

“My apologies, Miss Azusa... The choir’s power is much too strong—it has stolen the will to perform from all of our subsequent acts. So once this song is finished, I hope you do not mind being left to your own devices to eat, drink, and head home as you please.”

“That’s fine, but you might want to rethink the program order for next time.”

“The choir had not sung in earnest like this for such a long time... I am certain they put their all into choosing the most depressing music.”

I wished they hadn’t.

In the end, once all the songs had finished, most of the guests—the living included—sat lifeless in their chairs or on the ground, as if they, too, had become ghosts.

There were a few exceptions, however.

Like the two goddesses: Nintan and Godly Godness.

“Gods do not fear the cries of the dead.”

“Oh gosh, what an effect it’s had on everyone~ But what sinks must float back up. Let us look on the bright side!”

As I had thought, it had no effect on the divine.

Additionally, it seemed to have invigorated and inspired the two artists.

Curalina, the jellyfish spirit, was concentrated on her painting.

“Death may seem to be the end of everything, but more lies beyond. I have seen a world free from the chains of brightness. Jellyfish-fish-fish!”

Her brush dashed across the canvas, a ghastly look on her face. Maybe this was a valuable experience for her.

Then there was Kuku, feverishly jotting down music as it came to her.

“This is wonderful. I think this song will be on a scale I’ve never approached before! Totally new territory!”

It seemed the music had no effect on people who were gloomy to begin with!

Despite all the problems, we had still managed to hold a celebration for the two hundredth anniversary of Rosalie’s death, so all was well.

The red light from the Rosalie statue washed over the sea of lethargic guests.

It wasn’t terrifying per se, but I was willing to bet that once they woke up, the experience would linger at the back of their minds like a half-remembered nightmare...



That said, we were unaware that trouble had been brewing at the event.

A few days later, Eno, the “Witch of the Grotto,” brought me a book when she dropped by the house in the highlands. She had been present at the event as well.

The title of the book was ***Ruins of the Ancient Rulers: A Continuation.***

“I feel like I’ve seen this somewhere before...”

“Apparently, it’s about an adventurer who returns to a place where he once had a terrifying experience and comes across something new. I believe it’s about the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.”

Curious, I flipped it open.

—I had previously visited a ruin that was home to rows of strange box-shaped buildings that differed from any culture with which I was familiar. Perhaps “visit” is not the proper term, as I simply happened to stumble across it. The air had been much too cold for any living being, and it was there that I found a profane, howling beast, difficult to describe in words.

Though I miraculously survived the encounter, I was

compelled to once again see this strange, abominable land. I decided to attempt a return.

“Why do people like this always want to go back?”

He wouldn't be in any trouble if he had just given up...

“If the place had rare herbs found nowhere else in the world, then I would want to go, Miss.”

“That's because you're a consummate professional, Eno...”

I read on.

—My attempts ended in numerous failures, however. The paths through the deep forest led me astray, as though the trees themselves mocked my efforts. Over and over, I would find myself back at the mundane, rural village from which I had set out. I would ask the locals for information, but they could tell me nothing.

Well yeah, that was because the Thursa Thursa Kingdom used magic that prevented people from coming in most of the time.

—But after countless ventures, I at last arrived at what I believed was the place I sought.

Though what I saw first were not the box-shaped buildings, forged in an aesthetic sense so alien to our own; something else caused me terrible vertigo.

There stood the towering statue of a girl, carved out of stone, so tall it was as though the sole purpose of its creation was to pierce the heavens themselves.

He had seen Rosalie's statue!

“The spell over the kingdom had been turned off so that we could attend

Rosalie's two hundredth, Miss Azusa. Isn't that why this person managed to get in?"

"Yeah, I think you're right, Eno."

And he had come at another very bad time. I hadn't heard anything about a random outsider infiltrating the crowd, so he probably ran away.

I figured I'd find out if I kept reading.

—I felt as though I would be crushed under the weight of all of my questions. I could not fathom why someone would carve such a massive statue of a girl in a place like this—though, judging by its sheer scale, I suppose the term constructed would be more apt. It was, without a doubt, the largest man-made structure I had ever seen in my life.

Further, the great statue of the girl had both its hands raised, in much the same manner as a beast might use to intimidate a human; there seemed not a hint of intention to convey the girl's beauty.

He was panicking over the Rosalie statue!

—All I could do was stare up at the statue of the girl, awestruck. What was its significance? I stepped beneath her skirt for the sake of research and looked up to find that the statue had not been built in complete detail—all I found was crude stonework.

"What is this guy doing?!"

"He was so driven by his desire to discover an ancient civilization that he even checked her skirt."

"What kind of interpretation is that?!"

—It was then that the girl’s eyes shone a bright scarlet. In turn, her body also shone, illuminating the area around it. All I could do was stare up at it in horror.

I did not run; instead, my fear spurred my thoughts into action. Perhaps this statue acted as a guard, one that alerted the residents of the presence of trespassers from the outside. But its size was much too big to fulfill that role. Nay—I would certainly have spotted a structure of this size among the dense trees, but I could not remember ever having seen it.

For what reason did this statue exist here? No being appeared to provide me with the answer. I should perhaps count myself fortunate that neither did anyone appear with the intent to do me ill. The megalith’s eyes simply glowed scarlet.

I was pretty sure the statue had been built because “it seemed kinda cool.”

Similarly, it was given glowing eyes because “it seemed kinda cool.”

—I did not feel the deathly chill I had experienced on my previous visit. Perhaps now was my chance to fully explore these ruins. Excitement and expectation filled my breast as I proceeded forth.

But it was not long before I found myself needing to plug my ears lest I go mad.

I heard a strange, dreadful song wafting my way from the ether.

“Oh no, he heard the choir!”

—Was it indeed a song? This sound could not possibly have

risen from any creature's throat, but neither was it the rustle of feathers or leaves rubbing together. It seemed to follow a human melodic structure.

The tune had echoed in my ears for a mere few seconds when I suddenly felt the well of my adventuring spirit shrivel. I lost the strength to place one foot in front of the other; I fell to my knees. How unholy that music was, as though it thoroughly and fully held all life in contempt. Both the melody and production of the sound itself were powerful enough to destroy the very will of any living creature.

Oh yeah, I guess it would be pretty terrifying for a normal person to hear that song...

—I crawled through the dirt as tears streamed down my face, no choice but to put the music behind me. Had I remained standing where I was, covering my eyes in horror, I would have become unable to move a muscle until my final breath.

It was then that I felt a shadow cover me, and I looked up.

The massive statue of the girl was glowering down at my minuscule self.

In that moment, I finally understood.

This was no statue. It was a titan.

Though it was not human, it still stood in this spot of its own will. Even though it seemed to be made of stone, that was not proof that it did not live.

I sensed the titan warning me that this was no place for a

mere mortal, and so I left the wood and never looked back.

“So in the end, that song kept out an intruder...”

I closed the book.

I was glad it hadn't led to any unnecessary trouble. However, it seemed the ancient civilization did get the occasional adventurer seeking it out, so it was probably for the best that they took precautions.

I felt eyes on me from the ceiling and looked up to find Rosalie. She had apparently been reading the book, too.

“Big Sis, he described me like I was a beast... Am I really that scary?”

“I mean, if you're already spooked, anything you see immediately afterward would look scary...”

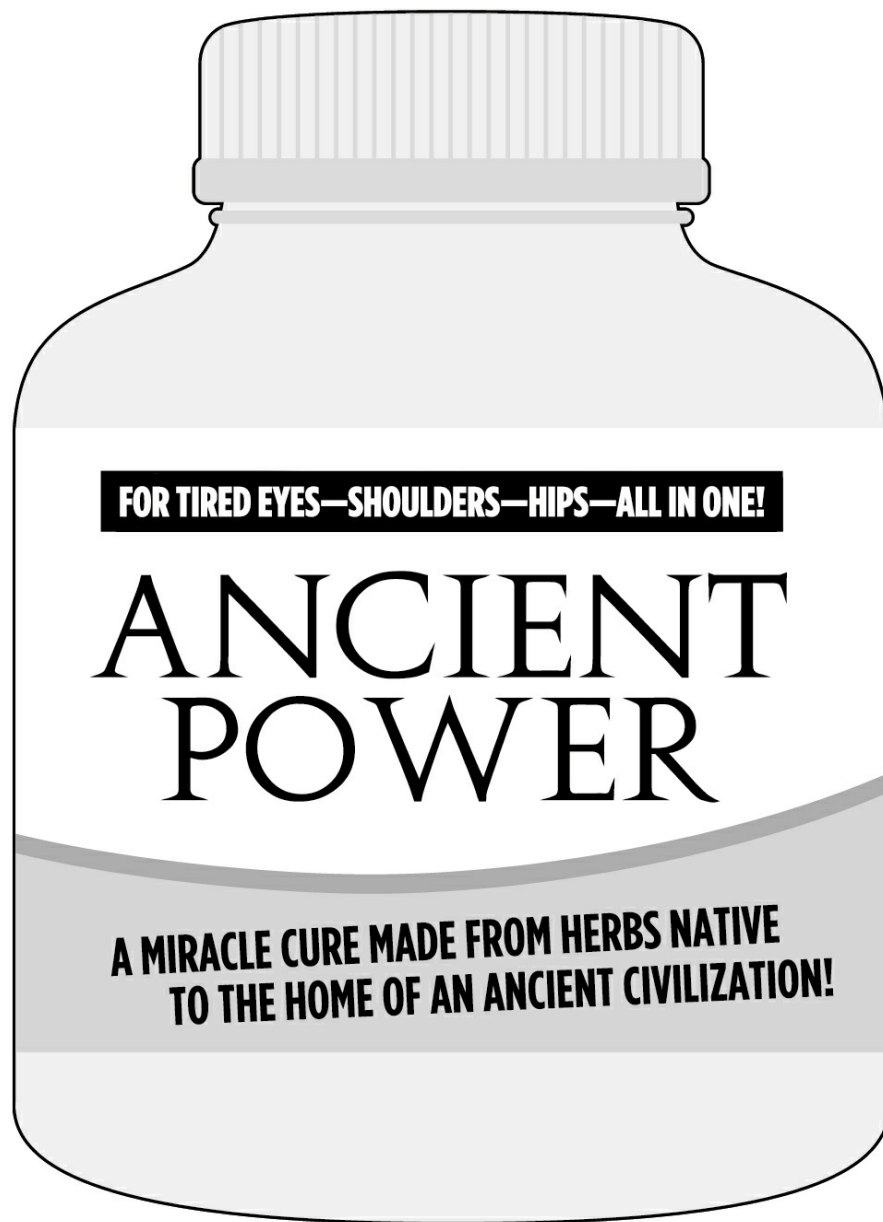
I decided I would ask Muu to destroy the statue.

“By the way, Eno, did you come here just to tell us about the book?”

“No. As it happens, I have developed a new medicine!”

With a self-satisfied smirk, Eno placed a bottle on the table.

The label on the bottle looked like this:



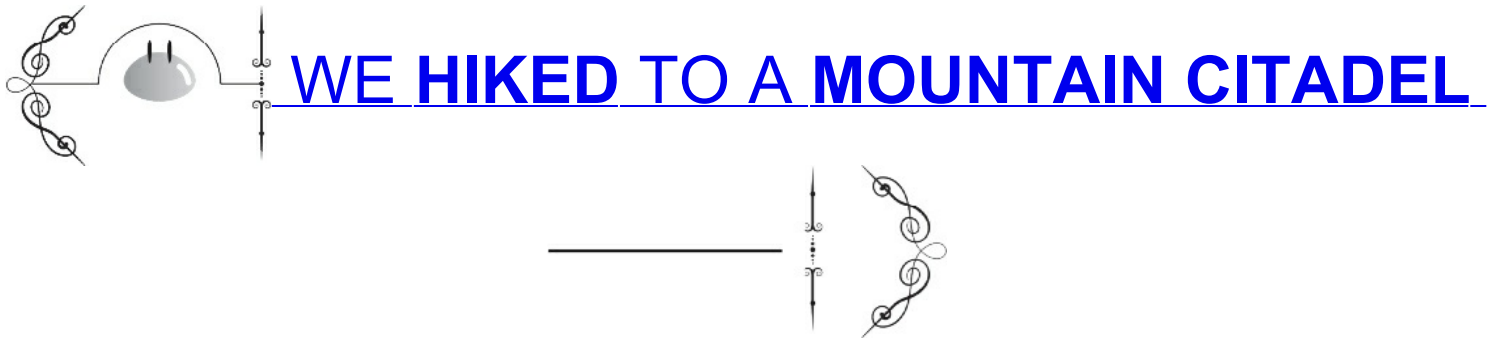
“What do you think? I made a thorough check for any usable herbs when I visited the Thursa Thursa Kingdom! It has been such a long time since any person has visited, you see! The plants had all evolved in a very unique manner!”

“You absolutely cannot put that on the label! People might figure out where it came from!”

Afterward, I had Eno change the label.

Maybe I really had invited too many people into the Thursa Thursa Kingdom...?

Later that night, when Halkara saw the Ancient Power bottle, she yelled, “That woman! I must make my own new product!” and proceeded to get very fired up about it.



After dinner, Shalsha remained in the dining room, sinking her teeth deep into a book.

Not literally—she was just really into it. Once, when Halkara was super sloshed, she actually bit into a book, but that’s not what I meant here.

“What are you reading, Shalsha?” I asked, placing a cup of tea I had made for her on the table.

“This.” She showed me the page she had open.

It was a picture of a small stone castle sitting on top of a mountain.

“Oh, are you interested in castles, Shalsha? Should I take you to Vanzeld Castle?”

Beelzebub would be happy to hear that—it would be perfect. She’d probably even be willing to take paid time off in order to provide a thorough guided tour. Maybe she’d let slip some defense secrets, too.

“This is a different kind of castle than Vanzeld, Mom.”

“It is? What do you mean? It looks the same to me...”

“All right. I’ll explain it in a way that anyone can understand.”

Shalsha turned the page.

On it was a picture of a big castle, like Vanzeld, and another one that sat at the peak of a mountain.

“Vanzeld Castle sits on a plain like this.”

“Mm-hmm, I get that.”

“Technically, this would be called a plains citadel. A powerful fortress built in a ruler’s territory for the purpose of governance.”

“Right, I see, I see.”

“Conversely, the one on the mountain here would technically be called a mountain citadel.”

These names were pretty straightforward for technical terms.

“Mountain citadels are castles built for battle, most often constructed at the height of a conflict between warring lords. They are much smaller than plains citadels and do not get many visitors now, so most are in ruin. But that’s precisely why they hold an alluring sense of the past.”

“Wow... So you prefer castles on mountains, then?”

Even though Shalsha never showed much emotion, I could still sense her enthusiasm.

“Yes. Shalsha wants to go to a mountain citadel. Especially this one, Tachidern Castle.”

The next page she flipped to had a picture of what looked like ancient ruins on a mountaintop—and a long stone wall. Thin clouds hung over the scene.

“Wow, that’s pretty neat!”

“Many castle enthusiasts like this place. You can tell how amazing it is just from the picture... But it’s not easy to get to.” Her face clouded over. “Tachidern Castle is surrounded by harsh terrain. Anyone other than the most skilled adventurers would find themselves exhausted partway through and give up. Shalsha can’t go alone.”

“In that case, we can fly over on Laika or Flatorte, and I’ll drop you off from above the castle.”

There was basically no place my family couldn’t get to. The only possible exception I could think of was outer space.

“But then there’s no point.” Shalsha shook her head.

She continued:

“Scaling the sheer mountain by ourselves is what gives the journey meaning. Getting to the castle the easy way lessens its impact. There’s no sense of adventure!”

Shalsha sure was passionate about this!

“Most mountain citadels were built for war. Therefore, the harsh, difficult journey to the central keep is a key feature. Flying on Laika or Flatorte and getting there in one attempt would be putting the cart before the horse.”

“A logical argument. That’s just like you, Shalsha! You mean to say the journey is important.”

I could understand how she felt.

It would be easy if, for example, we could get to our destination in a second. But then there would be no excitement in the buildup. Since my Teleportation spell didn’t work over very long distances, I’d never experienced that sort of disappointment, however.

I looked at the page about Tachidern Castle.

GETTING THERE

From Prichea, a town along the Princess’s Highway in Soldicra Province, take the carriage line to Fussa Temple and get off at the last stop.

Transfer to the carriage headed for Mount Nagodine and get off at Tachidern. The castle can be reached after a three-hour walk.

Beware of wild animals and monsters along the way.

I could tell just by reading that it was way out in the sticks...

It would be quite the journey for Shalsha to attempt alone. Soldicra Province was far away to begin with. Even if I did have Laika and Flatorte take her up to the castle, it would still be dangerous to let her be there alone.

That said, as long as a dragon or I accompanied her, there was no reason she couldn’t go.

Now that I thought about it, maybe this was our chance to take a good family

hike.

—Then I noticed the small print, casually added to the bottom of the page, listing the names of the adventurers involved in maintaining the site.

“I think we can do this, Shalsha. I’m going to go get some things ready. Just sit tight, okay?”

I patted Shalsha on the shoulder.

From there, I hopped on Laika and traveled to Wynona’s house.

Luckily, she was home this time. To be honest, she’d given me most of her schedule for the next few months already. She wouldn’t say it out loud, but she clearly wanted me to visit.

I informed Wynona that Shalsha wanted to go to Tachidern Castle.

“She does?! Then I shall guide her in every manner that I can! I will guide her so she will remember the journey for the rest of her life!”

“We’re not really looking for that level of enthusiasm...”

Still, this meant Wynona was willing to be our guide.

“You helped maintain the castle, didn’t you, Wynona?”

I’d seen Wynona’s name written in tiny print in the book.

That information was irrelevant to the description of the castle itself, so Shalsha had probably overlooked it.

“Yes. Ruins will eventually crumble away if left to rot. It would be dangerous for someone to accidentally wander in, not to mention it could end up serving as a hideout for bandits and monsters. Therefore, it’s important to maintain the site—a perfect opportunity to put adventurers to good use.”

In a broad sense, it was a kind of dungeon, so they obviously couldn’t leave it be.

“And it’s nice for us, too, since there’s the chance of discovering something valuable. Though any archeological records are donated, of course.”

Right. It wasn’t unusual for treasure to be hidden in castles.

Laika, who had come along, was listening intently to Wynona.

She then proceeded to ask some very technical questions about Tachidern Castle.

“In times of war, how many soldiers would have been stationed in castles like these? I apologize for the amateurish question.”

“Ah... I will look up the answer for the next time we meet.”

“I believe that a castle like this would fall in the blink of an eye if a dragon was to breathe fire on it. How did they defend against cases like that?”

“Ah... I will look up that answer as well for the next time we meet...”

She was helping maintain the place, but she wasn't a researcher, so she wouldn't have those kinds of answers.

“A-anyway, I shall take care of everything for your journey to Tachidern Castle! I will do all I can to help my sister! And I will look up everything I do not know!”

Great, now we had a guide!



A few days later, I spoke to the whole family over dinner. I had Sandra come inside, too.

“I'd like for all of us to go on a hiking trip to Tachidern Castle as a family—and soon. Wynona will guide us. She knows the castle well.”

That's right—I had decided I may as well make this a family hiking trip.

Hiking trips were a great family activity, so I thought it would be a good idea.

I wasn't really interested in mountain citadels, but I would enjoy hiking! Everyone would!

Shalsha's eyes were sparkling.

Falfa cried “Yay! Hiking!” with childlike glee.

I knew I had succeeded the second I saw their smiles.

Laika had been interested to begin with, so she was on board, too.

But the enthusiasm didn't extend to everyone.

"Oh... I'll pass..." Halkara weakly held up one hand. *Why...?*

"What? You don't like hiking? Of course, we'd have to go through territory with wild animals, but I don't think you'll be in any danger if we all go as a family. It's good to get some exercise every once in a while."

"We'll have to walk through forests and mountains to get there, right?"

"Well, the castle *is* on top of a mountain."

"That means I could get stranded there all alone!"

"Isn't that attitude a little weird for an elf?!"

What use was an elf who was afraid of the woods? They're supposed to be the ones guiding us through the forest...

"Oh, I always get separated from the group and lost in unfamiliar forests. I'll step off the path for one second to collect an interesting-looking mushroom, then the next thing I know, everyone is gone, and I can't find the trail...which I am very confident will happen!"

She could really do without that kind of confidence.

"But that does sound like a possibility... I can't believe you're making getting stranded sound so likely."

Considering how sure she seemed about being in danger, I couldn't force the matter.

And then there was Sandra, who looked obviously disgusted at the idea.

"You sure you won't like it, Sandra? I could carry you on my back if walking is too much for you."

"The plants out there are all awful people. A bad personality always shows through in the roots."

"I see..."

I wondered what kind of roots indicated a bad personality.

"Not only that, there are only rocks at the peak, right? I'm not the kind of

plant who grows between the gaps in stone, so I'm not sure if I'm interested. It's moss that likes to cling to stone, right?"

"I really can't empathize, but if you don't want to go, you can stay home..."

It was a lot more difficult to take the whole family hiking than I had thought.

"Everyone else wants to go, right?"

"I'm gonna tear that mountain to shreds and let off some steam!"

"No tearing the mountains to shreds, Flatorte."

It would be extremely bad if she destroyed the ruins.

"But it's a castle, right? They build it there for defense, right? That's practically an invitation to attack! *Come and take us on, if you're strong enou—*"

"That won't happen."

And finally, there was yet another one of us whose goals were a little different.

"The ruins might contain the spirits of some dead soldiers! I'm excited, Big Sis!"

"You're treating this like some kind of ghost tour!"

Well, I guess to Rosalie, it wasn't so much a ghost tour as it was a...potential social event.

"It's superhard to find people who were killed with swords or arrows unless they're from a time of war. It'd be really fresh and interesting to hear their stories."

"I hope I *never* hear any stories like that."

I couldn't really handle stories that got scary or gory.

And hearing it from a ghost meant the story would be real, not made-up...

Well, it didn't matter that we all had different goals.

And just like that, our plan to hike to Tachidern Castle was settled.



We met up with Wynona on the road, before arriving at the town of

Tachidern in Soldicra Province.

There were sheer mountains located right behind the town.

“All right, my name is Wynona, and today I will be your guide. Getting lost in the mountains is quite dangerous, so please listen carefully as I tell you—”

“They’re selling grapes over there! And they’re cheap ‘cause they’re directly from the farmer!”

“You, there! Blue dragon! Listen to me speak!”

I know it was a little late for this realization, but getting the entire family to concentrate on one thing was like herding cats.

“First, I will tell you about the history of Tachidern Castle. I have collated information from a careful reading of many local topographical descriptions and history books, so listen closely.”

Wynona didn’t slack when it came to these things. She was a little prickly, but she was a hard worker.

“The castle was established in the Era of the Fifteen Lords. It was a magnificent structure, so grand in fact, that it is believed to have been built for the purpose of defense by a nearby leader, rather than the local minor lord. This castle served as the stage for the main skirmish during the battle of Deep Pool, and three hundred soldiers are said to have lost their lives on the site defending it.”

“All that remains of the soldiers’ dreams...,” Laika murmured. I guess this world had its own Matsuo Basho writing haiku...

Meanwhile, Shalsha was taking notes. I was happy that she had a knowledgeable guide.

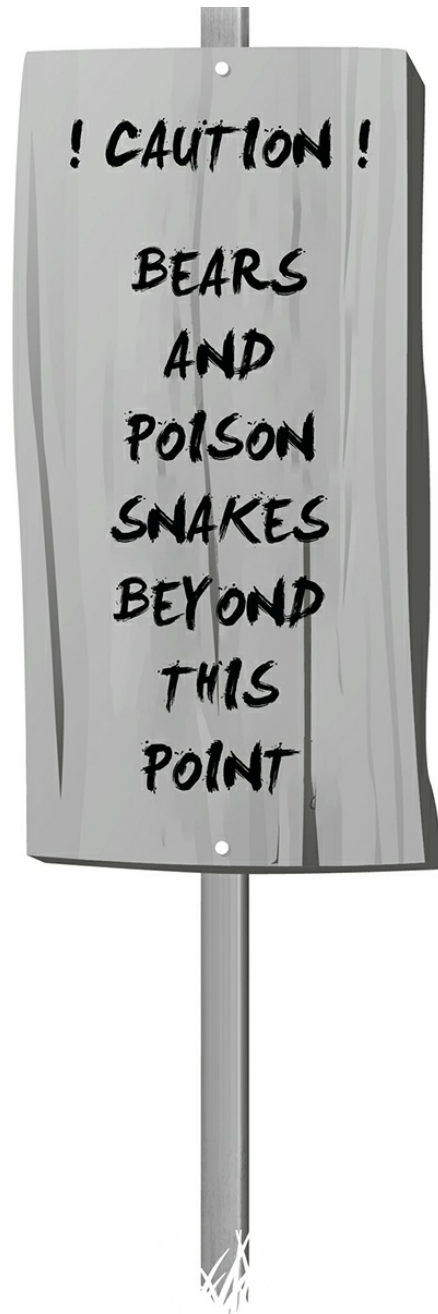
“Local superstition says that spirits of soldiers who died with regrets do occasionally appear, even now.”

“Oh! It’s unusual to find ghosts who’ve been attached to a place for so long. I gotta hear their stories.”

Rosalie had her own reasons to get excited.

“And while I don’t foresee this group having any trouble, I should let you know just in case.”

Wynona gestured to a nearby sign.



“The mountains here are home to bears and venomous snakes. Please be careful.”

“Bear meat can get real gamey, but I, the great Flatorte, think that’s what makes ’em so tasty!”

“She’s not talking about cooking them!”

I felt a little bad knowing that Wynona was earnestly doing her best to guide us.

“Well, I did warn you... Now, let’s begin our trek. This trail is said to be the

path attacking forces would use to assault the castle.”

We were finally beginning our hike.

It was going to be a long stretch, but I was sure we would enjoy the walk u—

The two dragons hurried off at incredible speed.

“A mountain this size shouldn’t take more than ten minutes to climb!”

“You have a lot of wasted movement, Flatorte. You do not have to lift your legs so high in order to move forward. You will tire yourself before long.”

“Don’t give me that sass, Laika. I, the great Flatorte, am going to reach my goal before I get tired, so it doesn’t matter!”

They were already really high up!

“Both of you! Stop! Stop!” I yelled.

“Do you think Laika got a head start, Mistress?”

“I would do no such thing. But if Lady Azusa is to be our referee, then I will follow her instructions.”

No, they had this all wrong.

“I didn’t get to race against Laika during the relay, so I thought we could settle our score now.”

“We are on equal footing as neither of us knows the castle. I believe this would be the perfect opportunity to settle the score once and for all.”

They really were drawing out the Post Town Relay Race. Their excitement over who could get to the top first reminded me of elementary school boys.

“You know this is a hike, right? It’s not a competition! We’re walking slowly. Together. Okay?!”

And I couldn’t say it out loud, but if they really did reach the castle in under ten minutes, then there would be no point for Wynona to be here.

I wanted her to lead us on our walk.

“Indeed! Some things can only be gained by firmly planting each foot on the ground, one after the other!”

Laika immediately understood, but Wynona was already exasperated.

“This is why I don’t like dragons... They remind me how weak and powerless I am...”

Dragons sure were extra.

Once again, we started our hike.

I paid close attention to my two girls as their parent. Well, even if I weren’t their mom, I wouldn’t really need to worry about everyone else.

Shalsha silently made her way up the path.

“Shalsha, you’ll get tired later if you rush now~ You should walk a little slower!” Falfa called out to her. Her big sister was worried about her.

“The soldiers who assaulted Tachidern Castle must have hurried up the mountain like this. They certainly did not treat it like a hike. Shalsha wants to put herself in the ancient soldiers’ shoes.”

“Falfa understands, but it’s dangerous if you don’t pace yourself correctly~ You can trip on roots and rocks here~”

“Shalsha will heed your advi— Aaah!”

Right at that moment, Shalsha tripped and tumbled forward.

Her foot had caught on a small ledge. *See? What did Falfa just say?!*

Falfa’s arm darted out to catch her. “See? You need to be careful!”

“...All right. Shalsha will be more careful.”

Look at that: Falfa was acting like a real big sister.

I guess I didn’t need to keep as close an eye on them if they were going to look out for each other.

But I never wanted to forget the image of them hiking together, so I was going to watch them closely anyway.

Ahead were the two dragons. They were walking just slow enough that they weren’t pulling away.

“This road sucks. We could just fly straight there.” Flatorte seemed genuinely

puzzled.

“If you’re not flying, this path is quite rough. It would have been even more difficult with arrows or rocks pelting you from above,” Wynona explained as she walked behind the two dragons.

“That’s right, Miss Wynona; how did they protect themselves against dragons breathing fire from the sky?”

That was what Laika wanted to know the most, apparently. The castle’s defenses must have felt particularly low from a red dragon’s perspective.

“I looked that up. Dragons were not often an active part of battle around these parts. There are no dragon lands in this province, either. Additionally, mages who specialized in Lightning spells were often dispatched to these mountaintop castles to defend against dragons.”

“I see. Lightning is very frightening to a dragon. It deals incredible damage to us. Thank you for explaining, Miss Wynona.”

“It’s just a risk to weak dragons. I, the great Flatorte, have been struck by lightning many times, and I’m just fine!”

I was pretty sure making up for a lack of strategy with brute strength was against the rules.

Their voices traveled up and up; I could hear them from ahead on the zigzagging path.

This was that hiking ambiance.

“Big Sis, wouldn’t it be tough to live at the top of this mountain?”

Rosalie was floating beside me.

“Yeah, it would be. I think Wynona knows more about that; you should ask her.”

I thought I saw a proud look cross Wynona’s face. Well, she was our guide, after all.

“I shall answer your query. Castles on top of mountains like these are not meant to be lived in. This is where people would fortify themselves in case of an

enemy attack; they usually lived at the base of the mountain.”

“Uh-huh. So they went back and forth? Life must’ve been tough for soldiers back then. But I guess it’s just a normal road, aside from the fact that the mountain’s so steep. Don’t think there are any bears or snakes here, either.”

The wild animals had probably been spooked by the dragons and run away.

They’d probably realize instinctually that these were not creatures they could fight against.

Then I heard a strange song coming out of Flatorte’s mouth.

“A blue dragon’s a strong dragon~ 🎵 They can freeze everything and anything~ They’re so great~ 🎵”

Singing a song to alert bears of your presence and keep them away was mountaineer wisdom!

Maybe she didn’t realize she was doing it.

“I did some preliminary preparations to make sure bears and snakes do not suddenly approach us. I am on the job as an adventurer today, after all.”

Oh, Wynona was showing us some consideration, too.

“But they are wild animals, so they may be hiding anywhere. Do be cautious.”

“That’s so cool, Wynona!”

“Your actions show you have a strong sense of your professional responsibilities. Impressive.”

The girls complimented Wynona.

“Oh, no, I still have much room for improvement... I will aim for even greater heights so I am not an embarrassment to you, Sisters... Please enjoy yourselves today.”

She treated them so differently than she did me...

As we gradually made our way up, Wynona started telling us more about the castle.

“At first glance, this flat bit of land may seem perfectly normal, but this area

was actually leveled out artificially. Soldiers were stationed on this very spot.”

Shalsha immediately started taking notes.

“From here, it would have been easy to shower the enemy with arrows as they were coming up the mountain. Such places were created to wipe out the enemy during their approach.”

“Rational. No wonder this mountain citadel is famous; it seems they’ve made full use of the builders’ expertise.”

“Right? And as you may have noticed, the road bends as it approaches the flat part. That bend was purposely created to keep the enemy from swarming in all at once. The resulting thinning of their forces would allow lancers and the like to stage an attack.”

This was informative for me, too.

I’d never made any real attempt to learn about this world’s history.

“But despite all this, the castles’ forces were still destroyed. Though the battle may be in the past, it remains a tragedy.”

Laika looked upset. She had a strong sense of empathy.

“It’s fine, Miss Laika. Turning your thoughts to the tragedies of the past is one of the great pleasures of visiting castles.”

Shalsha nodded deeply. It looked like they were in agreement.

“Humans are always worrying about stupid stuff, aren’t they?” And just as I had expected, Flatorte looked bored as she listened.

“Flatorte, you should put more effort into studying history. I am certain it will enrich your life,” Laika said, almost admonishing the other dragon.

“But think about it; this castle wasn’t even the ruler’s main base. The attackers could’ve just ignored it and gone straight to the leader’s stronghold. That’s what I would’ve done anyway.”

That was actually a pretty good point.

“That is not the way it works. Please allow your guide to explain. If you were to ignore this castle and attempt to press on, its forces could stream down the

mountain and attack you from behind. As a result, your only choice is to climb up to the castle and claim victory here first.”

“I see what you mean, but if the soldiers are all at the top of the mountain, the enemy might decide to burn down the village below and retreat before the soldiers could do anything. I think they should be more toward the middle.”

“You can’t burn down a village that quickly. They would definitely make it in time. That’s just how it is!” Wynona was a little bewildered by Flatorte’s ridiculous statements...

“Okay, okay, we’re moving on! We are starting to see remnants of the castle’s defenses, which means we are not far from the castle’s keep at the top. Let’s climb!” I called.

We began our trek again.

Shalsha lightly patted her thighs.

She was giving herself the energy to make it through the final stretch.

That’s right; study hard.

Just as Wynona said, it wasn’t long before we reached the area with the remains of the building at the peak.

“Wow, the stone walls just keep going. It really feels like an ancient ruin here!”

This was a real sightseeing spot. Even I was getting excited, and I had no interest in mountain citadels.

There were even other tourists here who had come up accompanied by adventurers.

“Indeed, Stepmother. Tachidern Castle is a fantastic structure, famous all over the world. It’s simply perfect! Not only are the remains attractive, but it also boasts impeccable defensive structures and the tragic tale of how all its forces were destroyed,” Wynona announced proudly, as if she were talking about herself.

Shalsha rushed around the ruins, sketching a map.

There was already a map in the book, but I guess she wanted to make one for herself, as well.

“What a great view!” Falfa exclaimed. She was standing in an area of the peak that had an especially good view, observing the village below.

This really was how hiking trips were supposed to be. I was very pleased.

But the purpose of this trip had been to visit the castle, so Wynona was now explaining to Shalsha and Laika about the castle’s construction and defense.

“For example, even if an opposing army were to attack, they would be shot by archers stationed at the watchtowers there and over there, so they would have no hope of getting close. It was very well constructed.”

But it didn’t seem like Laika was sold on the idea just yet.

“Well?” Wynona began. “I bet you’re wondering how one is supposed to take on a castle like this, hmm?”

“I guess... If it were me...” Laika, looking troubled, said:

“If it were me, I would breathe fire on them from above and burn them all.”

Laika was looking at a sign that showed an artist’s interpretation of what the castle would have looked like.

“No, no, no! I told you: They would have been safe from dragons because of the lightning mages stationed here!” Wynona refuted, as though Laika had suggested something utterly against the rules.

Yeah, I felt like she’d mentioned the mages before.

“Indeed, the mages might be able to hit dragons from a distance if they were flying slowly, but if I were to take on my dragon form halfway up the mountain and fly the rest of the way, I could burn down the entire castle before their lightning could strike me. I believe that would be the fastest way to end the fight...” Laika seemed hesitant—sorry, even—which meant she knew Wynona would hate this. “But you asked me how I would fell the castle... So that’s my answer, since you didn’t include the stipulation that I cannot come as a dragon...”

“Yeah, exactly—I’d give the same answer,” Flatorte said, providing backup.

“If I froze everything with my cold breath, I’d win for sure. Staying cooped up at the peak would be suicide. That would just help me freeze them even more efficiently.”

“Like I *saaaid*,” Wynona began. “If you did that, you’d just be hit by lightn—”

“I could take one or two lightning strikes without stopping my cold breath!” Flatorte declared. “And any mage who can take out a dragon in one lightning strike should be on the front lines fighting enemies. What a waste of their talent!”

That was more of a logical argument than I was expecting!

Wynona looked considerably annoyed.

“*Sigh*... I don’t care anymore... You dragons do not understand the appeal of mountain citadels.”

That sounded a lot like something Shalsha would say. I guess Wynona was a fan of castles, too.

“Maybe that is what would have happened if there was a dragon, but the old story goes that all three hundred soldiers in Tachidern Castle perished in an enemy attack. The elders in the village tell the tale the same way. I took the initiative and asked them myself!”

“Actually, about that. It sounds like that’s not exactly correct.”

It was Rosalie this time!

“For a place where everyone supposedly died in battle, it’s surprising that I can’t find a single ghost. I’d expect at least a few attempted deserters with extra-strong grudges.”

It sounded like the concept of disgraced warriors haunting the battlefield existed in this world, too!

“And there was a spirit over there who’s been wandering the area for a really long time, so I asked ’em. Apparently all the soldiers here knew they couldn’t contend with the enemy, and they all fled.”

That really turned the story on its head!

“According to the spirit, this castle was way too high up, so it was usually ignored even in the fiercest battles, and the enemy just marched right past.”

The blood drained from Wynona’s face, and she went white. At least she likes the color white? Or maybe that doesn’t help in this case...

“S-still... Having a castle full of soldiers behind their backs served as a deterrent for the enemy... It wasn’t a waste at all; it wasn’t...”

It appeared that Wynona needed the castle to have a purpose, or she wouldn’t be satisfied.

“There weren’t a lot of soldiers stationed up here, and they weren’t much of a threat. The commander wasn’t close to anyone important—just a local guy with some influence—so the enemy didn’t really feel like sending their troops out of their way only to face unnecessary losses.”

That was it—the whole story, utterly refuted!

Wynona fell to her knees in disappointment.

“What...? Then it did not even serve as the stage for a major battle? Then why the tale?!”

“The spirit said that the locals were embarrassed, so they turned it into a story where everyone died in an intense battle.”

Rosalie kept mentioning this spirit, but I couldn’t see it, so I didn’t know where it was.

“Also, the flat land down the mountain where soldiers were stationed is actually just naturally flat.”

“That ghost knows too much!”

Maybe we should have had the ghost explain everything to us from the start.

Well, I felt bad for Wynona, but what the ghost was saying was probably closer to the truth.

That aside, I was more concerned about Shalsha’s reaction to all this.

This wasn’t anyone’s fault, but I hoped she wasn’t hurt by it...

She’d just learned that the truth behind the sorrowful tales surrounding the

castle was actually kind of lackluster.

Shalsha was staring blankly at the castle ruins.

She appeared a little melancholic from where I was standing, but that was probably because I could only see her back.

“Shalsha...?” I called to her.

“Shalsha is not sad, Mom. Don’t worry,” she began matter-of-factly. “Humans tend to fantasize about the capabilities of a castle based on its structure. But in reality, wars are subject to countless factors that only come into play the moment the fighting breaks out: military strength, the soldiers’ skill and morale, the enemy’s strength... Even the most state-of-the-art castle could be abandoned without ever being put to real use. That spirit taught Shalsha something she had almost forgotten.”

I had complicated feelings about an invisible ghost teaching her all this stuff...

“Yet...that changes nothing about the fact that Tachidern Castle is a magnificent mountain citadel.”

A faint smile crossed Shalsha’s face. *Ah, my girl is growing up so fast.* I was feeling very parental right then.

“Exactly. It’s a wonderful castle, and it was worth coming all this way.” I placed a hand on Shalsha’s shoulder.

“The spirit over there also mentioned that there aren’t a lot of mountain citadels this carefully crafted,” Rosalie added.

I really wished this ghost would show itself.

Just then, I heard the voices of the other tourists.

“It’s a bear!” “And a really big snake!”

Well, we were in a mountain citadel, after all. We were at risk of running into wild animals.

“Are you all right? I can handle any bear!”

Just as I was about to head over, Wynona briskly stepped in front of me.

“It’s all right, **Step.**”

“I know you’re in a rush, but that’s a terrible abbreviation.”

Talk about a title with absolutely no sense of respect.

But she was telling us it was all right, which meant she was taking responsibility as a guide and dealing with the problem.

She was a great adventurer, so I doubted a bear would overwhelm her.

“I had them stationed in key places so that the wild animals would not harm my sisters.”

“Who?”

Then a bear and a snake appeared from the direction of the screams.

Both were white.

“Grand Duke Polar Bear!”

They were Wynona’s pets—well, one was the polar bear that took care of all her other pets while she was away, and the other was a cute white snake with red eyes.

“I had them defend us against any potentially dangerous creatures.”

“Don’t use bears and snakes in a place that’s already full of dangerous bears and snakes!”

I felt really bad for causing the other tourists to panic. I would have to apologize to them as Wynona’s stepmother.

From the opposite direction, I heard, “There’s a tiger!”

But I wasn’t surprised anymore.

“And I bet that’s your pet white tiger, right, Wynona?”

“Indeed. No wild tigers are native to this area.”

Wait a second.

Maybe...word had spread about dangerous wild animals in the area because of Wynona’s pets roaming free...?

She *had* come here to mind the castle in the past, too...

“But it’s possible an adventurer might hurt the tiger, so maybe we should take a look.”

“Yes. I doubt any adventurer would be so powerful, but we should make sure.”

Wynona and I made our way toward where the shouting had come from.

There, we found an older man who looked like an adventurer down on his knees before the white tiger.

What happened? Did he fall over in shock?

I guess anyone would be surprised to see a tiger where it wasn’t supposed to be. We’re talking way bigger than a cat, here. We needed to explain ourselves—and fast.

“Could you be my old friend, Samtran?”

“Whoa, this is just like a scene from a fairy tale!” I said.

I had heard stories like this in my past life, about humans turning into tigers and surprising their old friends.

But do humans turn into tigers in every world?

Wait, humans didn’t actually turn into tigers on earth... That just happened in fiction...

“*Meow? Mwam?*”

This tiger sure sounded a lot like a cat.

“Excuse me, adventurer. Did you have a human friend named Samtran?”

I decided to go ahead and ask, since I couldn’t sense any hostility from either the tiger or the adventurer.

“Long ago, when I served as a noble’s guard, I became friends with his pet tiger. But when the tiger gave birth to her litter, the noble declared he wished for them to be independent and live in nature, so he returned them to the forest.”

“Oh, so the *tiger* is your friend...”

That sounded way more plausible than a human turning into a tiger, but it was still a little strange.

“Come to think of it, Passionate Alabaster is quite comfortable around humans. Perhaps it was once in someone else’s care.”

Was this a real reunion?!

“Wait... Is Passionate Alabaster the name of your tiger? That’s hardly the kind of name you give a pet, is it?”

“I think it’s perfectly good. It’s in praise of the color white.”

I guess that was her standard for good names.

“We shall remain here on the mountaintop for a while, so you may speak with my tiger if you wish,” Wynona said, and the adventurer thanked her profusely.

“Wynona, you’re a lot softer now than you used to be.”

I got the feeling she was showing a lot more kindness to others these days.

“How rude. Just because I am a slime spirit does not mean I am soft and flabby.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Wynona sighed. This was an expression she would never show to her sisters. “To be honest, I am upset over my failure regarding the castle. To think no battles were even fought here.”

“You didn’t fail. We all managed to hike up the mountain and see the castle, just like Shalsha wanted.”

We’d accomplished our goal.

Wynona looked away. “Thank you, Stepmother.”

I decided to trust her expression of gratitude for the moment.

Now, we still had one major hiking-related event to tick off the list.

I could see Falfa waving her hand in the distance.

“Mommy! Wynona! We’re having lunch!”

Yes—it was lunchtime!

“We’ll be right there!”

I grabbed Wynona’s hand and took off.

To put it simply, lunch eaten at a mountain citadel is the best.

“This really is a nice view. I never saw anything like this while I was alive.”

Rosalie flew forward a bit and looked down to the base of the mountain.

“Yeah, you can see the whole village from here.”

It was so good to eat with a view. It added a flavor to the food that we wouldn’t have been able to get without hiking up all this way.

“I see; the castle would have had a clear view of any army proceeding along the highway at the base of the mountain. It did indeed serve as a defensive point.”

“The wind feels so good!”

It sounded like the two dragons were having a good time, too. Their lunches had way more volume than anyone else’s, especially where the meat was concerned.

And most importantly, Shalsha was having fun. “Shalsha feels as though she has become the lord of her own domain, eating in a castle ruin and looking down below.”

“You still have some vegetables left~” Falfa peered into Shalsha’s lunch box.

“A feudal lord has more important things to worry about than vegetables.”

“That’s not a good reason. You need to eat them~”

“A feudal lord in the era of war may not live to see the morrow. Now is not the time to be eating vegetables.”

“Vassals won’t obey a lord who doesn’t eat her veggies~”

Falfa finally won Shalsha over, and she began sullenly munching on her veggies.

“Shalsha feels as though the vegetables she eats here taste a bit better, even though they are the same as always.”

Despite her words, her expression seemed dissatisfied, like she hadn't changed her mind at all. I couldn't help but smile.

"It's probably your imagination, but as long as they taste good." I patted her on the head.

"I am delighted to see my sisters happy," said Wynona.

She seemed relieved as she ate the food we had brought. I had kept her in mind and made sure to pack some white things to eat, like white bread.

"Thank you, Wynona! Hiking felt great!"

"This mountain citadel experience was totally worthwhile."

Falfa and Shalsha said their thanks.

"Oh, no, I am simply glad that you enjoyed our small expedition," Wynona said humbly. An outsider would probably be confused to see the taller, "elder" sister being so polite.

Yeah, it was thanks to Wynona that this had all been possible.

After we finished eating, Falfa and Shalsha went and played hide-and-seek with Grand Duke Polar Bear.

I guess we should thank him, too...

"There you aaare! You're easy to find, Grand Duke Polar Bear, because your fur is so white!"

Yeah, he had pretty high visibility...

While Falfa ran around in excitement, Shalsha thought very seriously about where she should hide. She was starting to edge down the mountain.

It wasn't like they'd laid out the rules in detail or anything, but it probably wasn't a good idea to make the range of seeking too wide. Even worse if she got lost.

But then Shalsha suddenly came running back to me.

"Mom, Wynona, now is not the time for hide-and-seek. Come this way."

It seemed urgent, so we headed straight over, but I wasn't sure what had

happened.

“What is this? It’s just trees growing on a flat spot of land, right?”

I didn’t see any treasure chests or cave entrances anywhere.

But Wynona, who Shalsha had also called over, looked shocked.

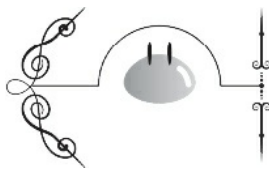
“Incredible... It’s hidden by the trees, but this looks like the remains of one of the castle structures, one that was not on the map! Now we know that Tachidern Castle was much bigger than past research suggests!”

“What? Does that mean Shalsha made a new discovery?”

“Yes! She can face mountain citadel researchers with pride!”

I guess sometimes hide-and-seek can lead to new discoveries.

The hiking trip had taught me there was no such thing as wasted effort.



WE TRAVELED AROUND ON AN

ARTIFACT CREATURE



Pecora had invited me over—well, summoned me, really—so I headed to Vanzeld Castle.

“Thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to stop by.”

Fatla’s voice echoed around me like an airline announcement.

The rest of the family and I were presently flying on Fatla in her leviathan form.

“It’s fine. I bet she sent you out in a rush, too. You’re basically the victim here.”

I could only imagine that Pecora had come up with some kind of scheme.

“I am very pleased with your understanding. Apparently, she has developed something new and wants to show it to you as soon as possible...”

The word *developed* caught my attention. Those demons really would come up with anything... But as long as it wasn’t destructive, then there was no cause for concern.

Powerful people in every world tended to do things according to whim.

That often caused trouble for others, but it occasionally brought about good results, and I doubted Pecora would genuinely try something dangerous.

“Where is everyone else, by the way? It feels really empty in here.”

I wasn’t the only one on board, but the population density in the relaxing lounge area was abnormally low.

“If I may hazard a guess: the casino. Halkara asked Vania to open it up on the

condition they do not bet with real money."

"...Right. I'll go take a look..."

As I approached the casino, I could hear Halkara's cries.

"I lost! Again! I can't believe it, I can't believe it... This is my fifth loss in a row!"

Vania stood in the dealer's spot, laughing.

Before her was a conical roulette wheel.

There were small balls rolling around in it, and the point seemed to be guessing where they would land.

"My, my, what bad luck, Miss Halkara. I guess your beginner's luck has already run dry."

"N-no, it hasn't! I know my luck will come back, and I'll win big! Hit me again, dealer!"

Vania grinned. The manipulation was so obvious...

The rest of the family stood behind them in various degrees of exasperation.

Laika, in particular, had no interest whatsoever in gambling, and she looked on in disapproval.

"Gambling is bad. It encourages an individual's desire to win big, rendering them unable to make calm, rational decisions," she said. "In a way, this is a lot like a Brainwashing spell."

"Big Sis Halkara is obsessed~ Falfa's glad she's not using real money!"

"When she won at the beginning, that number of chips became her standard. Now, as that number goes down, she feels as if she's lost and can't bring herself to stop. She has been caught in the quicksand. She will never get out."



Falfa and Shalsha were calmly observing, too.

I'd heard that dealers let you win at first to make you feel good, then rip everything away. I guess that was all true.

"Man, Sis Halkara's losing so bad." Rosalie noticed as I entered the room and came over to me.

"How much has she lost?"

"If this were real money, I think she'd have lost about thirty million gold by now."

Yeowch.

"I don't gamble, but it can get pretty intense. There are a lot of ghosts who fall so deep into the habit that they eventually have no choice but to die~"

"Wow... It will literally destroy you if you get too into it..."

"Halkara looks smart, but she really isn't. I, the great Flatorte, am much smarter than her," Flatorte said, sitting at the table and sipping tea. Sandra was also seated.

It felt like everyone was curious about Halkara's escapades and had gathered to watch.

"I see; so you're not interested in gambling, Flatorte? That's a bit surprising. You struck me as the type of animal who would particularly enjoy it."

From Sandra's words, I assumed it was pretty typical for plants not to be interested in gambling.

That aside, I had been under the impression that Flatorte—well, more like blue dragons in general—would be quite likely to throw all their money away on gambling. They weren't so keen on working and tended to live hand-to-mouth.

"Blue dragons don't have money, so we can't gamble. That's why none of us are super into it."

So that was the reason!

"And if a blue dragon did gamble and started losing, I bet they'd wreck the

place and breathe ice everywhere.”

The casino would probably be too scared to swindle them.

But whatever the reason, it was better not to get too into gambling.

Halkara was continuing to incur massive losses.

Once you got into a vicious cycle like that, it was really hard to get back out.

By the time dinner rolled around, Halkara was still pale.

“Hey, Halkara. You didn’t bet any real money, right? Why do you look so drained? Do you feel sick?”

“Yes...when I imagine doing that with real money...”

She was at rock bottom. This was even worse than when she was drunk.

“I calculated that I would have wasted one hundred million gold in a single day... No matter how one looks at it, that is such a reckless use of money... What was I thinking?”

“I’m glad you’re considering the consequences of your actions, but you could have started a little earlier.”

“Madam Teacher? If I ever try to gamble again, please just throw me into a cold bath. Thank you.”

“So we’re going with the physical cooldown tactic.”

It seemed like Halkara had understood the terrors of gambling this time around, so it probably wouldn’t be as bad next time.

In a way, the casino was teaching her some important lessons.

But if she’d ended up winning big, there was a chance she would have just gotten more and more obsessed... The casino was a dangerous place.

Then in came Vania, the one who’d won big against Halkara, carrying food.

Vania was in charge of the meals again this time. As always, her food was at such a high level.

“Miss Halkara is the archetypical sucker. You’d best stay away from now on~”

“...I was only watching from the sidelines, but it was a great lesson on what

not to do,” I said. “And, Vania, I didn’t know you could act like a casino dealer.”

“I practiced in my spare time during university~ Here you go, roasted lamb chops with an herb rub.”

Maybe Vania just gave off a ditzy impression, and she was actually a multitalented genius...?

Then Fatla’s voice came over the announcements, as though she’d read my mind.

“Vania is capable in all things outside of work.”

In my opinion, that was better than being good at absolutely nothing outside of work, but if that was true, should she really be working as a government official?



We arrived at Vanzeld Castle on Fatla without incident.

The whole family was given the VIP treatment, and we had a little time to relax.

Meanwhile, I alone was led away across the castle grounds by Fatla and Vania. They said that Pecora had some special business with me.

“The item currently in development is in the courtyard,” Fatla explained briefly.

“By ‘development,’ do you mean, like, a magical artifact?”

“Precisely. It seems Her Majesty has made use of a bit of ancient magic again. I do not know the details, but she claims to have created a fantasy artifact that appears in one of her favorite books.”

So the magic from the Thursa Thursa Kingdom was involved, huh?

Well, I’d find out once I saw it all in action.

Soon, I arrived in the courtyard.

Before me stood what looked like a robot kaiju monster, almost seven feet tall.

“This thing looks like it could breathe fire!”

That was my first impression. It was made entirely out of metal, and it was in the shape of a kaiju-like monster. It even had eyes and a mouth.

Pecora and Beelzebub stood before the creature.

Beelzebub looked exhausted, so she was probably Pecora's victim in all this.

"We have been waiting for you, Elder Sister! What do you think? Is it not magnificent?!"

"Er, possibly. But what is it?"

"Exactly what it looks like! An artifact lizard!"

After Pecora spoke, the artifact lizard roared. "**Grrroooaaaah!**" It could make sound, apparently.

"Goodness, I've read so many stories that feature artifact monsters, and now I have finally completed the real thing! Isn't it just so cool?!"

The lizard roared again. "**Bwooooooh!**"

It was loud.

It seemed robots had finally been introduced into this world.

"I didn't know there were that many stories that featured artifact monsters..."

"There are! Plenty of famous titles!" Pecora said, circling behind the robot kaiju (it took too long to say artifact lizard, so I decided to use a nickname).

She then returned, carrying a stack of books in her arms. I guess she'd set them out beforehand.

There were pictures of what looked like robot kaiju on all the covers.

"Gargantuan monsters of magical technology that do not exist in reality go on a rampage of destruction! And then the heroic titan arrives to subdue it! It may be a bit clichéd, but that's exactly what makes it so exciting!"

This world had actual monsters roaming around, but I guess there was still a market for this type of fiction...

Then again, sharks existed in my past life, and we still had a lot of movies that featured giant sharks, so maybe it wasn't all that unusual.

“Up until recently, we had been unable to create artifact monsters with lifelike movements using magitech. However, we finally succeeded by harnessing the ghosts’ magic,” Beelzebub said, filling in the gaps.

“Maybe it wasn’t built with the demons’ power alone, but I have a lot of respect for really fresh inventions like this...”

The demons were exceedingly skilled at using old tech for new things.

That and putting their ideas into practice.

“Well, even we demons could not create something s—”

“Ubwaaaah!” the robot kaiju roared.

“Silence! Remain silent whilst the adults talk!”

“Gwah...,” the robot kaiju whined weakly in response.

“Even we demons could not create something such as this overnight. It should have taken a tremendous amount of time...” Beelzebub trailed off at the end of her sentence.

Pecora, meanwhile, looked gleefully proud.

“On my authority as demon king, I offered gratuitous funding to universities and research institutes! Technology develops so quickly when you give them money!”

Was she right to think of it like giving plants fertilizer...?

Though without money, it was hard to develop new technology.

Testing out new technology was kind of like a gamble. If an attempt failed, it didn’t make any money. As a result, the funding for more tries would dry up.

Which meant that throwing financial support at the developers so they could keep trying until they got it right was the correct way of doing things.

And unlike games at a casino, failures were still progress toward success, so there was meaning in failing.

“I know you were just doing this for fun, Pecora, but it’s probably a good thing you put so much money into it. I have a feeling this will give rise to a lot of new things in the future.”

“What kind words, Elder Sister. Please pat my head, too!” Pecora shamelessly presented the top of her head to me.

“O-okay... If that’s what’ll make you happy...”

It was a little embarrassing, but it wasn’t like I saw her every day, so maybe it was fine.

Pecora seemed really pleased, and I decided that this was a small price to pay if it made her happy.

I patted her head.

There sure were a lot of devilish ideas packed in there.

“Well, I saw the robo kaiju, so I guess that wraps up our business here, then?”

I could understand why kaiju fans would want to see something like this. The quality was so high that I imagined even nonfans would be interested.

“No, our real business begins now,” Pecora said. That sounded ominous.

“What? You didn’t call me out here to show me your invention?”

Beelzebub stood behind Pecora, arms crossed, shaking her head.

“*This* is what I wanted to show you!” Pecora whipped out a book from the stack she had brought over earlier and showed it to me.

The cover featured a person riding on the back of a robot kaiju.

The other covers all showed big robot kaiju making a mess of some city or other, but this one had a different vibe.

“What is this? Someone’s riding the creature?”

“Yes. The title of this one is *Give Me Some Magic*. An arcane researcher is unable to hire a carriage, so he decides to use the artifact creature he created to travel, but the artifact’s magic keeps running out along the way, and he has a lot of trouble getting to his destination.”

“Last time, you said you wanted to go on a carriage journey like the one you read about in a book, didn’t you...? You really like travel stories, huh...?”

I think it was a novel series called *The Carriage Line Journeys*.

We'd mimicked the events of the book and gone to a destination using only local carriage lines. But we got there really quickly because everyone involved was absurdly physically fit and rushed up the mountain.

"Yes! This time I want to ride on my artifact lizard and travel like in *Give Me Some Magic!* ...Just the three of us!"

When she added that last part, I understood why Beelzebub looked so tired.

I didn't even have to ask if Beelzebub was included in the count...

"You two, bring them out!" Pecora called, and Fatla and Vania dragged out two more robot kaiju from the back. They were probably extremely heavy, but the leviathans were strong enough to handle them.

Three robot kaiju stood alongside each other.

"I see; so these are vehicles..."

"Graaaah!" "Bwooooh!" "Aaaaaaah!"

All the robot kaiju roared at once! They were super loud!

"We will ride these lizards and travel to a town called Ehock, one hundred seventy *gilro* away from Vanzeld Castle! I am looking forward to traveling with you, Elder Sister!"

"Er, well... I haven't said anything about going with you y—"

"Graaaah!" "Bwooooh!" "Aaaaaaah!"

The robot kaiju roared again, drowning me out.

"Thank you! I knew you would agree!"

"Sorry, Azusa. I cannot spend any time with the girls, but I will be coming along. Just bear through it for a few days."

Both Pecora and Beelzebub had assumed I was actually going along with them!

"Hold on a second. This is all way to sudd—"

"Graaaah!" "Bwooooh!" "Aaaaaaah!"

I couldn't hold a conversation because of these stupid robot kaiju!

Hold on; were they doing it on purpose? Were they drowning me out whenever I tried to say something inconvenient?

“Well then, I say we get right down to it and prepare for departure.”

“Our starting point is the Thirteenth Triumphal Arch. ’Twill take time to carry the lizards there, so there’s no rush.”

Oh dear, it sounded like I couldn’t turn them down anymore...

And so I was forcibly roped into Pecora’s weird scheme.



We moved to the Thirteenthth Triumphal Arch, which would serve as our starting point.

There we found the three robot kaiju from earlier—and a huge crowd of demons checking out the sight.

“It’s like a festival!”

“Three oddities such as these would capture anyone’s attention. That is not all, however.”

Beelzebub pointed at a sign.

Give Me Some Magic

A Journey from Vanzeld Castle to Ehock The Demon King’s Titillating Adventure “Why is she calling it a *titillating* adventure?!”

Wasn’t it kind of weird that she had decided it was going to be “titillating” before we even hopped on these things? What was she going to do if the trip was boring?

But Pecora ignored my commentary and waved to the crowd.

I guess it was a leaderly thing to do. At the end of the day, the people loved their demon king.

“Good luck, Mommy!”

“We pray for your success.”

“Be well, I suppose.”

I then heard some familiar voices. There was no way I could miss the sound of my children cheering me on.

“You came!”

Falfa, Shalsha, and Sandra were standing at the front of the crowd.

The rest of the family was there, too. That probably meant they had specially reserved seats.

But before I could approach them, Beelzebub rushed over.

“I’ll be going now. I hope you all behave yourselves. Now, if you need any help, just ask Fatla or Vania, all right?”

“Hey, being their mom’s my job!”

That was crossing the line, so I pushed her aside. I wished she would restrain herself.

“Ah! What are you doing? I’m enjoying my precious moments with my daughters!”

“That’s my line! At least wait until I’ve talked to them!”

“Look how greedy you are, despite getting to see them every day...”

Well, obviously I see them every day. I live with them.

The thought of Beelzebub moving into the house in the highlands in the near future terrified me...

Or if she developed some kind of easy long-distance teleportation skill, she’d be visiting every day...

In the end, I had to be thankful that getting around was so inconvenient.

Meanwhile, Flatorte, who had been hanging out with the others, slipped away.

“Wow... It’s made of such sturdy metal. Interesting.”

She was all over the robot kaiju...

“Oh, Miss Flatorte, please refrain from touching the creatures! No touching allowed!” Vania came over to stop her. *Sorry about that, Vania.*

“Why? Touching it isn’t going to do anything. You brought it out here; I wanna spar with it!”

“We cannot have you breaking them! Please stop!”

It’d probably shatter to pieces if Flatorte attacked it...

“Hop on, Elder Sister. You’re on Creature Number Two.”

On Pecora’s prompting, I hopped onto my robot kaiju. On closer inspection, I saw there was a patch with a number on its front. It felt like I was renting a bike.

“Oh hey, if you look at it from the back, there actually is a seat up there.”

There was a seat in the middle of the robot kaiju’s back, making it possible to sit down. Attached to it was something else that looked like a rudder. I was probably right to think of it as the steering wheel.

“Do not press on the main magic supply yet. That puts the creature in motion. You can adjust the speed by moving the lever on its back. When you want to stop, press on the pedal by your foot.”

“Oh, okay, I get it.”

This was more like a car than I had thought. Problem was, I’d never really driven before. I’d had a license in my past life, but I was really only a driver on paper.

There weren’t any cars in this world, so I’d probably manage if I just drove carefully.

I had no idea how fast these things went, though. It’d be disastrous if they suddenly took off like a car speeding down a highway... I wanted to believe that wouldn’t happen, though.

“And there should be a few buttons next to the rudder. Please press one of them.”

“Okay.”

Pressed it.

Cover the world~ In darkness~ And everyone will become one~ 🎵

It started playing music!

“This is the song you sang when you were an idol!”

“We recorded music into it and designed it so the music plays when you press the button. You can listen to my songs anytime you like!”

“You demons really like adding random bells and whistles...”

Now that we’d had the controls explained to us, Fatla started making some introductory remarks.

“Ah, thank you all very much for taking time out of your busy schedules to gather here with us today. With the help of academic-industrial collaboration between various universities and businesses, we have successfully developed these artifact—”

“Brrrooooooaaaaah!”

The robot kaiju roared loudly, cutting Fatla off.

I hadn’t pressed any buttons, so the vocalizations were apparently automatic. Probably would have been smarter to have a button trigger the roar...

“Along the one hundred and seventy *gilro* between Vanzeld Castle and Ehock, we have several—”

“Graaaaaah!”

The monster roared a second time, once again cutting off Fatla.

“Couldn’t you have made it so you could turn off the noises, Beelzebub...?”

“I do not understand why, but that was not legally possible, or so I hear. It must occasionally make noise to let others around us know that it is running.”

I guess a car that ran without making any noise would be a hazard.

The next extended growl came from Pecora’s robot kaiju, completely cutting out whatever Fatla was saying.

“... And that concludes my remarks. Thank you all for listening.”

No one was listening; I was sure of that.

“Let us go then, Elder Sister! Miss Beelzebub!” Pecora pressed the main magic

supply button, and her robot kaiju started moving.

I pressed mine in turn.

Boop!

My robot kaiju started up!

The robot kaiju (officially called artifact lizards) raced through the town around Vanzeld Castle.

If I thought of it like a motorcycle tour, maybe it would be pretty fun.

It wasn't long, though, before I noticed some discomfort.

"This thing really shakes you around!"

My body was swaying everywhere!

"I thought this would be like a car, but the movement is totally different! The bouncing is awful!"

"Of course. These lizards run forward by moving their two hind legs. It would be impossible to move as smoothly as a wheeled carriage."

"Yeah, that's a good point, Beelzebub, but...then shouldn't it move forward on all four legs, including its front ones, instead of standing up on its back two...? Or maybe the legs should've been wheels to begin..."

If they had wheels, then we wouldn't get knocked around everywhere like this.

"No, of course not," Pecora replied, puffing up her cheeks. "There is nothing exciting about wheels."

"Exciting? Do you really need to be concerned about excitement in an industry like this?"

But maybe there wasn't any precedent for these kinds of things? This was the first attempt at creating robot kaiju in this world, after all.

"In *Give Me Some Magic*, the main character went around on an artifact creature that moved on two legs! What point is there if we do not do exactly what they did?!"

“So you just based it on the book!”

“Well, I suppose I could get used to the rocking after a whi— Bah! Beh...”
Beelzebub’s sentence suddenly got cut short. “Good grief... I bit my tongue...”

“See! We already have an injury!”

“All right, I do not mind you all chatting, but keep your eyes on the road. You must be aware of people who might attempt to cross the road in front of the creature.”

Right... There weren’t any traffic signals around, so we actually did need to pay attention.

We were going just over ten miles an hour. I didn’t want to cause any driving accidents.

Incidentally, the roads we were traveling were lined with demons who’d come out to watch.

“This reminds me of the relay race.”

“It is because Her Majesty is participating. The turnout is excellent because she is so popular.”

Pecora, indeed, was waving to everyone on either side of her. “Thank you~”

Maybe this wasn’t just any old journey, but more like a parade.

Watching the demon king herself marching (running, to be more precise) on a strange vehicle would sure leave an impression.

“People came to watch in *Give Me Some Magic*, too~ I successfully got enough people together to match the events of the book~”

“Could you try to be a little less concerned about that?!”

Because we started out right in the middle of the city, there were a lot of people, and we couldn’t go very fast. But the farther out we got, the more we could accelerate.

The roads were empty, too, so there were more and more places we could ride side by side.

“Hey, this is kind of pleasant... Well, maybe not exactly *pleasant*, but nicer

than before.”

I’d gotten used to the jostling. Given up on it, more like.

This vehicle was just rumbly, and that’s how it was.

“Indeed. If I had to criticize one thing...I would say that it’s not as fast as flying.”

Beelzebub had wings, so she could fly.

I could float, but it wasn’t like I could go very fast. Beelzebub, on the other hand, could easily fly much faster than these robot kaiju.

“No, you may not fly! And you may not say how flying is faster! You have no appreciation for the excitement! That would go against the thrill!” the demon king warned us again. “Listen carefully. In the book, the researcher builds an artifact as a last-ditch measure because he is unable to purchase a carriage. It is supposed to be slower than a carriage.”

Pecora really wasn’t compromising on her faithfulness to the experience.

“Your Majesty, you had enough money to commission these artifacts, which means you had enough money to purchase a carriage. How many hundreds of millions did these cost to develop?”

“Miss Beelzebub! No snarky commentary from you! It is unbecoming of a minister!” Pecora warned again. “We could reach Ehack in two hours on the back of a wyvern! Practically in the blink of an eye! But we are deliberately taking our time getting there, and that is okay. We will see the sights we would have otherwise missed flying on a wyvern!”

I’d seen people like this in my previous life, insisting you would miss all the good scenery if you took the bullet train instead of the slower, local trains.

“Sigh... I still do not understand why we must use these vehicles, but if you insist, we shall do so, Your Majesty.”

“Before long, you will understand the significance of traveling on a slower artifact, Miss Beel—”

Pecora’s robot kaiju tilted forward! It was about to fall over!

“Hey! Pecora! Are you okay?!”

But the robot kaiju’s arms (its front legs, to be precise) whipped out and entered four-wheel (?) drive for a while.

“Hey, I didn’t know it could do that!”

“Yes, this is one of its modes.”

Then, after a few paces, it went back to running on its two hind legs.

“My, that was close. Its leg tripped on a small step there. But it can make up for falls like that just as it did now. Isn’t the design wonderful?”

“In that case, I feel as though perhaps it was not the wisest idea to have it run on its two hind legs to begin with.”

“I think Beelzebub has my vote on this one...”

Taking a leisurely journey was nice and all, but I really couldn’t care less about having the thing move like an actual monster.

“Neither of you understand the thrill of the journey! This will be a requirement next time! I cannot have an elder sister with no sense of excitement!”

Perhaps because we were running along on our robo kaiju, Pecora’s complaints drifted into the background.

It’d been a long time since I’d experienced sound like that.

For some time, we headed toward the outside of the city, before finally passing through the big—thick, more like—outer city walls and leaving the metropolis behind us.

At first, it seemed like the city continued even beyond the walls, but we eventually saw farmland stretching out before us.

“Hey, we’re finally on the outskirts!”

“Aye. Some of these plots are managed by the ministry, though, so this is also part of my workplace.”

I guess, due to the nature of her work, she did sometimes need big fields for experiments and whatnot.

Just then, Pecora's robot kaiju made a noise. "Hweeeeeeeeeee..." It sounded rather dispirited.

Then Beelzebub's did the same.

"What was that? It sounded like they're losing motivation..."

"Ah, they must be running out of magic~ We must charge them, otherwise they will stop working."

So they worked on a charge system. Now that she mentioned it, I remembered the title of the book that had inspired all this was *Give Me Some Magic...*

I mean, I understood that, but—

"What?! We just left Vanzeld...and it's already almost out...?"

"Yes. We have the technology to allow for magical recharge every hundred *gilro*, but I had them design it so a recharge is needed every twenty *gilro*, like in the book."

"Being that faithful to the source has zero benefits!"

"Elder Sister, our lizards are about to stop, so please find somewhere we can borrow some magic," Pecora said, like it was the most natural thing in the world. I, however, was hearing about this for the first time.

"Where on earth do I get magic...?"

Pecora opened her mouth and pointed to it. What did that mean?

"The lizards can convert food into magic power. In short, please find a house that will feed us!"

Pecora's and Beelzebub's robot kaiju had run out of power (they didn't run on electricity, but it was basically the same idea), so they had slowed down and eventually stopped.

"Why is mine still going?"

"You are surprisingly good at driving, I'd say. You are preserving your magic level well since you do not often accelerate or decelerate."

So it was like how driving well supposedly led to more efficient fuel

consumption... I guess my experience was coming through, even as a carless driver.

“We will follow on foot, so go look for a store or a house along the road!” Beelzebub commanded.

“Seriously...? I have to bargain for food...?”

Well, I'd better get to it. To be honest, I thought this would go a lot quicker if the demon king herself went around asking for food, but I guess that wasn't in the cards.

It wasn't long, however, before I realized I was at a distinct disadvantage.

There were no houses here in the outskirts.

There were absolutely no buildings around me at all.

Just farms growing who knows what stretching out on either side of the road...

“This isn't good... We could have managed if we were in town somewhere, but what am I supposed to do out here...? We should have fueled up before leaving the city...”

These were artifacts, not living creatures, so couldn't they just convert stones and dirt into magic?

No... They'd probably break. I shouldn't.

And since they looked sort of animal-ish, I wanted to feed them real food if I could.

At long last, my own robot kaiju started to make the “*Hweeeeeee~*” noise. Even with my efficient driving, the extra time that had netted me was still about what you'd expect.

“What should I do now...?”

I got down from my robot kaiju and gave it a push, and its legs began to move, spurring it forward. It kind of felt like pushing a bicycle.

“Any shops...? No shops...”

Then I saw something move in the field next to me.

It was a demon, a farmer with eyes of two different colors wearing a hat. He had been hunched over in the middle of his work.

“Hmm? Wazzat? New scarecrow?”

“No, not exactly.”

He had spoken to me first, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to ask him.

“Excuse me, but we were traveling on these, and it seems we've run out of magical fuel for them. Do you think you could give us some food so we can recharge?”

It was probably a little brazen of me to be doing this, but I didn't know how long I would have to push this robot kaiju before finding a shop.

“Not sure I understand, but sure thing!”

Oh, thank you! My guardian angel! Or rather, my guardian demon!

“But the house is pretty far from where we're at. How 'bout some of this crop here? Got more'n enough here to sell, so I can give you all the ugly ones that won't do well at market.”

“Um... That should be fine. What are you growing anyway?”

The demon farmer lifted up what looked like a massive ball.

I could see unique striped patterns on a base of green.

“Cousin of the melon. Nice and sweet on the inside.”

So...watermelon, then.

The farmer hoisted up a watermelon considerably bigger than his own head and brought it up to the road, where he viciously struck it with his bare hands.

The ball split, and the red fruit inside became visible. It really was like a watermelon.

“There, you can eat that.”

“That's an exciting way to cut it!”

“Cutting with a knife takes too long. Go on; eat as much as you like.”

I immediately grabbed a suitable portion of the fruit and fed it to the robot

kaiju.

“Eeeeeeee...”

The dispirited noise came back, and the robot kaiju’s tail started swinging back and forth.

“It sounds like it’s groanin’ or something; does that mean it’s got its magic?”

“I’m not sure, but it should be okay!”

On closer inspection, I saw what looked like a meter next to the rudder, and the needle went up whenever I fed the robot some fruit. Before long, it would be fully charged.

By the time I had gotten it back to full, the other two came up behind me.

“Did you find food, Elder Sister~?”

“This guy gave me some~!”

Incidentally, when he saw Pecora, the demon farmer beside me exclaimed, “The demon king!”

Yeah, I’d exclaim, too... The sovereign herself had just sauntered up...

Afterward, as we fed the watermelon-like fruit to the robot kaiju...

We had a little feast ourselves.

“Mmm! This is delicious!”

“These lifeblood melons have a very high sugar content, Your Majesty!”

That sure was a creepy name!

“But they really are good. They’re so sweet; these watermelons are practically all juice.”

“What’s a watermelon? These are lifeblood melons.”

Well, they’re watermelons to me; could we just call them that?

“Thank you very much, good farmer. And for feeding us, too,” I thanked him graciously.

Our journey would have been rough had I not found him.

“Oh, not at all. I feel ashamed to have fed Her Majesty inferior lifeblood melons...” The demon farmer hunched his shoulders in humility.

“Not at all! They were delicious~”

“Indeed, they were! Besides, these are only considered inferior due to their strange shape, and there was no problem with the flavor. The protruding part that would act as the thorn simply is not there, making them round.”

“So the round ones are inferior...”

Anyway, it was thanks to this kind farmer that we had managed to charge up our robot kaiju.

“Thank you so much for your help. Here is a royal letter of thanks. I’d like you to have it~”

Pecora handed him what looked like a certificate of commendation.

The farmer exclaimed “Nothing would make me happier!” and graciously received it.



We once again set off on our robot kaiju.

All three of them made noises that sounded like sirens. It was time to press on!

But right after we headed off, Pecora tilted her head and said, “I had a feeling that might happen, but it’s not really ideal~”

“What’s not ideal?”

“If I were to ask for help, I would only be met with shock. I will have to ask you, Elder Sister, or Miss Beelzebub to negotiate for food from now on.”

It didn’t sound like it was easy for the demon king to enjoy a leisurely journey like this.

“Got it. We’ll do our best.”

After that, our journey progressed favorably.

Eventually, we found a little café where we took a break. While we were there, we gave some water to our robot kaiju and got a little bit of a charge from that. It seemed even water would do.

Things were going well.

The sun was starting to set, but there was no need to stop just yet.

“I know you said I’d get used to the bounce, but I really don’t notice it anymore.”

It didn’t matter if the robot kaiju was at full magic or about to run out—it was a clunky ride.

“Indeed~ I’m starting to feel more and more like I’m in the book! 🎵”

“It seems like your main standard for how we are doing is accuracy to the book...”

“Yes! After all, I’ve never been able to experience such a strange and wonderful journey before.”

It wasn’t Pecora’s tone, bright as ever, that caught my attention; it was what she said.

That's right—she was the demon king. She couldn't take on an aimless, wandering journey, even if she wanted to.

Of course, whether everyone wanted to do something like that was a different story. There were plenty of people who weren't interested in traveling, who were perfectly happy staying in the town they lived in.



But maybe it was in our nature to be interested in things we had never been able to do.

Maybe Pecora had always dreamed of taking interesting journeys—the same thought had struck me when we’d traveled on the local carriage lines.

“Pecora, if this kind of thing makes you happy, then I wouldn’t mind coming along with you occasionally.”

It wasn’t all that dangerous or trying; and she liked to call me her big sister anyway.

“Really, Elder Sister? You cannot take back what you’ve said, you know?”

Her eyes were sparkling.

“Yeah, of course. I’ll help you out, so long as it isn’t an unreasonable ask.”

“Hell’s bells, you give her everything she wants.”

Beelzebub looked annoyed. We’d been driving for so long that I now had the confidence to glance over at the other two while still moving forward.

“It’s not that big a deal. Better than being too harsh on her, I say.”

“Give your word without too much thought to Her Majesty, and you will pay horribly for it. I know more about this than you do. I have more experience.”

Well, obviously you’ve known her for a long time because you’re the agricultural minister, but that’s no reason to start acting like you’re the authority.

“‘Pay horribly’? It’s not like I promised to grant her heart’s desires or anything. We’re just riding on these monsters...I mean lizard artifacts, right? And it’s not like it’s going to take weeks and weeks to get to our destination.”

Beelzebub still didn’t seem happy with that response; her expression was cautious.

“The moment you think something is simple is precisely when she has a trap waiting for you. I have been tormented by Her Majesty’s whims too many times...”

“W-well... I’m not going to deny that you’ve been through a lot.” I

remembered that Beelzebub had been forced to act as an idol before, among other things.

“Indeed, you’ve stopped making easy promises, Miss Beelzebub~ I must have failed to raise you properly.”

It sounded like Beelzebub often said similar things to Pecora, and she casually brushed it aside.

There was a bond of trust between them, such that Pecora wasn’t bothered hearing her vassal joke around like that.

“Now, then~ I hope we’ll be able to experience the best part of our journey before the day is done~”

Pecora sped up and moved ahead of us, which made her robo kaiju even noisier as it stomped along.

“The sun’s set, so maybe we should look for an inn for the night.”

Trees lined the road on either side of us, and it had begun to look like a mountain trail.

“We should! 🎵”

Just then, I thought I saw a devilish smile cross Pecora’s face.

But she was moving ahead of us, so it was hard to tell.

“Mmm... I thought I saw Her Majesty smile devilishly...,” Beelzebub said, looking exhausted.

“So you saw it, too.”

“I have a terrible feeling about this. She may be plotting something...”

“But we’re all on this trip together, right? If something were to happen, wouldn’t Pecora end up a victim, too?”

“If she’s taken that into account, then there shouldn’t be a problem, but... What? What sort of trouble will befall us...?”

Beelzebub was really on her guard. Was that because she’d spent so much longer with Pecora than I had?

The path became a steep uphill climb.

Our robot kaiju slowed as we ascended.

And we had yet another problem—

“They’re using up way more magic than before...”

“It is a hill, after all... It makes sense it would use up more magic than traveling on flat ground...”

That was obvious.

Wait.

At this rate...weren’t we going to run out of power right in the middle of this mountain pass?

Just as the thought occurred to me, Pecora’s robot kaiju made the dispirited cry “*Hweeeeeeee...*” as it ran out of fuel ahead of us.

“Oh my, oh my~ I went too fast and ran out of power early. Please do what you can, you two~” Pecora said, waving to us.

I felt a horrible chill.

She was definitely plotting something.

Like when she rushed ahead earlier... Was her inefficient fuel usage intentional so that she would run out of magic before either of us...?

“We have no choice but to press onward, Azusa.” Beelzebub’s expression was that of resigned realization. “We have no choice but to trust that we will reach a place where we can stay up ahead... Even if it seems hopeless...”

“Wait, what do you mean...?”

“Precisely what I said. I doubt there are any inns along this pass. We would likely have been able to get through and stay at the next town over had we used carriages, but...with these artifacts, we are likely to be stranded in a less than ideal spot...”

Uh-oh...

“You didn’t book any inns ahead of time or anything?”

“No. Her Majesty insisted that the best part of the novel was searching for a place to stay... I have a feeling she planned for the artifacts to stop in a deserted area...”

And then, Beelzebub’s apprehensions proved justified.

Both of our robot kaiju came to a halt on the empty mountain pass. The sun had set ages ago, so it was pitch-black, too.

“What should we do...? There’ve been no buildings at all for a while now...”

“We simply have no choice but to keep going. We have gone much too far to turn back now... We have to push our artifacts forward until we find a place to stop...”

Beelzebub and I were dancing in the palm of Pecora’s hand!

We couldn’t stop here, so we walked along the pass, pushing our respective robot kaiju.

As we pushed them, our monsters would occasionally make weird roaring noises: “Grrroooooaaah!”

“Silence! Do not roar so! At least remain quiet when you have no power!”

I understood why Beelzebub was angry. Pushing these things up the slope wasn’t easy...

“These things are more than able to store five times as much magic, and yet I was not as suspicious as I should have been that Her Majesty did not allow for their full capacity to be used. It was all for this performance of inconvenience...”

“Guess so. I can’t imagine how miserable we look pushing these things.”

If we’d at least run out of power on the way down, we could have kept going with momentum.

We’d lost power at the worst possible time.

“How long is this mountain pass anyway?”

“We will be walking for some time yet... Now that I think about it, Her Majesty plotted our route perfectly.”

“What does that mean...?”

“This pass is indeed the shorter route judging by distance, but it offers no recourse should we run out of power on the way. If we had avoided going through the mountain and instead gone around it, our route might have been longer, but we would have found plenty of residents and shops, so we likely would have been able to deal with the situation and find a place to stay. She has led us straight into a path where we are helpless.”

Which meant...

“No matter how far we push, we’re not going to find any inns or houses...?”

Beelzebub nodded.

“That stupid demon king! This is so evil of her... It was her goal all along to see her traveling companions suffer! ...Though, I’m sure she can’t be too happy with the situation, either.”

“That is precisely why you must not be too easy on Her Majesty. Her primary motivation in life is enjoyment, not comfort...”

I’d have to be more cautious from now on. Actually, there was something else I had worried about since entering this dark forest.

“Are there any bandits around here? The atmosphere is awfully eerie...”

Traveling through places like this at night was considered dangerous in the human lands. Merchants, especially, avoided it.

“Bandits? I doubt they would pose much of a problem,” Beelzebub quickly declared.

“Oh, that’s good~ I guess the demon lands really are safe, huh?”

Beelzebub pointed ahead of us.

There was a sign.



“This is not a place for bandits. If one were powerful enough to live here, then I have no doubt their talents would easily earn them employment elsewhere.”

“You mean it’s even more dangerous!”

It wasn’t the bandits specifically I was worried about, actually.

“Calm down, calm down. You and I would never be done in by such weaklings. In fact, I would be tempted to feed the basilisk to my artifact to recharge its magic if one attacked us.”

“That’s terrifying; please stop.”

I didn’t mind shooing them away, but I wasn’t so sure about turning them into food...

“Why? The strong eat the weak in nature. If they lose the fight against us,

then they place their lives in our hands.”

She sure was ruthless...

I heard a faint rustling sound from up ahead.

Then a basilisk emerged. It was huge—a monster in its own right!

It looked a lot like a big lizard. Apparently, it could stand on two legs, and its legs looked kind of bird-ish.

...But when the basilisk saw us, a look of terror crossed its face, and it ran away...

“Hey, that pisses me off for some reason! We’re not monsters!”

“No, from that beast’s perspective, we are more than monstrous enough... It could tell we were bad news...”

I was glad my level was so high. But I guess if I was being forced to travel this road at a lower level, then I’d be suing Pecora.

From that point on, basilisks and snakes kept jumping out at us before meekly retreating.

One basilisk actually brought us some nuts.

“Uh... Are you...giving these to us...?”

The basilisk bowed its head. It was apparently an offering.

“It seems to be saying that it will give us these nuts in exchange for not laying waste to this land.”

“It’s treating us like bandits!”

“Ahh, ’tis much appreciated, however.”

Right after she spoke, her stomach growled.

These basilisks had really gotten the wrong idea about us, but we did end up with some dinner.

“Pecora hasn’t shown up yet, but should we start eating anyway?”

“It is my estimation that Her Majesty is deliberately taking her sweet time. And if she is indeed behind us, then she will certainly catch up while we are

dining, so we shall set aside her portion.”

“You’re right. Let’s take a quick break, then...”

We roasted the nuts with Flame magic. I didn’t know if I was allowed to use fire out here, but this was technically part of a journey with the demon king, so it was probably fine.

“Hey, they’re not bad when they’re toasty like this.”

“Indeed. Back in my hometown, these were sold in shops.” Beelzebub really did know a lot about agriculture and forestry.

“Oh yeah, what is your hometown like anyway?”

“A—*ahem, ahem...* Mmm...what was it like? I can scarcely recall...”

“What an obvious avoidance tactic! You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I bet you come from a good family, though. Otherwise, you couldn’t act so haughty.”

“Aye... Yes, precisely... I have always been like this...”

She seemed really shaken. Maybe she was in a fight with her family?

Maybe I should send Falfa and Shalsha to ask her next time. I had a feeling she’d talk the second they showed any curiosity.

But maybe it wasn’t nice to wrench people’s secrets out of them.

“Pecora isn’t showing up at all. Don’t tell me she sneaked off on her own to stay at an inn...”

“That would not happen. Her Majesty has recognized the significance of being a regular member of this traveling party. She would not abandon us. It is more likely that she is moving as slowly as possible.”

“Hmm, I guess that’s preferable.”

And so our robot kaiju journey unexpectedly turned into a camping trip.

I could see how an unplanned trip like this might be interesting.

“These nuts are delicious. I don’t know what they’re called, but they taste expensive.”

“It seems as though that basilisk chose these nuts based on taste. A gift, perhaps. The basilisks in this area do offer food to their companions, after all.”

“So we *are* like bandits...”

And so we leisurely waited for Pecora to show up.

However, soon we were faced with an assault from a terrible new foe.

I heard a strange buzzing sound.

“Hey, is that the artifacts again?”

“No, they do not make such a noise.”

A massive swarm of bugs flew at us!

“Gaaah! What are these things?! We didn’t see any bugs when we were pushing the artifacts up here!”

“They are attracted to the light! They are going to swarm us!”

So they were reacting to the light...

“Get out of here! It’s dangerous! Go away!” I cast a small Flame spell.

I was warning them that I would burn them if they got close.

But the bugs didn’t care at all; they formed clumps and headed straight for us!

“Oh no, oh no!”

“Keep your mouth closed! They will get in!”

“Oh, I have an idea,” I said, continuing to produce flames.

“Oh? Let’s hear it!”

“Aren’t you the Lord of the Flies, Beelzebub? Can’t you tell them to go away?!”

“Do not make a fool of me! ’Tis not as though I was born a fly!”

Guess not. I thought it was a pretty good idea, though.

Beelzebub was casting a Blizzard spell to keep the bugs away, but they just kept coming.

“They’re so persistent for being so small! We don’t have anything like this in the highlands!”

“Insects in the demon lands are made of hardy stuff! I shall retreat for the moment!” Beelzebub dashed into the woods.

I wanted to run, too, but there was no way of telling what’d be waiting among the trees...

I was apparently the strongest person in the world, but I had no idea how I was supposed to deal with these bugs!

No, wait, I guess that was normal. The greatest fighting champion would still get annoyed by bugs swarming them... They were a whole other kind of enemy.

“You’re after the fire, huh? Then how about this wind...?”

I summoned a small tornado.

The wind seemed to work really well, and the bugs were flung away, scattering.

“Yes! More tornadoes, coming up!”

After I had made about five small tornados, the bugs vanished.

“*Huff, huff...* I feel like this is the first time I’ve used so much magic in a while...”

I really hoped nothing else would come out at us. I hadn’t been physically harmed, but I wanted a little rest after all the psychic damage.

But then the grasses near me started rustling.

What now? A basilisk? Was it coming to check out the commotion?

If it was a massive spider, then I was going to run right back the way we came without thinking twice. That would just be plain scary...

I prepared myself to run at a moment’s notice, waiting for the source of the sound to reveal itself.

What emerged was a huge deer...with Beelzebub riding on its back.

“A more comfortable ride than I had imagined.”

“You came in like the king of the forest!”

Its antlers were absurdly big—they looked like an upside-down chandelier. I wondered if the creature had made a mistake in its evolutionary path or something. And the deer itself was big enough to fit Beelzebub comfortably.

“This species is called the antlers-too-big faildeer.”

“You demons really give these creatures awful names...”

“It can understand us, so ’tis quite handy. I say we use this deer to cross the pass. Nay, I say we head straight for our goal.”

I hadn’t thought of hitching a ride from the local fauna!

But that would be no problem with a deer this size. And most importantly, it wasn’t going to run out of magic and cause us problems along the way...

“There are still more deer. Why don’t you hop on one, Azusa?”

“Well, if you insist...”

I entered the tall grass and found a bunch of deer the size of horses.

I hopped on one, and it didn’t protest. They weren’t so much domesticated as they were friendly.

“Nice. I’m starting to enjoy this.”

I guided the deer toward Beelzebub.

“These deer have learned that if they allow people to ride them, they will get a treat. Perhaps they took a troubled individual out of the pass and into the village and received a nice meal.”

“Judging by their reactions, you might be onto something there.”

Still—

Riding on a deer was a lot of fun.

It was a bit different than a horse. It wasn’t as rocky as the robot kaiju, either. And their round eyes were so cute.

“Deer, take us to Ehock, and I shall get you whatever you and your herd want. I promise this to you as your minister of agriculture.”

It sounded like Beelzebub was making political promises.

I hadn't thought they'd understand speech, but the deer all gathered together and appeared to deliberate.

"They're really smart..."

"I suppose only the cleverest were able to survive in such a harsh environment. The foolish ones vanished without receiving any food. The strong eat the weak here."

That sure was a visceral way to put it...

The deer finally turned to look at us and started nodding vigorously.

"It seems our terms have been accepted."

"They're so smart!"

As I watched the deer, I started feeling more and more attached to them.

"Maybe we should continue our journey on the deer, then. I think it'd be a nice way to—"

"No! Changing the rules in the middle of the journey is against the rules!"

A clear voice echoed through the trees. And there was Pecora, earnestly pushing her robot kaiju.

"Oh, hey, Pecora. You finally made it."

"You were quite slow, Your Majesty. Too slow."

"Both of you are acting as though this is none of your concern! I was on the verge of tears alone in this dark wood, going uphill, just barely managing to push my artifact! It was so hard and grueling!" Pecora claimed, but...

"That's not very convincing when you have such a big smile," I said.

She looked like a mountain climber who had finally conquered the summit.

"That is because I managed to re-create the scene in the book where the artifact comes to a halt in a deserted area, and the main character finds himself in huge trouble~"

She was enjoying this like it was a ride at an amusement park.

“And, Pecora, you didn’t need to struggle to push your artifact up at all. You could have run.”

Beelzebub and I could have done that as well, but seeing as we were waiting for Pecora, we had decided not to. It wouldn’t be easy to meet up again if we got too far ahead.

“No! Normal people cannot run at such a pace! You may not say anything that ruins the atmosphere!”

This demon king sure was being picky about the setting...

“I was so discouraged as I was coming up this hill. I wondered what I would do if I were attacked by bandits.”

“Did I not report to you in the previous land survey that no bandits live here?”

“And there are basilisks and snakes around here, too~”

“I know they would have turned tail the moment they saw you.”

“Stop ruthlessly attacking my fun, Miss Beelzebub!”

Based on her protests, it seemed like Miss Beelzebub had been right on the money.

“This has always been my dream—traveling on an artifact, running out of magic power on a mountain pass...pushing it along a seemingly endless road, at my wits’ end...searching for a light that might suggest civilization, but unable to find it... *That is Give Me Some Magic* at its best!”

The words tumbled out of Pecora’s mouth at an alarming rate as her eyes glittered.

This girl was basically a nerd on the inside.

“I can’t say I understand, since I haven’t read the book.”

“Then imagine: a story where we reach our destination with no hiccups, no troubles brought on by a lack of magic. It would be quite boring, wouldn’t it? We need bumps along the road.”

“But these hiccups you’ve created are all fake.”

“La-la-la, I can’t hear anything. Now then, let us continue. Let us cry as we

push our artifacts through the mountain pass!”

The words *cry as we push* really didn't suit her cheerful tone.

“If we go that slowly, it'll take all night. And besides, the deer are willing to give us a ride.”

“You cannot take a different vehicle! That would be like deciding to ride a dragon partway through a local carriage line journey! It is forbidden! And we cannot leave the artifacts behind!”

She was right—if we left the robot kaiju here, then we'd be leaving them parked (?) in the middle of the road.

“Then I would like you to compromise by allowing us to push the artifacts with our regular strength, Your Majesty. Then we should be able to reach the houses at the bottom of the pass tonight.”

In response, Pecora puffed out her cheeks in defiance.

She was being stubborn this time, as usual.

“No, we cannot use strength beyond that of a normal person. That is against the rules. If we did that, we could just do whatever we wanted. We *have* to slowly push our artifacts and cry!”

I wasn't sure if Pecora was a genuine masochist or if she was just a little nerd obsessed with replicating her favorite book to a tee.

But how were we supposed to resolve this situation?

I really didn't want to be pushing this robot kaiju all night if I could help it.

This was Pecora we were talking about. I could use my position as her elder sister and say *You are being way too selfish right now; give us a break!* and she'd probably listen to me. That would allow her to experience something straight out of another one of her favorite books.

That said, I didn't really want to abuse my power as her big sister and force her to listen to me. Such selfishness would be no different from the demon king's behavior.

At that moment, I sensed something watching us from the grass.

Oh, right.

In that case, we could work this out.

“Hey, Pecora? It’s not a problem if we can charge the artifact lizards and get them up and running again while we’re out here, is it?”

“Of course not.”

Yes, this was going to work out.

“Wait here. I’ll go negotiate. Though, I don’t know if they’ll be able to understand me.”

I waded into the grass.

Once there, I used all the gestures I could think of to communicate with the animals.

The creatures then ran off.

Please understand me. I’m counting on you!

—Ten minutes later, I could hear rustling from all directions.

Basilisks surrounded us. All of them stood on two legs; their front two legs (hands, really) clutching nuts.

They were like smaller monsters who’d come to bring their robot kaiju bosses back to life.

Beelzebub and Pecora were shocked.

“You said that these basilisks have a custom of giving food to their companions, right, Beelzebub? That’s why I decided to make a request,” I said.

“I see. We can use the nuts they give us to charge the artifacts!”

“You negotiated with the deer, so I thought I could do the same with the basilisks.”

With a triumphant look, I turned to Pecora.

“We can charge them with these, right? That isn’t against the rules, is it?”

“Ooh... It is touching to think that the warm hospitality of the locals has allowed us to charge up and overcome the obstacle that is this mountain pass...

Very well, I will allow it.”

The locals were basilisks in this case, but they *were* native to the area, so it should be fine.

“No going back on your word, Your Majesty. Once we pass through with our artifacts, we should be able to stay at an inn at the bottom.”

Beelzebub seemed relieved at the thought of sleeping in a bed.

“Thank you, basilisks! You’re all good little kaiju!” I thanked them all by petting their heads and lifting them in the air like little kids. A normal person wouldn’t be able to do that, but my stats made it easy for me. “I feel like I’m hugging my own kaiju children.”

“I am afraid I do not understand the concept of ‘kaiju.’”

“I guess it refers to these kinds of animals, like basilisks and lizards.”

We filled the robot kaiju with magic by feeding them the nuts the basilisks had given us and once again set off on our way.

But our circumstances had now changed considerably.

“Hey, Beelzebub?” I didn’t think I needed to ask, but I was going to anyway.

“What?”

“There are a lot more of them now, aren’t there...?”

An entire herd of basilisks and deer were following behind us.

“The deer believe they will get good food simply by following us. I suppose they have determined that the contract between us is still valid. Well, food is a small price to pay. I shall buy some for them later.”

“But then why the basilisks? I didn’t ask them to come along. Maybe they’re following us because they’re not happy with us dining and dashing... We’ll have to get them something nice, too...”

“No, they have acknowledged you as ruler of these woods, Azusa. They follow you because they are your vassals.”

“I mean, the demon king herself is right here. Me being the ruler of the woods makes this a little complicated.”

The more the merrier, obviously, but this was kind of a weird group.

“Th-there was a scene in the book where the researcher finds more traveling companions along his journey... So this is all right... I will allow it...”

Pecora’s interpretations were becoming looser and looser.

Once our group started downhill, we immediately sped up and at last reached the village at the foot of the mountain.

We knocked on the door to the village inn. Incidentally, it was Beelzebub who was doing the talking this time.

“Pardon us, but we need a place to stay. We would like several rooms, if possible.”

“Sorry, but it’s late, so we only have one room open.”

Beelzebub glanced behind her. “Her Majesty the Demon King is with us, so get us rooms. We will even accept an unoccupied one in some resident’s abode. Her Majesty will pay.”

“...I—I will do what I can!”

In the end, we got rooms in what was essentially the community center.

The deer and basilisks slept outside the front of the building.

I even got my own room—so I wasn’t sure why Pecora was in my bed...

“Hey, uh, you know the room next door is open, right...?”

“But not having enough rooms and needing to sleep huddled together happened often in the book~ We should be grateful that there is an inn at all~”

Was this about matching the book, or was this just Pecora? I’d never read the book, so I couldn’t be sure.

“Well, whatever. You can stay as long as you don’t move around or talk too much.”

“Aww~ But we should share romantic gossip~ 🎵”

“I don’t have any.”

I stayed on guard, wondering if Pecora was going to try to talk to me, but both

of us were exhausted, and we fell asleep right away, so there were no issues.

We all had plenty of physical strength, but it was surprisingly tiring to do something new and different.

The following day, we hopped back on our robot kaiju to continue on toward our goal, the town of Ehack.

Even though we weren't passing through any big towns, there were a lot of demons on the roadside.

"Did you ask these people to come out here ahead of time, Pecora?" I asked.

"No, not here. I think it is because of that." Her gaze flitted backward.

The deer and basilisks were still following us.

"I guess that does attract attention..."

Being so noticeable was working in our favor—we received a lot more offerings on day two.

And thanks to that, our robots didn't run out of magic or cause us any trouble.

"We can go at a leisurely pace and still make it to our destination on day three. I don't think we'll have any more trouble from here on out."

"Oooh! My perfect accident plans were all for naught! I never imagined an unexpected accident would lead to their failure!"

"I feel like you're regretting the wrong thing, there..."

So she *had* planned for things to go wrong.

Honestly, if we had kept a careful eye on our magic supply as we'd traveled, our robots wouldn't have come to a stop on the mountain pass. The characters in the book probably just got into trouble at the most interesting moments for the reader.

"Well, not everything goes to plan when you travel. It's all right. In fact, I would say that this is the true delight of the journey."

"Now you're getting it, Pecora!"

If we thought of the change in our plans as part of the journey, then we could

keep going without dragging the mood down.

“We must reward those that are following behind us,” Beelzebub said. Yeah, the deer and basilisks were still happily following along, after all.

“I understand the deer, but I’m surprised that the basilisks can run such a long distance.”

“Weaker animals and monsters cannot thrive here in the demon lands. The strong eat the weak.”

The robot kaiju roared, **“Bwaaaaah!”**

The basilisks roared back: **““Bwaaaaah!””**

“Hey, Beelzebub? Something just occurred to me.”

“What is it? No need to be dramatic, just say it.”

“What if the basilisks think of these lizard artifacts as their ruler, not me? They look similar, too.”

“...I believe you may be correct.”

I liked that possibility more than me becoming the lizard queen, so I hoped it was true.

“Nay, they may consider you the true ruler, since you are atop the lizard.”

“...Urgh. Yeah, you might be right...”

And then came day three.

Pecora’s original plan had us *possibly* reaching our goal at some point during the day, but we rolled into Ehock before noon.

The surroundings were looking more and more populated, so we dropped our speed. There were people on either side cheering us on.

Among them, I recognized a few people, like Pondeli and Nosonia.

“You’ve made it~!”

“You’re almost there~! I can send you clothes that will wick away sweat later!”

I was genuinely happy to hear so many people cheering for us.

“Thanks, everyone!” I called.

My robot kaiju also roared, **“Gwooooh!”**

The deer and basilisks cried out in chorus.

Then, just as we were about to cross the finish line, I saw my family and the leviathan sisters waiting for us.

“You have done excellently these past few days, Lady Azusa!”

“You can hop on my back on the way home, and we’ll get to Vanzeld in no time!”

The dragons’ voices rang out clear.

“It’s not like we charted new territory or anything, but I’m really touched,” I said.

“Indeed! This is precisely what drives us forward through the most difficult of journeys!” Pecora said, triumphant.

“Actually, I’m pretty sure you were enjoying the difficult parts the most...”

As Pecora and I chatted—

“Falfa, Shalsha, Sandra! I am home~!”

—Beelzebub was shouting, waving her hands.

“Don’t call my kids’ names before I do! That’s against the rules!”

“No such rule exists!”

As we chatted, we crossed the goal ribbon.

“Yes! We made it!”

My daughters rushed to crowd around me.

“You made it, Mommy! And now you’ve become friends with deer!”

“A sight that has no precedent. How fascinating.”

Thank you, Falfa and Shalsha, for coming to greet me.

“Animals will group up with other animals, I see. Well done.”

Lastly, Sandra greeted me from a plant’s perspective.

And so concluded our journey atop weird artifacts that constantly ran out of power.

The deer and basilisks that accompanied us to the goal were given the highest quality ingredients from the agricultural ministry.

It wouldn't do if you started living here, so go back home, guys!



But even after returning to the house in the highlands, I had side effects from the trip.

“Madam Teacher, you have been bouncing your knee quite vigorously. They say that brings financial ruin, and I’m trying to run a company. Please rein it in if you can...”

It was Halkara who pointed it out to me.

“Was I doing it again? Sheesh, I was on that rocky artifact for three days straight, so I guess I need some movement to stay calm.”

It took me almost a week to stop bouncing my knee.

If I got the chance, I would have to go and thank the deer and basilisks for all their help.



That day, I had been invited into a terribly strange space.

By “strange space,” I didn’t mean something out of a science fiction story or cyberspace. It was a spot along the main street that might exist in any town.

So what was so strange, you ask?

“Gah! Another person passed through me and the table!”

It gave me the creeps, and I shivered.

This felt a lot like...when you went to get your hair cut and the scissors got really close to your head...

“Aww, Azusa, you are having such a tough time adjusting, aren’t you~? You know you can’t enjoy your relaxing teatime like that,” Godly Godness said to me, smiling softly like she was watching me learn how to ride a bike.

“Indeed. You must lack dignity if you find yourself panicking over a trivial divine miracle such as this,” Nintan, who sat next to Godly Godness, said casually. (Well, there were three of us sitting together, so we were all next to each other.) “No, no, come on! We should’ve had our tea in a place with less traffic, then! People just keep passing by—passing through us!”

As I argued, another person walked straight through Godly Godness.

The weird space we currently occupied was apparently infinitely closely overlapped with my usual world, but just slightly misaligned, which meant that the people passing by couldn’t see, hear, or touch us.

I wasn’t a god, so I didn’t know the details. And contrary to what I’d expected,

I had a feeling the gods didn't know, either. It was like a bird that could fly without understanding the exact mechanisms that allowed it to do so.

And so people passed straight through us as we drank our tea.

Maybe they didn't have a problem with it, considering they weren't aware of us in the first place, but having strangers constantly occupy the same space as me made me squirm.

"I'm getting really distracted. Shouldn't we have met up in a place with less people?"

"Azusa, you just don't understand~ It's a divine privilege to be able to people watch while drinking tea like this~"

Godly Godness looked smug.

"I'm not a god, so I can't really say I get it, no."

If I did, I think that would make me pretty arrogant.

"Azusa, the divine are ever present in the world, though you may not be able to see them. This is considered part of a god's job."

Strangely enough, Nintan agreed with Godly Godness.

"Ah, that woman wears clothes much too gaudy for her age. She looks as though she is trying too hard to look young, which is instead making her seem much older. That young one over there appears to think he can pull off those expensive clothes, but they do not suit him. Instead, the clothes are wearing him."

"You just want to play fashion police."

"Hmm, that man lives in a distant village, yet he has come all the way here to do his shopping at the cheap market. Considering the energy he will use getting here and going back, We believe he should have done his shopping at home; though We suppose We could understand if he was playing a game with himself where his goal was to purchase something for one hundred gold cheaper."

"Your people-watching observations are too detailed."

You're probably wondering why I'm having tea with the gods.

Well, earlier, when I had finished doing the shopping in Flatta and returned to the house, I suddenly heard Godly Godness speaking to me in my head.

Azusa, Nintan is having a teatime, so I want you to come along, too. This will be a tea party, by the way. Teatime is more fun with more guests! And it would be awkward if we ran out of things to talk about at the party with just the two of us!

After yelling “Is it a party or a teatime?! Can you please pick one phrase to describe it?!” I was suddenly shunted across time and space, ending up here.

I may be working with a small sample size, but gods tended to be really pushy...

The only other deity here besides Godly Godness was Nintan, so I had a feeling that Godly Godness had summoned me simply because she didn't want to be alone with Nintan.

Godly Godness was generally very casual, so their personalities tended to conflict.

And neither seemed like they wanted to budge or accommodate the other...

That said, now that I was here, they seemed to be getting along as they chatted; maybe Godly Godness's self-consciousness about having to deal with Nintan had dissipated.

“You seem to have grown accustomed to this world, Godly Godness.”

I'd been thinking the same thing—it was natural for Godly Godness to act as a deity here now. Nintan rarely ever gave her kind words, so the compliment this time rang true.

“There are many deities to whom I haven't introduced myself yet. I still have a long way to go.”

Oh wow, it was unusual for Godly Godness to humble herself like that.

“We wouldn't say that. You showed up at the previous divine drinking party. We believe that was an effective way of introducing yourself.”

So gods had drinking parties, too...

I really hoped they were special—and a little more awe-inspiring than normal drinking parties.

I had strangely mixed feelings as I sipped my tea. The tea, by the way, was unusually good. Not only had it been brewed with flawless technique, but it was probably made from the tastiest water in the entire world.

“Oh, no. Those who come to drinking parties are those on the sociable end of the spectrum to begin with, so I would have met them eventually. The bigger problem is those who don’t like drinking parties—how am I supposed to introduce myself to them?”

The problems they were discussing sounded awfully human...

“Without meeting the loner types, I would say my completion rate is still around forty percent. You know how in games there are easily obtainable characters—and then rare characters who rarely show themselves? It is a lot like that.”

“Hey! Do not liken them to game characters! That is rude!”

I thought it was perfectly acceptable for Nintan to get angry about that.

This was the reason Godly Godness always got turned into a frog.

“But it’s true, isn’t it? For example, I have not yet met this world’s god of death.”

That shocked me.

“Um... So there really is a god of death...?”

A god of death—a reaper, was a terrifying being. They took people to the afterlife.

I imagined the deity as a skeleton clad in a black hooded robe, carrying a scythe.

That said, I wanted to believe that a reaper couldn’t hold the spirits of the dead forever since we had the concept of reincarnation...but I didn’t know anything more than that.

Unfortunate souls caught by the reaper might be taken to a place equivalent

to hell. Even I only remembered dying and getting reincarnated once.

Maybe most dead were taken to hell by the reaper, where they were made to work like corporate drones for decades, and then reincarnated afterward.

Being reborn was nice, but getting stuck in hell would be...well, hell in every sense.

“Ah, you said god of death, did you not?”

It sounded like the god of death was a special being in Nintan’s eyes, too. She hopped on the topic fast.

“Don’t most places have gods of death? There might be some differences between worlds, but they seem to be ubiquitous based on my experience.”

Godly Godness had casually dropped some tremendous lore on me.

“The god of death, hmm. We have one in this world, yes, but she is an odd one.”

Nintan had basically confirmed the god’s existence.

Then she sipped some of her tea, making a really loud slurping sound.

I wasn’t sure if that was considered good manners or not.

“After all, she has spent a very, very long time writing a book. When will it be finished?”

“She’s writing a book?!”

That didn’t sound like a very divine hobby.

“Yes. She has been writing for far too long; We informed her that the best way to leave one’s mark on the world was through literature, and she has been writing ever since.”

Maybe it was too early to start making assumptions, but that seemed like an eccentric hobby for a god.

“In which case, shall we drop by and say hello now? We know where she lives. We believe she should have some interaction every once in a while.”

It almost sounded like Nintan was asking if we wanted to drop by and say hi

to a friend who lived in the area, except the friend was the god of death.

Were we going to be okay...?

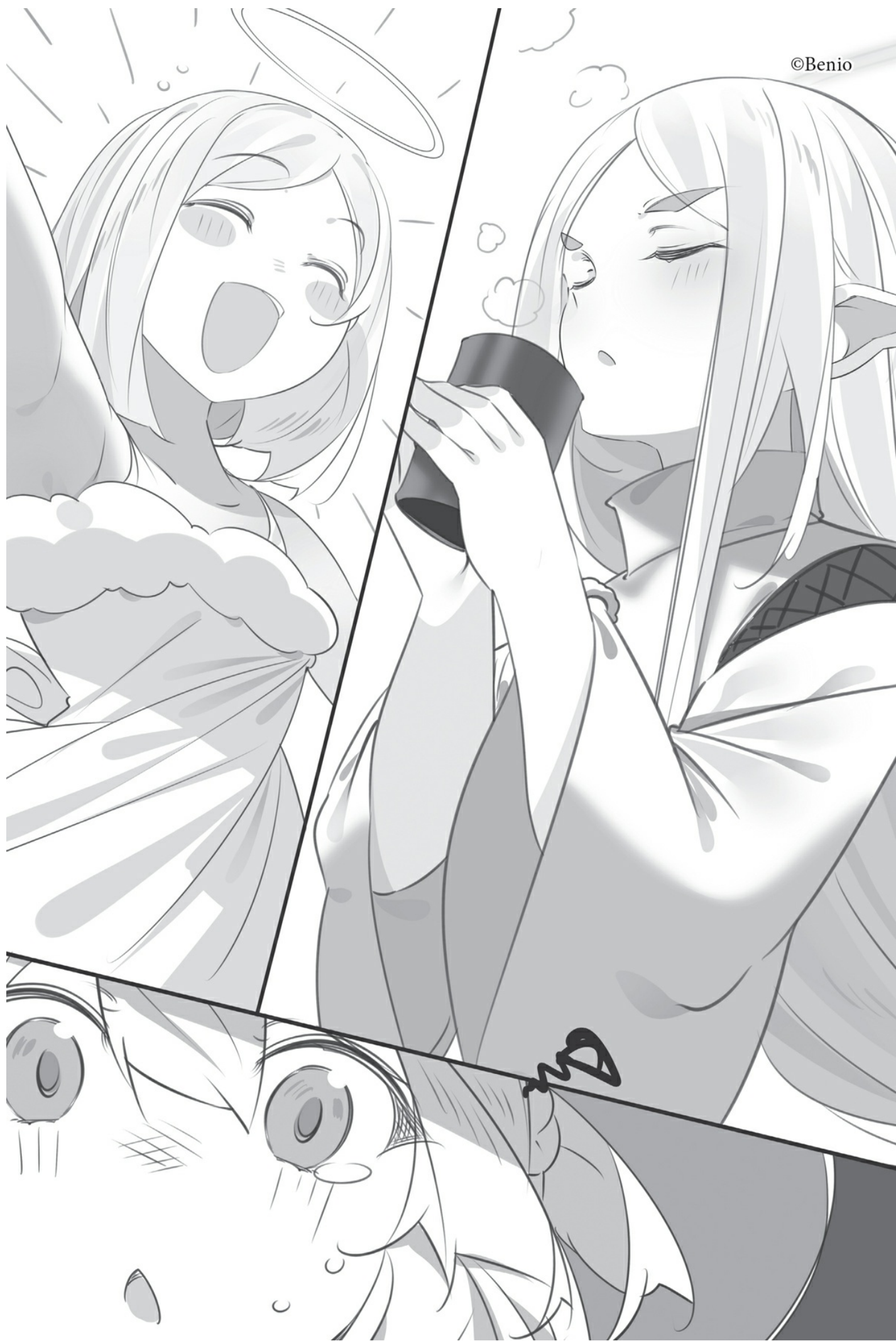
At the end of the day, I was still terrified of meeting *the reaper*. I bet it would be hard to find someone who wouldn't be.

"Um... I know people say I'm the strongest in the world, but I'm still human, so...this god of death isn't going to suddenly steal my soul or anything if we meet her, right?"

"Fool. We would not suggest popping in for a casual visit if she were indeed that dangerous."

Oh, so Nintan had been aware of how casual she sounded.

"Oh, yes, yes! At times like this, we should hop straight to it!" Godly Godness was waving her hand around. She really didn't take anything seriously! "Life is full of fleeting hellos and good-byes. We should see people when we get the chance!"



I wasn't really sure if gods without the concept of death should use maxims like that.

Oh, well. If it was really safe, I guess I could tag along...

"All right. I'll come along with y—"



"—ou."

The moment I gave my answer, we were transported to a bleak patch of land.

"With your permission, We have teleported us. This is where the god of death lives."

"That escalated quickly!"

We'd arrived before I'd even finished my sentence. I could have said *I'll come with you later* or *Tomorrow*. What then?

"Oh my, this place does not look very exciting at all~" Godly Godness's gaze was sweeping the area.

I bet a local might get angry if they heard her insult their home right after arriving for the first time, but it was so desolate here that I wasn't even sure if locals existed in the first place.

There was nothing to suggest the presence of life anywhere around us, and the ground at our feet was dried out. There looked to be a rocky mountain in the distance, but I could tell at a glance that there were no grasses or trees on it.

Even if there were locals around, they probably couldn't boast about how amazing the scenery was.

"I guess this does seem like the kind of place a death god would live... It's so desolate..."

To be honest, I probably never would have come here if these two hadn't brought up the topic.

Even if you were to visit, there didn't seem to be anything to do. There probably weren't very many herbs around for potions, either.

“This place is colloquially called the End of the World. We would not have come if the reaper did not make her home here. No human that believes in Us resides here, after all.”

So the gods did ignore places without any worshippers.

“The reaper lives at the foot of that mountain. We have already teleported here, so we may as well walk. This is a rare chance for Us to walk.”

Maybe Nintan put us far away from the reaper’s house to begin with so she could get a good look at the area.

It was very considerate, in a way. Had she teleported us right next to the god of death the moment we agreed to go, I know I wouldn’t have been ready. I probably would have lost it.

“Got it. If you see anything interesting during our walk, be sure to point it out.”

“This is such a good idea~ I haven’t been doing enough aerobics lately, so I appreciate the opportunity!”

Both Godly Godness and I agreed, and we all started walking.

One hour later.

We were still walking through the wasteland.

“It’s so far away! And the scenery has barely changed!”

That mountain was a lot farther away than I had thought...

“Of course. This location has been recognized as the most boring place on the planet. Its official name is the Empty Wastes.”

“That’s kind of mean.”

“Roughly six tourists come every year to experience the nothingness.”

“That’s one person every two months!”

Godly Godness had seemingly succumbed to boredom not too long ago, and now her eyes were glazed over as she floated in midair. Being divinity gave her the power of flight. I could float, but not fly around freely.



Just then, I spotted some kind of sign standing in the middle of all the emptiness.

“Hey! Evidence of civilization!”

“What are you doing out here, Misjantie?!”

Actually, the real question was *What were you doing out here?!* No way she got any worshipers in this place. I doubted anyone would want to hold a wedding here, either. Even locals would probably want to hold their wedding somewhere else.

This seemed like a typical example of a store opening too many branches and having to close them again.

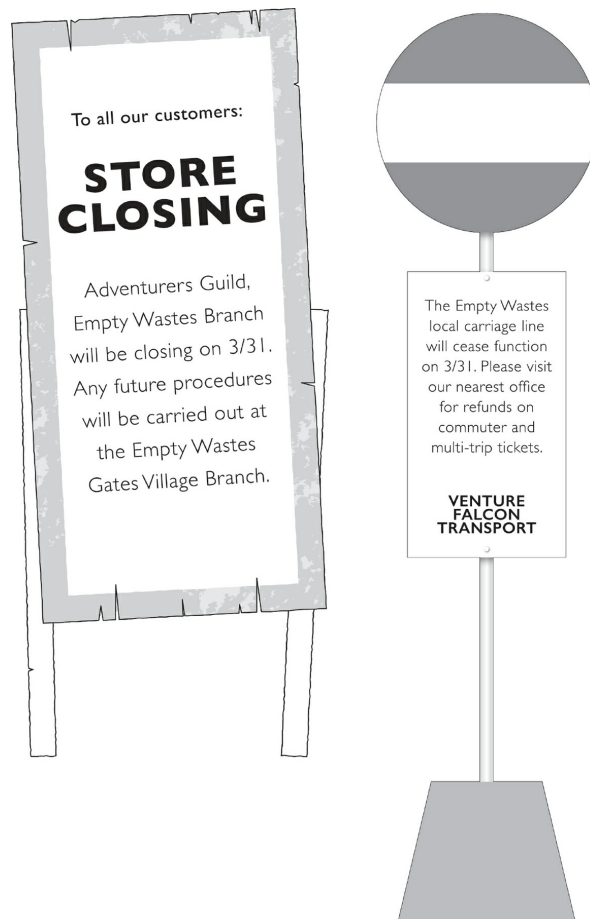
“Oh my, Azusa! There are so many signs here!”

Godly Godness had suddenly come back to life. Compared to the sheer nothing we’d been walking through earlier, any kind of *thing* was exciting.

I went to look at a nearby sign.

This place was closed, too! And now that I looked closer, I thought I saw the remains of some buildings.

It looked like there were ruts in the ground over there. And another sign, too.



The carriages had shut down, too!

Everything here was already over and done with!

“I’m shocked public transport used to come here! I wonder if there really were people around to use it?”

“Yes, exactly. I was wondering the same thing. Did people used to live here?”

Nintan nodded. “At its peak, seventeen people lived in the Empty Wastes, but the number slowly dwindled, and the population eventually vanished. The wave of rural depopulation even managed to reach this corner of the planet.”

“I think this might go beyond rural depopulation. Why were they living here in the first place...?”

“A hermit seeking out the most isolated areas once wrote in a book that this was the most remote place in the world. After that, it became well-known among the hermit community, and the region continued to attract more and

more hermits.”

“Doesn’t living somewhere famous go against the hermit lifestyle?”

I would have expected them to pick a place where they could live in hiding, away from the world’s gossip.

“But there were apparently a great number of problems—for example, they needed to pay exorbitant import fees in order to obtain water, so only the hermits with considerable economic power could live here for extended periods of time. Nowadays, the vogue among hermits is to hide away in mountains close to big population centers.”

“It seems a little backward for hermits to be so concerned with convenience...”

“We are not a hermit; therefore, We cannot speak to their ways. And either way, hermits are a shallow bunch who like to tell others, ‘I live an exemplary lifestyle away from earthly matters.’”

It sounded like hermits were about to get some divine criticism.

“To be honest, We care not for hermits, since they do not give much in the way of offerings to Our temple.”

“That’s *too* honest!”

“But they are the sort to write things like that.”

Nintan pointed to a paper plastered on an empty house.

“I don’t think these people have an enlightened bone in their body!”

**THIS hermit was featured in
HERMIT
WALKER!**

This pure recluse is particular about living in a place with absolutely nothing in it. A new rising star of hermit culture who already has the air of a veteran.

(Comment by Bernard, Hermit Critic)

“That is their way. We do not mind a materialist, but We are much happier with materialists who will donate lots of money to Us.”

If I had known how shallow hermits were, maybe I’d have become just as judgmental.

Meanwhile, Godly Godness was looking around the empty lands.

I wondered if there were many interesting discoveries to be made here from the perspective of a god.

“If the next person I reincarnate asks for a quiet place, I think I will put them here~”

“That’s horrible! Don’t do that!”

They would be lost from the moment they reincarnated.

That was like when you made a deal with a demon in exchange for a wish, only to get something terrible that follows the letter and not the spirit of your request. That happened a lot in fables. It was definitely not something a god

should be doing.

“Now we are approaching the reaper’s house.”

Nintan pointed toward the mountain.

It was finally getting closer.

At its base, I could see what looked like a little house.

“Once the residents were gone, the reaper started existing in a physical body. We believe you will see her right away, Azusa. Rarely does anyone come visit, you see.”

“I’m sure you’re right... I doubt anyone has good reason to come here...”

Now that I knew where we were going, I picked up my pace.

And finally, we arrived at the house where the god of death supposedly lived.

“It’s so normal. Way too normal...”

At a glance, there was nothing frightening about it. The outside looked a lot like a human’s house.

I had been hoping for a garden at least, but plants were probably impossible to grow here since it was kind of a wasteland. Shopping seemed like a hassle, but this was a god we were talking about, so it was probably not an issue.

“Gosh~ They probably don’t have many believers~”

“Hey, no rude remarks,” Nintan reprimanded Godly Godness.

It sounded like a number of believers served as the basis for acting superior to other gods.

“There is an old saying that goes: Be rude and you shall be turned into a frog.”

“You’re the only one turning people into frogs!”

This goddess was trouble because she always wanted to turn people she didn’t like into frogs.

“Anyway. Let us say our hellos.” Godly Godness stood before the door and bowed twice. She then knocked twice on the door. Finally, she bowed once again.

“It’s like you’re praying at a shrine...”

She must have been doing it as a joke, since that wasn’t a custom in this world.

“Gosh~ Well, she is a god, so I thought it might be a good way to summon her~”

Then, not long afterward, the doorknob moved.

The reaper was finally going to appear...

I sincerely hoped she wouldn’t be the terrifying kind of reaper I was picturing...

Please don’t be a skeleton in a black robe...

What emerged was hair.

Not a single strand of hair, of course; it was a whole clump of hair.

It looked like a marimo, a round clump of algae, that had grown too large and could no longer retain its spherical shape.

Did she not have a human form? Was she some kind of fuzzy creature? It wasn’t like gods were required to take on human forms.

And then...two pale hands poked out from the ball of hair.

That startled me!

I was reminded of a scene from a horror movie.

The two hands started to part the hair. Soon, a face and body emerged from the clump. Apparently, this ball of hair was actually a girl.

Physically, she was even smaller than Sandra, but the sheer volume of her hair made her appear larger than she actually was.

“Ah, it is good to see you, Reaper. We have brought along a new god and an acquaintance,” Nintan introduced us briefly. Her tone suggested she and the reaper had some rapport.

“...Okay,” the reaper replied, her voice barely a whisper.

The fact that she was holding herself up here probably meant she wasn’t very

good at getting along with other people—or other gods, as the case may be.

Godly Godness and I gave our own brief introductions. Godly Godness was casual, as always, but I was a little nervous since I was speaking to a god of death.



“...Hi. Am Ost Ande.”

She spoke very quietly and seemed to be making every effort to say as few words as possible, even dropping the “I.”

“You do not attend our drinking parties, which is why We have brought along the newcomer. Have a chat. Try to talk about something interesting.” Nintan was making some pretty unreasonable demands.

“...If you’re okay with simple conversations. Nothing is here, but come in.” The reaper spun around, and her mass of hair whirled after her. She looked like a cryptid when her body was hidden in the hair...

“Oh, yay! Don’t mind if I do~ ♪” Godly Godness nonchalantly sauntered into the house, and I followed along behind her.

It was the first time in my life I was visiting the home of a reaper.

Inside was a room with a simple wooden table. The table was cluttered, and there were several bottles lined up on it.

“...Don’t really have drinks.”

It was like the hair itself was talking.

“Oh, don’t worry about it! You’re a god, so why would you have human drinks lying around?”

“Alcohol on the table... Drink whatever you want.”

Every single bottle on the table had an absurdly high alcohol content.

She was more of a degenerate than I had imagined!

But she *was* a reaper...so maybe she was supposed to be like this?

“Gosh, then maybe I will~”

Godly Godness pulled a cup seemingly out of thin air and poured some alcohol into it. She really went for it whenever she was given permission.

And as she was drinking, I heard the hair ball speak.

“I’m the reaper... That’s it.”

.....

Was that really *it*? Her whole introduction, over already?

I guess she did say herself that she was the god of death, so maybe it made sense for her to bring a swift end to the conversation. But even so, wasn't that a little *too* swift?

"Apologies... She rarely communicates with other people. We cannot trust her to take the reins herself, so We will guide the conversation..."

If nothing else, at least I'd discovered some things about the god of death's personality.

"Come now, Ost Ande. Show Us what it is you are interested in."

"...Okay," Ost Ande replied, her voice barely louder than the buzz of a mosquito.

The reaper then disappeared into the next room over, dragging that massive volume of hair with her.

"In a way, this reaper strikes me as very reaper-like, Azusa. I am relieved!"

"What? How is she reaper-like?"

"Well, if the reaper were a more energetic or ambitious sort of person, she might start trying to collect as many souls as she could. If she started harvesting the souls of people who were still young and healthy, complications could arise. It'd be like in human society, when salesmen start relying on high-pressure tactics or even fraud to inflate their numbers.

"The more I talk to you, Godly Godness, the less dignified the gods seem to me."

It might help if she stopped comparing them to humans.

"It is better that she does only what is required of her and nothing more. And that is why most reapers are people like her."

"I kind of get it and kind of don't..."

So black-robed reapers like in my imagination were actually pretty rare.

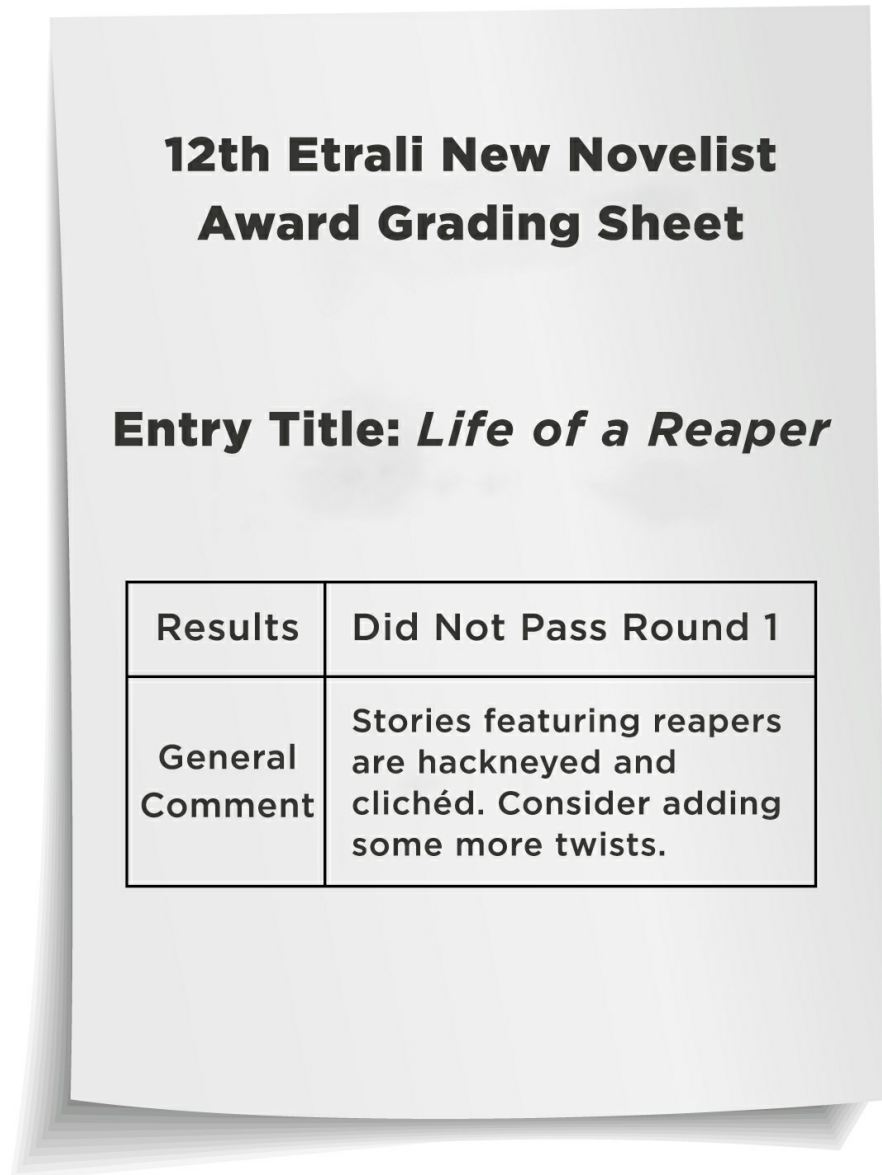
After a while, Ost Ande came back.

Bundles of paper were wrapped up in various parts of her hair.

“That’s...an avant-garde fashion statement.”

“...Read whatever you like,” she said.

I plucked one of the bundles of paper out of her hair, wondering what she meant.



“You’ve been applying to writing contests!”

Come to think of it, someone did mention she had taken up writing. But it was kind of unexpected that she was submitting her manuscripts.

“Is that what yours says as well, Azusa?” Godly Godness asked. “This sheet of paper has the name of a new novelist award along with a book title. The comment says, ‘It’s common for the reaper to be the heroine, so please find something more original. Otherwise, try to write about something based on your own experiences.’”

Could it be that she was sending applications to every contest she could find?

“Ost Ande has been pursuing the path of the novelist for about five hundred years now, as a means to kill time, and has applied to new novelist awards all around the world,” Nintan explained.

“...Writing about the reaper has been done. Been telling me that for five hundred years,” Ost Ande muttered.

I didn't know a whole lot about the writing world, but it sounded like when the reaper wrote about her own life, it always ended up sounding clichéd.

Maybe a writing career wasn't in the cards for her.

“...Have seen so much death that I'm bored of it... Thought I might be good at writing, started applying...”

Ost Ande paused to take a breath—probably because she hadn't spoken so much in quite some time—and took a swig directly from one of the alcohol bottles.

Maybe she was a little bohemian, after all...

“...Phew. But submission after submission...they kept telling me it's 'too common' or 'not realistic enough'...”

Even though it was, indeed, extremely realistic for her!

What a tricky situation. She couldn't tell them the reaper herself was the author, and it wasn't like they'd believe her even if she did.

“...Got no results, wanted to crawl into a hole now and then...”

With a strange rustling sound, Ost Ande vanished into her own hair. *Hey, that's not a hole.*

“Wait, come back out! Hiding won't solve anything!” Nintan yelled, and Ost Ande reemerged from her hair with that rustling sound again.

She wasn't particularly cheerful to begin with, but the depressing topic seemed to have upset her.

Maybe she was depressed because things hadn't been going her way for so long.

“...Hair got in my mouth.”

“That’s your own fault.”

Nintan was right. Wait, was that why she looked sour?

“We knew you had been writing novels, but it has only been five hundred years. Your efforts will surely begin to blossom if you stick with it for another five thousand, fifty thousand years.”

That was the kind of consolation that only worked on a god; Nintan patted Ost Ande on the shoulder (?). Everything was covered in hair, so I wasn’t sure where her shoulder actually was.

At any rate, I couldn’t help but feel like fifty thousand years was a little *too* long.

“...Okay. Will keep trying for another fifty or five hundred thousand years.”

And she just added another zero! That time scale was almost impossible to imagine for a young’n of only three hundred like me.

“Besides, you have been doing this for five hundred years now. It has become a solid hobby for you. We see no problem here.”

“...Was my intent.” Ost Ande nodded.

Obviously, she wouldn’t have kept at it for five hundred years if she didn’t like it.

“Other gods have said they would begin writing poetry, yet they give up on it after a few decades.”

That still sounded like a pretty long time! Usually people gave up short-term hobbies after days or months...

The gods sure measured everything on a different scale. Even their values seemed to be different...

Godly Godness tapped my shoulder. “Look at this, Azusa. She has a saying taped on the wall to motivate herself.”

Put Some Soul into It

“That phrase has a slightly different nuance when a reaper writes it...”

But that reminded me of something I had been wondering about. And since

it'd crossed my mind again, I decided to ask.

“Um, Your Divineness, Ost Ande?”

“...Just call me Ost Ande. I don't take souls in a way that warrants worship. Please don't be so deferential.”

I guess she wasn't the type of god to act high-and-mighty. Though of course she was, being a god and all.

“Ah, well, Ost Ande, then...what does your job as the god of death entail?”

She was still the reaper—writing books wasn't her job.

I hadn't heard a peep about her actual profession.

“...Sign things. Goes quick.”

Her voice was barely loud enough for me to hear. She then dragged herself and her hair over to the next room.

When she came back, she had more papers curled up in her hair.

👤 **REPORT** 👤

Her Deathliness Ost
Ande the Reaper;
Are you sure you'd like
me to reincarnate the
souls of those listed on
the attached document
into cows?

Mid-rank Reaper

👤 **REPORT** 👤

Her Deathliness Ost
Ande the Reaper;
Are you sure you'd like
me to banish the souls
of those who died in Arua
the other day outside of
our world?

Mid-rank Reaper

“Shouldn’t really show you this, but...whatever.”

She flipped through the documents.

“I really don’t think you were supposed to show me this...”

I never thought I’d see something like this with my own eyes. The atmosphere right now was so relaxed I would probably forget all about it, but depending on the situation, this kind of revelation could quite literally cause someone to lose their sanity.

“I see~ The god of death has a lot of authority in this world~ You can even

choose where a soul is reincarnated~” Godly Godness had experience in this field, so she was nodding, impressed.

“Ah, what was it like in my previous world, Godly Godness?”

“Reapers carried souls to me like machines over there. That is why I was able to reincarnate you to another place under my jurisdiction. If the reapers had been allowed to decide, you might have been reincarnated as a dung beetle or something.”

“I’m glad we didn’t have that system, then.”

I was suddenly very happy that it had been Godly Godness who’d picked where I’d be reincarnated.

“But the life of a dung beetle is quite fun. Imagine just how alive you’d feel while rolling up that dung. A pretty good life, I’d say.”

“But they roll up *dung*. I’m just glad I’m here, where I can express my opinion.”

“—In short, Ost Ande simply gives her approval on things. It’s been a long time since she took part in the actual business itself.”

Well, I guess that made sense. You stopped working in the field once you got important enough in any job.

“...Have lots of free time. So I write.” Ost Ande nodded again.

“I see, so your job lets you work on a hobby at the same time.”

“...But there’s one drawback.” She started shrinking back into her hair. Maybe she was embarrassed.

Before she could completely vanish, however, Nintan grabbed her hand.

Nintan really knew how to handle her.

“Do not shrink away with every twinge of embarrassment! You mentioned the drawback; now you must state it. Do not bring it up if you do not want to tell Us. Do not leave Us wondering.” Nintan was really nitpicky about stuff like this. “Be proud of yourself. You are, after all, a god. Carry yourself with confidence.”

Ost Ande nodded in understanding. “...Showed the manuscript to

subordinates. They said that souls weren't handled like that anymore. Was old fashioned... Said if I'm gonna write about it, I should do some research..."

So her depiction of reapers was unrealistic, after all!

She'd gotten so important that she no longer knew what happened on the job!

Nintan took one of the manuscripts and started flipping through it.

"Your recent works are terrible. These are nothing more than retrospectives on your own work. No narrative arc. This is not even a story anymore."

"...Rrrgh! Also got a comment that said, 'This is the kind of thing a recent retiree would submit to a rising novelist competition. Please send us a story, not an autobiography'..."

Ost Ande was about to shrink back into her hair. She was clearly mortified.

"Ah! Do not attempt to hide every time you speak! Oh no! She's gone!"

Ost Ande's body had once again been subsumed into her hair.

With a sigh, Nintan turned to us. "As you can see, she cannot grow as a person without occasionally speaking to others. Now and then, we bring acquaintances over to meet her. This time, that happened to be you."

Godly Godness nodded. "I see~ I suppose that was the reason you invited me to your teatime all of a sudden~ I was wondering why you would want me at a tea party."

"Can you settle on whether it was a time or a party, already?"

I suppose that meant Nintan, in her own way, was concerned about this god named Ost Ande.

I guess she had a softer side, too.

"Sure. I'll help out, if there's anything I can do. Not sure what that would be, though."

"Serve as a conversation partner to this hair ball. That is more than enough." Nintan glanced over at the perfectly still clump of hair. "We doubt she will emerge anytime soon. Shall We drink whilst We wait?"

Delighted, Godly Godness whipped out another cup from nowhere.

I guess it would be more difficult for Ost Ande to come back out if we kept talking to her.

That said, it was pretty surreal to have a big hair ball in the same room with us...

About fifteen minutes later.

As we slowly sipped our drinks, Ost Ande finally emerged from her hair.

“Well? Have you calmed yourself?”

“...Apologies. Say what you want now; can handle it.” Ost Ande slowly nodded.

“That’s it!” Godly Godness exclaimed. “You should send in your most embarrassing autobiographies! Just say it’s fiction, and it’s fiction!”

“...Nope, still embarrassed.” Ost Ande tried to shrink back into her hair.

“Godly Godness! No! Do not traumatize her! Now We will have to start all over again!”

“Whaaat?! But she said she could handle anything we said, and yet I’m responsible...?”

“Someone with as little tact as you must always consider their words before speaking, no matter what the other party says! Come back out, Ost Ande! Help Us pull her out, Azusa!”

“Me?!”

With the two of us pulling, we managed to get Ost Ande out.

We had made almost no progress, and I was already exhausted...

“...Sorry. I’m okay now. Over it.”

At this point, I wasn’t very convinced, but I had no choice but to believe her.

“...Can withstand anything you say about my stories. Those submissions are in the past. Working toward greater heights now.”

Oh-ho! Could this be genuine?

I thought I saw a bit more determination in her face.

“Ah, you must have finally resolved to write outside of your own experience. Or you could simply mix some fiction into stories drawn from experience. Perhaps something about the exploits of a mysterious hair ball monster.”

Nintan was right—if writing only about being a reaper was the problem, then all she had to do was find another subject.

But as it happened, Ost Ande’s determination had turned in an...unexpected direction.

“...I see the truth now. Submissions that win awards cannot be called art. True art is work that no one can understand. It’s cutting edge.”

She was getting even worse!

“...Submitting manuscripts is a sign of weakness. Am different from those bound to preexisting rules.”

“This is bad! She has started to reject her inconvenient reality!”

“You could’ve worded that a little better, Godly Godness!”

But it was true the reaper was displaying some troubling behavior. It sounded a lot like she was trying to escape her problems.

“...Am currently doing something much more meaningful than putting words on paper.”

A lock of Ost Ande’s hair grew and curled around our arms.

Why was she suddenly acting like some kind of demon?!

Was she attacking us?! Godly Godness had said some traumatizing stuff, after all... Maybe she saw us as working together...

“...I want you to look at my work.”

“Oh, that’s what you meant...”

It was nice that she was eager, but she didn’t have to demonstrate it like *that*!

“Apologies, both of you. This hair ball is not good at communicating how she feels...” Nintan bowed her head.

Gods had to work hard on their inter-deity relationships, too.

“It’s okay. I can see that you’re determined, too, Nintan.”

We went outside, Ost Ande dragging us along with her hair.

The solid, stony mass of the mountain loomed before us.

Ost Ande’s house was at the foot of the mountain, so we had naturally all noticed it—but the way Ost Ande was gazing up at it suggested it had some significance.

“It’s a big rock~ Nice and sturdy.”

“That’s not much of an opinion, Godly Godness... Though, I can’t say I know what this rock is called, either.”

There were other masses of rock sticking out around us, but I couldn’t tell the difference between those and the one we were looking at.

“...Look.”

Just as Ost Ande spoke, she released us. Being tied up with hair wasn’t a very fun experience, so I was glad to be free.

Ost Ande then moved toward the rocky mass.

Incidentally, since her feet were covered in hair, it looked less like she was walking and more like the hair ball itself was sliding across the ground.

“Hey, Nintan? What’s she about to do? I can’t even guess.”

“We do not know. As far as We are aware, none of these rocks has any spiritual significance...”

As Nintan and I spoke, Ost Ande came to stand at the foot of the mountain.

“...Going up.”

Vwoooooom!

There was an eerie noise as her elongated locks of hair slithered up the mountain.

“Whoa! That’s terrifying! Her hair is moving like tentacles!”

This was incredible!

Ost Ande's body slowly rose up, like a freight elevator.

"Ah, it seems she is digging her hair into the rock to pull herself up~" Godly Godness said cheerfully. "Must be a rocky r—"

"Uh, can't gods fly?"

"Azusa, you just interrupted my joke, didn't you?"

Oh, she was going somewhere with that, wasn't she?

There were two kinds of people in the world: Those who thought up puns but didn't want to say them aloud, and those who immediately blurted out any pun they came up with. Godly Godness was clearly the latter.

"She probably can fly, but it may be the hair ball goddess's personal preference not to do so. A god who makes use of their power will find themselves able to do anything, you see~ But I suppose I do know a goddess who was unable to exterminate mosquitoes, so perhaps that isn't the case."

"Mmm, We sense someone's desire to become a frog." Nintan glared at Godly Godness.

I kind of had a feeling that Godly Godness had said that *because* she wanted to be turned into a frog.

It wasn't long before Ost Ande reached the top of the rocky mass.

"What is she planning to do up there? Yell out her feelings?" Godly Godness wondered aloud.

"As a god, she's already lived a long life; I doubt she would do something so childish..."

That said, I still didn't have a clue what was going on.

"Hmm, there is something written on the rock face. Looks like grammar from a millennia ago," Nintan said, shielding her eyes.

She was right; I did see some kind of writing there...

"...Will use a reaper tool."

Ost Ande reached into her pocket (well, her hair, to be precise) and pulled out an item with a dark, metallic luster.

It was...a scythe!

Exactly what I would have expected a reaper to have. I was still unsure what she planned to do with it, but it probably had something to do with harvesting souls.

Was she going to do that now? If so, I wasn't keen on watching something scary...

"Godly Godness? If things take a turn for the worse, I'm going to close my eyes right away. So tell me when it's safe to open them again... I don't like scary stuff..."

"Okay~"

I know I was the one who asked, but her reply was so casual I didn't trust it.

Ost Ande didn't raise her scythe into the air, however.

Gshink! Gshink!

Instead, she dragged it across the rock face, making a scraping sound.

Gshink! Gshink!

What did this mean? I doubted the mountain was filled with fossilized souls...

I looked at Godly Godness.

"Well, I'm stumped!" Her answer lacked so much as a shred of divine dignity.

"What are you doing, Ost Ande~?"

I called out to Ost Ande as she stuck fast to the rock face. It would be quicker to ask her directly.

"...Carving sentences... No, writing a novel."

She was writing a novel?!"

"...Writing on easy things like paper lacks soul... So decided to carve it into the rock."

That would take *ages!*

"...Wasn't all that long ago people started writing things down on paper. Could only use clay tablets and rock long ago... This is the traditional style!"

“But that will take such a long time,” Godly Godness breezily pointed out. Tactless as ever, she had no problem cutting straight to the heart of the matter.

She was right, though. If Ost Ande had to exert herself to write one letter, then she would need a long fuse to withstand the years and months it would take to write a whole novel.

But when Ost Ande turned to look at us, she was grinning.

It was like she was trying to tell us that she, too, could smile like this on occasion.

“...Can keep going for five thousand, fifty thousand years. It’ll be done someday.”

I wasn’t sure why, but I found this very touching.

Even if it was going to take an unimaginably long time to complete, so long as the one doing the activity had the will to see it through, then it would be done someday. She would finish it.

“...Am going to carve the highest story in the world on this rock,” she said, then continued to scratch her scythe into the stone.

“Let us return home, then,” Nintan said, the calmest she’d seemed all day. “We can pay another visit in thirty years’ time. If she has quit by then, We may laugh at her for her lack of perseverance.”

“I’d say carving into a rock for thirty years straight would give anyone the right to brag, but I guess that’s nothing for a god...”

“Regardless of the time spent, what is important is whether the story is interesting. And even more important is whether the hair ball is enjoying herself.”

I was sure Nintan’s heart had been warmed to see an acquaintance of hers carving out a path for herself. The look in her eyes was so gentle.

“Yeah. If she’s found meaning in her life, then that’s all there is to it.”

Nintan had been worried about her acquaintance, but now the reaper was on her way toward a lofty goal.

Ost Ande might not have many chances to meet with or talk to other people in the future, but that was a trivial matter as long as she had her own objectives.

When I looked up at Ost Ande, however, a thought crossed my mind.

“I happen to know a spirit who’s a part of the art world. Are gods and spirits naturally drawn to the arts?”

I was talking about Curalina, the jellyfish spirit.

“When one lives a long time, one tends to gravitate toward hobbies that last. If one involves oneself in a fad, then often everyone will move on too quickly.”

“Right... It’d be sad if everyone else stopped playing your favorite game...”

Suddenly, I could no longer hear the echoing *kthoom, kthoom* from behind me.

At some point, we’d been transported back to our tea table.

“We have caused you both much trouble today. It seems like her problems are already solved. If that was the case, she should have said something earlier. We needn’t have worried. We may as well turn her into a frog.”

Nintan finished the remaining tea in her teacup. It was still good, even though it was cold.

“We just met the reaper and had a little chat with her. It wasn’t any trouble at all,” I said.

“Indeed~ You are usually so indifferent, Nintan, that it was a delight to see you so concerned for your coworker~ ♪”

“Become a frog.”

Godly Godness, having gone too far, was turned into a frog.



A few days later, when I was having my after-lunch tea at home, Beelzebub came in.

“Come on, you’re always dropping by with no warning. Couldn’t you have sent a message beforehand?”

“I have a question I must ask you.”

Her face told me there’d been some kind of trouble...

“Do you recall the adventurer who chanced upon the Thursa Thursa Kingdom and published a book about it?”

“Yeah, the guy who just happened to show up when Flatorte was freezing the plants?”

He’d come during Rosalie’s two hundredth death anniversary, too.

“He has published another one, about somewhere completely different—*the End of the World*, apparently, and I thought you might be involved, so I came to confirm.”

I had a bad feeling about this.

“I wasn’t directly involved, so it can’t be my fault, okay...?”

“It sounds to me like you were up to something quite recently.”

Beelzebub looked dubious. Hopefully, she understood the idea of innocent until proven guilty.

“It’s not like I told her to do anything. Really, she’d already done it... Actually, we might be talking about totally different things here, so why don’t you give me the details? I’m probably just overthinking it.”

“Aye. The title of this pamphlet is ***The Secret of the Empty Wastes.***”

“Oh... It’s exactly as I feared...”

Beelzebub looked dubiously at me again. I mean it; none of this was my fault!

But I should probably read the book first.

—The Empty Wastes: a land in our country now entirely forgotten. It was once coveted by hermits seeking the most isolated place to practice their asceticism, but only traces of human civilization remain there now, giving the place an even deeper aura of loneliness.

The carriage lines leading there were done away with an age ago, of course, and the only way to reach this place was to walk two whole days from a village called the Empty Wastes Gates. It is too distant to be called a gate, but that simply illustrates how vast and wild the Empty Wastes are.

“I guess nothing’s happening because it’s still the beginning. But seriously, why does he always come to places like this? How much time does he have?”

“People have all sorts of hobbies. Keep reading.”

—The reason I decided to visit the Empty Wastes is because this land serves as the stage for many a legend about the god of death.

Long ago, the reaper was said to have made his home here, managing every soul across the world—these myths have been passed down in the region around the wastes for generations. I decided I would see those myths in action with my own eyes.

Long ago? But she’s still living there...

—After two days of walking, I finally arrived at what used to be a village in the Empty Wastes. As the name suggests, it was empty.

I have traveled to many a hair-raising, terrifying place, but here alone did I experience the feeling of vast, endless nothingness.

I wondered if he had met Ost Ande.

If I recalled correctly, she was so convinced no one would show up that she didn’t bother to hide herself.

—Then I saw it. The one thing present in the Empty Wastes:

the stony mountain.

And I was dismayed to learn that it was covered in horrific, wretched text!

“Hey! He read the story carved into the mountain!”

“Who on earth is writing in a place like that? ’Twould be quite a lot of trouble if he thought a demon did it.”

I understood how Beelzebub felt, but Ost Ande was a god, so I couldn’t really stop her...

—The text was written in a language in use a millennium ago, carved into the rock face with a sharp blade.

Here is what the text said, translated into today’s speech:

I am the one who controls all death in this world. But to put death into words would result in an emptiness unknowable to any other. Therefore, I shall record all the details I experienced while harvesting souls.

Yeah, reading that with no context would be a shock for sure.

First, I ask the details of the soul’s circumstances. I then listen to the soul’s demands. Afterward, I send the soul to its designated destination. When I do, I double-check with others to make sure that all is correct. It is quite the hassle to change someone who has become a cow into a pig, so we must be diligent.

“It’s so clerical!”

It wasn’t terrifying at all! To be honest, it just sounded like she was talking about a normal job.

Though I grow tired at times, hearing words of thanks from

the souls gives me the motivation to work another day. Their gratitude fills my heart with energy. Perhaps I have worked so hard and for so long simply to hear those words.

“Now, that’s cheesy!”

Was this kind of thing why she couldn’t win an award...?

But what about this was “horrific, wretched text”? Did this adventurer just write things like “It was frightening beyond description” and call it a day?

—The latter half of the text I was unable to parse, but what was the meaning of these words, supposedly written by the one who controls death? In my shock, I found myself unable to move. As I stood rooted to the ground, I felt as though I would lose all sense of time itself.

Yet I managed to produce a pen from my pocket and began to copy down the writing.

At that moment, however, I felt an odd presence behind me.

Standing there was a creature—human or beast, I was not sure—covered entirely in hair.

It was no taller than a toddler, and every strand of its hair writhed, like each was a separate being!

That had to be Ost Ande!

—One of its hairs reached out and coiled around me.

I was certain that I was its prey. That was the first time I felt genuine fear.

But instead, the indescribable creature spoke.

“...Dost thou edit writings? Yay or Nay?”

She was asking if he was an editor!

—“No, I record my travels in books and publish them for the world,” I replied.

“...Then thou shalt introduce to me the one who edits your writings.”

“Oh, no, I self-publish, so I don’t have an editor!”

“...Then I have no use for thee.”

I have no memory of what happened after that. When I came to, I found myself collapsed at the Empty Wastes Gates.

What was that hair-covered being? Was it somehow related to the one in the Empty Wastes who claims to control all death?

She was trying to network for an editor!

It sounded like she still had a lot of regrets about those awards. I guess it was awfully human of her to struggle with that. Even if she was a god.

I slammed the book shut.

“What on earth was it? There is no demon such as this,” Beelzebub pressed.

Hmm... Should I really go around talking about the gods to whoever asked?

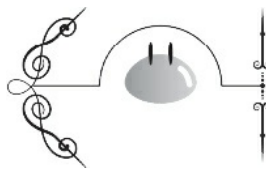
Well, it wasn’t like I was told all this was off the record, so it was probably okay.

“That hairy creature was the reaper.”

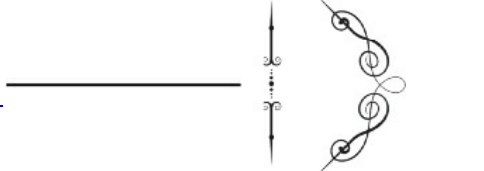
Beelzebub looked at me, astonished. “Why would the reaper be a hairy monster? The reaper wields a scythe and flies around on the darkest of nights collecting souls.”

“I didn’t realize the demons had such a stereotypical image, too!”

Beelzebub didn't seem to believe me, but she didn't ask any more about it, so that was that.



I TRIED OUT THE GODDESS'S TRAINING PROGRAM



It was nighttime.

After a day of leisurely killing slimes, I crawled into bed and heard someone speak in my head.

Hello there, Azusa!

This was definitely Godly Godness's voice. Well, to be precise, she wasn't speaking, so it wasn't her voice. It was like she was telepathically projecting into my mind.

And things never ended well whenever she started a conversation with me...

"Don't tell me you had another fight with one of the gods in this world. I'm not mediating for you. You know Nintan. Ask her for help."

I still hadn't fallen asleep, so I replied to her out loud. I could probably have conveyed my thoughts to her mentally, but this was easier for me to grasp.

Oh, no, no! I come to you for respectable reasons this time! ...Well, they might not be entirely respectable. What do you think?

"You're asking me...? I don't even know what your reasons are, so I can't answer that. You're a goddess; can't you speak with a little more gravitas?"

It is thanks to you that my teachings to perform virtuous acts are spreading throughout this world. By my estimation, I have around fifteen thousand people who have three or more stamps on their virtue stamp card.

"That's a big number. Well done."

And so getting to the point, I was hoping to build a training program for my

most fervent believers. I need a program that truly tempers the spirit, otherwise my believers might grow bored of me.

Hey, she was actually sounding like a deity for once. I really wished she would contact me in the morning or something, though... Why did she always try to contact me when I was about to go to sleep...?

And so I worked with this world's renowned game designer Pondeli to create a video game for my training program!

Okay... Now this was getting weird...

When I spoke to Pondeli, she was surprised at first, of course, but she understood me in only five minutes once I explained the situation.

That was pretty fast. But I guess spirits were a normal thing in this world, so maybe it wouldn't be so hard to believe a god was talking to you.

So did this mean they were having trouble with the game development?

We successfully created the game! My believers can now train as much as they like!

"That's wonderful. It doesn't sound like there's much of a problem, then..."

No, there is. Though it's finished now, I still need to play-test it. I thought you might be able to help in that regard. You strike me as the type to have had gaming experience in your past life.

Gah! So I was going to be roped into this anyway.

But there was still one big thing holding me back.

"You've been calling it a game this whole time... Isn't it a training program...?"

Ostensibly? Yes.

"A god cannot say things like that!"

I simply added some game elements to my training program so that anyone can enjoy it. I am hoping my training will be popular with as many people as possible. That is all.

It was better for something to be fun than not fun, sure, but was training supposed to be fun?

Well then, I look forward to your help, Azusa!



Before I knew it, I'd been transported to a strange otherworld.

I could tell it was a “strange otherworld” because the ground, the trees, and even the clouds in the sky had hard, jagged edges. It was like they'd been made up of tiny squares...

“It's like a retro game in here. Also, I technically never agreed to help...”

“This is the spiritual world I will use for my training program! Try to clear every stage! Ready, start!”

I blinked and found Godly Godness standing in front of me.

Since she was a god, she could appear and disappear as she pleased.

“Um, I kind of want to sleep... People shouldn't be working at bedtime. People need to sleep at night.”

I liked getting my full seven hours of sleep if at all possible.

“It'll be fine. You can train here in the spiritual realm while your physical body remains asleep. This is not your corporeal form—this is your spiritual form. To put it simply, this is a dream world. This is not a sleep study, but rather sleep training.”

“Okay, if you say so... No harm done if I can still recover energy, I guess.”

“Yes, precisely! The controls are easy, so try to learn as you play.”

Yet another gamelike element, I see.

“This is your spiritual form, Azusa, which means you will have to grow accustomed to controlling your spirit instead of a physical body. Oh! Perfect timing—there's a slime. Test yourself with that.”

Just as she had said, a slime was hopping in my direction.

The slime appeared to be made from coarse pixels, like in older video games.

“I could kill a slime with a flick of my finger.”

“Oh, in reality, yes! But this training program has certain rules. You cannot

use any punches or kicks that are not included in the rules. Though it's just a little slime, you will still take damage if you run into it, so be careful."

I guess she wanted me to play this like an action game...

"Now, as for how to defeat it—Azusa, try attacking."

"It's still far away from me, but I'll give it a shot."

I turned to attack the distant slime.

Nyoom!

A staff flew out of my body.

It traveled a couple of feet in front of me and then...vanished.

"What was that? Vanishing staves...?"

"Whenever you try to attack, you will shoot staves—the basic witch weapon. You can use them to damage the slime."

"Wait, you know staves aren't weapons you throw, right?! And picking them up afterward would be a pain."

"That won't be a problem. You can throw an infinite number."

She was right—when I tried it again, sure enough, a staff shot out from me before disappearing.

"How does this even work? Do I even want to know where those staves are being kept?!"

"Do not mind the details~ It's just a game!"

It didn't seem right for a god to be treating her training program as "just a game."

"Now, try to tackle the first stage. Onward, Azusa!"

The slime from earlier was slowly approaching me.

"Take this!" I shot a staff at the slime.

The slime vanished, and a coin floated in the air. Maybe I was supposed to collect these. Once I touched it...

Da-ding!

That sound probably meant that I'd gotten it.

"Oh! So you do have experience, Azusa! You have a complete understanding of the principles!"

"Sure, but isn't this just a retro action game?"

"By the way, you should be aware that this stage has a time limit of five minutes. You will run out of time if you take too long."

There was no reason to re-create the genre that faithfully...

After defeating the first slime, I pressed onward.

There was a weird *blip, blip* noise. Oh, that was me when I moved...

Next, I was approached by a similar-looking slime as well as a bat flying overhead. The bat was all jagged, too.

I shot the slime with my infinite supply of staves and got my coin.

The bat, however, was zipping around erratically. It was hard to hit!

"Argh! I'll just go up to it!"

I slammed into the bat, and my body started blinking. Very gamelike.

I had a general guess as to what was going to happen.

"Once I stop blinking, I'm going to become small Azusa, aren't I?"

I'd played that game where mushrooms made you big and flowers let you shoot fire before.

But once I stopped blinking...I was in my underwear.

"Hey! Why did my clothes come off?!"

Godly Godness appeared again. "You lose your equipment when you take damage. If you touch an enemy without any of your armor on, you will lose remaining lives, so be careful. Your clothes will come back when you obtain an armor item~"

"It's still embarrassing, even though I'm just up against slimes and bats!"

I threw a staff at the annoying bat mid-jump and finished it off. I wasn't able to do it in with one hit, incidentally—it took two. So not all enemies were created equal.

I thought a coin might appear like when I killed the slime...but it was a sword instead.



I concluded that this was another item for me to collect, so I touched it.

“I knew it! You’re a gaming veteran, Azusa! That is a sword, an upgrade weapon! It has a longer range than a staff, and it deals more damage as well!”

I tried another attack, and the sword went sailing much farther.

It collided with a bat I couldn’t reach when I was using the staff. The bat went down in one hit and turned into a coin. I’d had to hit the thing twice when I was using the staff, so it definitely dealt more damage.

I understood all that, but—

“Come on, swords aren’t throwing weapons! You’d run out of swords if you tried this for real!”

“This is a game, so just go along with it!”

“You’re going to keep dismissing everything I say with ‘This is just a game,’ aren’t you...?”

As we talked, the ground behind me swelled.

Zombies had leaped up from the earth!

“Enemies spawn behind you in this game?!”

I could have easily avoided them in real life, but in this (game that took place in the) spiritual realm, my movements were a lot slower. I just barely managed to get out of their way.

Okay, if I can jump right before they touch me—

Cha-cha-chaka, chaka, cha-cha-cha~!

I heard an odd noise, and my vision went black.

The next thing I knew, I was back where I had started, with the first slime bouncing toward me.

I’d even changed back from my underwear into my witch clothes.

“Huh...? What happened...? I don’t really understand...”

“Aw~ You died~ Unfortunately, you have lost a life. You start with three lives, but you can play with zero lives remaining in this game, so you essentially have

four.”

“Wait, wait, hold on! I dodged that! That zombie didn’t touch me!”

I didn’t remember feeling the sticky zombie skin.

“That depends on the collision detection. Please keep that in mind.”

“So it’s a coding issue... I hope you fix that once I’m done with this play-test...”

“Understanding the world’s providence is part of training! Learn the mechanics!”

She was just saying whatever suited her, but I had made up my mind.

If this was how it was going to be, I would beat this game, crappy Godly Godness shovelware or not!

I proceeded further and further into the game.

I learned where the enemies spawned and got the hang of dealing with them.

I ended up hearing that *cha-cha-chaka, chaka, cha-cha-cha~!* tune and seeing the YOU NEED MORE TRAINING! TRY AGAIN! game over message (also written in pixelated letters) countless times, but I only pressed further into the stage.

Godly Godness would also appear suddenly whenever I wanted her to. Maybe she was like one of those helper characters...

Then—

The background music abruptly became very intense.

You know, I’d barely noticed it before, but there had been weird melodies playing the entire time... It’d be utterly impossible in real life, but it was normal for music to be playing like this in games.

This music told me a boss was coming.

Approaching me from a distance was a strangely pixelated version of Fighsly.

“You made Fighsly into an enemy...”

“There she is. The boss of stage one is Fighsly. I have not received her permission to use her likeness, so I have changed her name.”

Oh, so *now* she was being careful! And this didn’t even matter!

This training was taking place inside the mind, so it wasn't like Fighsly could sue Godly Godness over it.

But considering how this was supposed to be "training," it made perfect sense for a fighter like Fighsly to appear here.

What kind of attacks was she going to use against me...?

"Do you happen to have any coins on you?" the "Fighsly" character asked. A very un-boss-like question.

"Yeah, I think I managed to get about fifty coins from stage one alone."

"That is proof of your training! You can proceed onward by paying me twenty coins!"

"You unlock things with money here?!"

But if I could avoid the boss fight, then I was perfectly happy to.

A selection appeared: GIVE COINS? >YES >NO. I chose YES, and "Fighsly" vanished.

"Congratulations, Azusa! Your training is steadily bearing fruit!"

Godly Godness appeared, probably because my boss fight was over. Convenient, because I had a question...

"Godly Godness, if I get a game over in the second stage, do I have to start over from stage one?"

"No, you will start from stage two."

Oh good; this was a comparatively kind system.



Stage two took place over water, which was also pixelated.

There were no waves or currents. The water was still.

If I paid attention, I could tell that the music had changed. It sounded like each stage had its own music.

I didn't die immediately when I touched the water, but I would sink if I didn't keep jumping. And if my legs became completely submerged, I died.

In reality, I could breathe just fine so long as my nose and mouth were above

water. It was kind of ridiculous to think you'd suddenly die once the water reached your waist, but I could understand it as an action game mechanic.

Fish enemies would come swarm me in spots where I couldn't move very fast, which made it tricky.

I had to jump from platform to platform, avoiding the water as much as possible.

I slowly started memorizing where the enemies spawned and how to time my dodges, and I made steady progress.

"Incredible, Azusa. No matter how many times you die, it never gets you down. You are slowly clearing the stage..." Godly Godness was genuinely impressed.

"I mean, this is the kind of game where you just have to remember what to do, so I'm using my head. For example, if you try to hop onto that platform over there, an enemy'll jump out at you, so you have to wait a second for it to go away. You can't know things like that on your first playthrough."

Platforming wasn't about being good or bad, it was about remembering how to move in certain spots.

That was why there was no need to be embarrassed about dying over and over. I just needed to learn from my mistakes!

Then the background music switched to something more intense.

"The boss of stage two is coming, I see. Who's next?"

And once again, a pixelated "Fighsly" appeared.

"The same character again?! At least pick someone related to water!"

Just as that thought crossed my mind, another "Fighsly" appeared.

"There's two of them! Is that not against the rules?!"

Tutorial Godly Godness appeared again.

"For reasons related to the spiritual realm's capacity, I have reused the boss from stage one."

"This spiritual realm sure has limited resources!"

Each “Fighslys” wanted twenty coins in order to let me pass. Which meant a total of forty coins...

I had enough saved up, so I paid it all and avoided the boss fight.

I guess the lesson was that some conflicts in this world could be solved with money...



I steadily progressed through stage three, the cave.

This one felt more on the difficult side for a platforming game, but I had to do it. It wasn't like I could just quit and go to bed. After all, I was already sleeping, apparently.

Finally, that intense boss music started playing.

I really hoped I wasn't going to come face-to-face with three “Fighslys” this time...

The stage-three boss was a pixelated Witch of the Grotto, Eno.

“I have seen the breadth of your skill, trainee. I am the Witch of the Grotto, Enono.”

“I'm almost certain you didn't get permission to mess with their names.”

“I have a special deal for you. I will allow you to pass if you purchase my poultice for fifty coins.”

“You don't need bosses if they're all going to be like this!”

Skipping the bosses by paying money was a unique feature in this platformer...



Stage four was the kind where you had to keep moving.

The ground slowly vanished below. It was like the world was gradually rising...

It was hard to verbally describe this, but I could understand it in game terms. There were platforms above me, so all I had to do was keep jumping upward.

“If you fall where a platform has already disappeared, then you will lose lives. Please be careful~” Godly Godness said to me, floating to my side.

I wanted to fly, but I couldn't use that kind of magic in the game.

Standing on ground that would eventually disappear and send you plummeting to an abrupt death was very obviously a strange concept, but that's games for you.

There were a lot of unnatural things about platformers. Like how an enemy touching your foot counted as damage. I mean, stepping on a bat would kill it, and the human would be basically unharmed. There were even some action games where stepping on an enemy would defeat it.

"I've started to get the hang of this, so I'm gonna go for it!"

I deftly dodged all the enemies on the ground, throwing my sword to kill them as I made my way up to the platforms I saw above me. Yeah, stage four was kind of easy!

But as I kept going...

My head suddenly caught on something, and I was pushed back.

"Oh, Azusa, you are rushing! You cannot reach places the scroll hasn't gotten to yet because nothing exists there. Please jump once you see the platform has been created for you."

"Some of these concepts really are hard to accept."

There wasn't a lot of room between the top and bottom of this world, and I really didn't understand what kind of power was causing the forced scroll!

"Do not doubt your faith. Believe! These are necessities for our training~"

"Sorry, Godly Godness, but this all sounds like a bunch of meaningless clichés..."

Regardless, I eventually reached what I assumed was the top floor of the fourth stage.

And once again, I heard the boss battle (even though I hadn't actually battled yet) music.

Two "Enos" appeared, just as I had expected.

"You can't just add more to increase the difficulty!"

After I said that, Godly Godness seemed a little apologetic and said, “I will change this once I solve the spiritual realm’s storage capacity problems.”



Next was stage five. Platformers like this usually didn’t go beyond ten stages, so I knew I was nearing the interesting part.

The floor on the fifth stage was made of ice. I knew what was going to happen the moment I saw it, but I still found myself slipping everywhere.

I’d end up running into baby enemies like slimes if I wasn’t careful controlling my movements.

But then I encountered a problem even more awful than that.

I leaped from the sea of ice aiming for the cliff on the other side of a gap, only to land right on top of a penguin! That was sneaky enemy placement!

I ran right into it and took damage.

As a result, my robe disappeared, and I was back in my underwear. Goose bumps immediately covered my whole body.

“Brrr! It’s so cold! I didn’t know I could feel cold in the spiritual realm!” I wrapped my arms around myself. This was actually pretty bad.

“Don’t worry, Azusa! The cold will not damage you~”

“That’s not the problem here, Godly Godness!”

I needed to get an armor item—and fast. I needed to kill every enemy who dropped items.

Of course, this was when they started dropping only weapons...

“Come on, give me armor!”

I was practically praying as I threw my sword at penguins (not that I would ever hurt animals; I was just killing enemies).

One penguin I killed dropped a smaller, pixelated version of me.

That would give me more lives. Don’t get me wrong, I was happy about it, but I really wanted clothes...

“It sure is strange to watch a penguin drop a small me...”

Godly Godness appeared again (wearing what looked like a scarf and a coat), probably because I’d commented out loud.

“That is a visual representation of you facing yourself. It is a part of your training.”

“You don’t need to explain every detail. It’s actually making me trust you less. And can’t you do anything about this cold...?”

“The cold is also a part of your training. See, an ascetic wouldn’t wear a warm, comfortable coat during training, would they? It is more appropriate to wear less.”

Well, I could have lost a life somewhere and started over with my robe back on, but of course, I ended up skillfully making my way through the level. The game was old hat for me now.

“There’s a big hole here, so I need to jump as far as I can to make it to the other side. And I know an enemy will appear right after I land, so I just have to remember to add another little jump right afterward.”

“You’ve seen right through my hidden design, Azusa.”

“This is the kind of game that you can only complete by memorizing where the enemies are, so I know I can manage if I just keep trying!”

At this rate, I had a feeling I might reach the boss while still in my underwear. It would be embarrassing to be in my underwear in front of a real person, but all these bosses were fake, so it was fine.

But when the boss music started playing...

The real Beelzebub appeared instead of a pixelated one.

“Why are you in your underwear...? Is this some kind of special training?”

“Why is she real?!”

“As I was falling asleep, this Godly Godness person spoke to me.”

So Beelzebub was a victim, too.

“She informed me that a boss with my image is supposed to appear here.”

Beelzebub pointed to a pixelated version of herself.

But if I was up against the real Beelzebub, this would be a tough battle.

She saw me as a rival. I couldn't believe we'd be having our fighting tournament rematch here and now. This would certainly count as training.

"Hey, Beelzebub. I have a question for you. You won't let me through if I paid you in coins, will you?"

"What do you take me for? What sort of boss would that be? Fight me like you are supposed to."

As it happened, a majority of the bosses I'd met so far had taken the coins...

Well, I guess I had no choice.

It was still weird that my battle strategy was to throw swords, but I was going to give it my all!

I'd gotten a good handle on controlling myself (I know that sounds strange, but work with me) after playing so much of this game.

If Beelzebub hadn't, then I'd beat her with flying colors!

But for some reason, she started lining up cards on a table sitting out in the open.

"What? Are you the kind of person who makes decisions based on tarot cards...?"

"No, you shall play a game of memory with me."

"Isn't this an action game?!"

Wasn't it a little weird that the scrolling part of the game had a boss who played *memory* with you?!

"And what else should we do? These are the rules. I shall begin."

The first one was a picture of a tiger.

It wasn't a scary tiger, by the way; it was a cute, cartoonish illustration.

"Tiger. And this one is...a rabbit. My miss. Your turn."

"We're actually playing memory..."

“Also, Godly Godness told me that this is a fair activity for spiritual training.”

“Then when Falfa and Shalsha do this at home, are their spirits getting stronger?”

We played the game, and I won without any major incident.



Stage six felt very different from the previous stages.

This time, the setting was a castle, and the music was more intense than it had been before.

That was proof I was getting closer to the final boss.

The enemies attacked me relentlessly, and there were mysterious thorns and traps littered throughout the castle; I had to hit the continue button over and over again. This sure was difficult for a platformer, but perhaps that was part of the training...

Games that came out around when I was born in Japan were supposedly made less for the enjoyment of the player and more as a kind of challenge, like they were daring players to complete them. This felt similar.

Regardless, I eventually came to stand before the door that probably led to the boss.

I stepped inside to find...“Fighsly.”

“Is this going to be a boss rush?! An action game staple!”

But if they were the same bosses, then the way to beat them would be the same, too, which meant I could avoid the fight by paying coins. Paying the bosses to avoid fighting was the only use for coins in this game...

“Fighsly” stared at my coins and said, “Oh, these coins do shine so nicely. But you cannot use money to buy another’s heart. I hope you will learn that as part of your training.”

“That’s rich, coming from the one who just took my money!”

“You may proceed to the next boss room.”

A door appeared at the far end of “Fighsly’s” room.

I expected it to be “Eno,” and it was, so I paid her in coins again and avoided the fight.

There was definitely room for improvement in this department...

Just as I predicted, Beelzebub was in the next room.

“There you are. Stage six was quite difficult, no?”

“Are we playing memory again? I’ll give you everything I’ve got.”

“No. This time we shall be playing word chain.”

“Isn’t that the game you play when you’re bored and only have two people?”

Just as I was worried about word chain going on forever, I saw panels with different pictures on them lined up on the wall. Apparently, our answers were limited to what was shown.

This struck me as a proper game, but what made it difficult was how abstract the pictures were.

“The pixels make the pictures so crude that it’s hard to tell what a lot of them are at first glance! I was wondering what this chimney thing was initially, but it’s a lighthouse... And I thought this one was a carriage wheel, but it’s a waterwheel...”

“Your comments will be taken into consideration as a play tester. There are still many things to improve.”

For a while, Beelzebub and I played what felt like an endless game of word chain, but— “I believe it is safe to call this your victory.”

All of a sudden, she ended the match.

“Isn’t it a problem for the boss to suddenly lose interest in the game?”

“No, I was assigned a point threshold that you must meet. However, I believe it would be best if the player is also able to see this.”

Beelzebub was making note of the problems. She looked very bureaucratic.

“You mustn’t keep the final boss waiting. Azusa, if there is any one person who would come after me as the final boss...you can guess who it is, yes?” Beelzebub said meaningfully, sounding tired.

“I see... So the next boss is...”

Just as I thought, I found Pecora waiting for me in the throne room.

“I have been waiting for you, Elder Sister~ ♪”

“I knew it.”

This was still training, so of course the boss had to be someone I found troublesome.

And that meant Pecora.

“I will not go easy on you.”

“I know. I wouldn’t learn anything if you did. I’m coming at you with all I’ve got, so no hard feelings.”

“You will have to take me down if you want your princess back!”

“What? Wait, no! This game didn’t have any story line about saving a princess!”

I had only been told this was training!

“I will not waste another breath! Fight me, Hero Azusa!”

Suddenly, I was being called a hero... Apparently, the hero was here to save the princess from the demon king now.

Pecora was powerful. She was the final boss, after all.

Not only that, I could still only make the awkward, clunky movements that came with being in a platformer. On the other hand, Pecora wasn’t a facsimile; she was moving around like normal. This was brutal!

I took damage, and whenever I found myself backed into a corner, she would continue with a follow-up blow.

“You are just full of openings, Elder Sister~!”

She swooped in behind me and pulled me into a hug; the moment she did, my screen went black, and I heard the music that played when I died.

Cha-cha-chaka, chaka, cha-cha-cha~!

The next thing I knew, I was in Beelzebub’s room.

“This place serves as your checkpoint. You will start over here when you die.”

“That’s a relief... I wouldn’t have the coins to pay ‘Fighsly’ and ‘Eno’ if I had to go back to the beginning.”

“Well, under the current system, you can also put the payment on your tab.”

“Is there any point to the bosses at all...?”

After another a leisurely game of word chain with Beelzebub, she let me through to Pecora’s room.

Afterward, Pecora gave me another good beating.

I had no other attacks besides throwing my sword in front of me, so I couldn’t really do anything when she attacked me from above.

Pecora, on the other hand, damaged me the second she so much as brushed against me. This was extremely difficult.

Despite that, however, I was starting to remember her attack patterns better with each battle.

Even though she wasn’t a game character, she still had habits and unique peculiarities.

I could manage if I could just learn them!

I stepped into Pecora’s room for the fifteenth time.

“I think I’ve finally gotten a hang of your attack patterns. I’m going to finish this.”

“Is that so? I hope your bite is more impressive than your bark!” Pecora dashed straight at me.

At that speed, she managed to touch me without much of a struggle, and my witch robe vanished to reveal my underwear. I’d have to try again if she did any more damage.

“Aww, Elder Sister, you are not doing well at all!”

Wrong. The real fight was just about to begin.

Afterward, I deftly dodged Pecora’s attacks while steadily hitting her with my

swords.

I wasn't very accurate, mind you, so I missed a lot, but as long as I was landing hits and she wasn't, the battle was progressing.

It was taking a while, but I was doing damage!

"Rrrgh... You fight better when you find yourself backed into a corner, don't you...?"

"You have a weak point, Pecora!" I said, pointing at her.

"When I take damage and end up in my underwear, your attacks lose strength!"

Yes! Once I was one hit away from losing, the difficulty went down a little bit!

"You found me out... **It's so much fun to watch you fight while you're embarrassed, Elder Sister...**"

"Come on, you're just picking on me!"

But either way, it was creating openings for me. I threw my swords as hard as I could at her.

Then, after hitting Pecora more than ten times...

It was finally over.

"Ooh... To think, I, the demon king, would face defeat..."

The image of Pecora began to blink as she uttered her dramatic line. I had defeated the final boss!

"The captured princess is waiting for you just ahead. You win, Hero Azusa..."

Then Pecora vanished. Well, this was just the spiritual realm, so she was probably fine.

Just as she had said, a new door appeared on the far side of the room.

I wasn't totally sure if there was a princess back there, but either way, I had cleared my training program. Godly Godness was probably going to come give me her blessing.

I earnestly threw open the door.

All of a sudden, someone rushed at me to give me a forceful hug.

Was this the princess?! Had Godly Godness dressed up and latched onto me like a koala?

Maybe she was going to say something like, *Now you are closer than ever to the goddess.*

“I’m so happy you came for me, Elder Sister~! ♪”

It was Pecora!

“Wait, hold on! Why are you here again, Pecora? I just defeated you!”

“I was so close to giving up hope after the demon king kidnapped me. I am so glad I trusted in you, Hero Elder Sister Azusa!”

“You’re playing two roles!”

And she was mixing together my hero role with my role as her elder sister.

“I guess you are both the actual demon king and kind of like a princess, so maybe this casting works? No, I think it’s still a stretch...”

As Pecora clung to me and refused to let go, Godly Godness appeared.

“Wow, Azusa, you are very good at games. I did not think you would defeat the final boss on day one.”

“Please don’t forget this is supposed to be training! This isn’t a game; it’s training!”

“Thanks to you, the demon king has been felled and the princess freed. Peace will once again return to this world.”

“I feel like I’m hearing about this story very, very late in the game...”

“To be honest, I came up with it while you were making your way through the stages, so I hastily threw it in.”

She’d updated the game in real time.

Pecora finally let me go, and I got to bask in the afterglow of beating the training.

“I saw a lot of room for improvement, but I feel accomplished having beaten

it,” I said. Completing any training course was indeed an accomplishment.

“Well done, Azusa. As the one who decided to create this game, I, too, can proudly say that it was time and effort well spent. A game is something created for other people to enjoy, after all.”

“I’m still not sure why you’re not even pretending it’s training anymore, but I’m happy for you.”

I had a feeling I would sleep soundly and be able to face the next day with lots of energy.

“Now keep it up and try to clear the secret mode!”

I wasn’t about to let *that* phrase slip by.

“...Uh, sorry. What do you mean by secret mode?”

“By finishing the secret mode, where I have included more enemies and traps and increased the overall difficulty, you will have cleared my training for the first time! I am looking forward to your further endeavor— My, Azusa, that is a terrifying look in your eyes...”

I think my anger was justified.

Pecora, who was still in the room, was having fun performing an eccentric one-woman show.

“Heh-heh, I will capture you again, Princess. Please save me, Hero!

Post as many guards as you like, you will never be safe from me! Kidnap me as many times as you want, but the hero will always save me! I am waiting for you in my castle, Hero. I’m waiting for you in the demon king’s castle, Hero!”

“I’m the one who needs saving from your dang secret mode!”

Godly Godness came to stand before me and shook her head. “Azusa, what this signifies is that good and evil are simply two sides of the same coin.”

“That’s a stretch.”

“I am serious. I did just come up with it, though.”

A mixed feeling bubbled in my chest when I considered how this irresponsible goddess had first set me on the path to my current life.

It wasn't like I had any other choice, so I gave my all to beating the even more difficult version of the game.

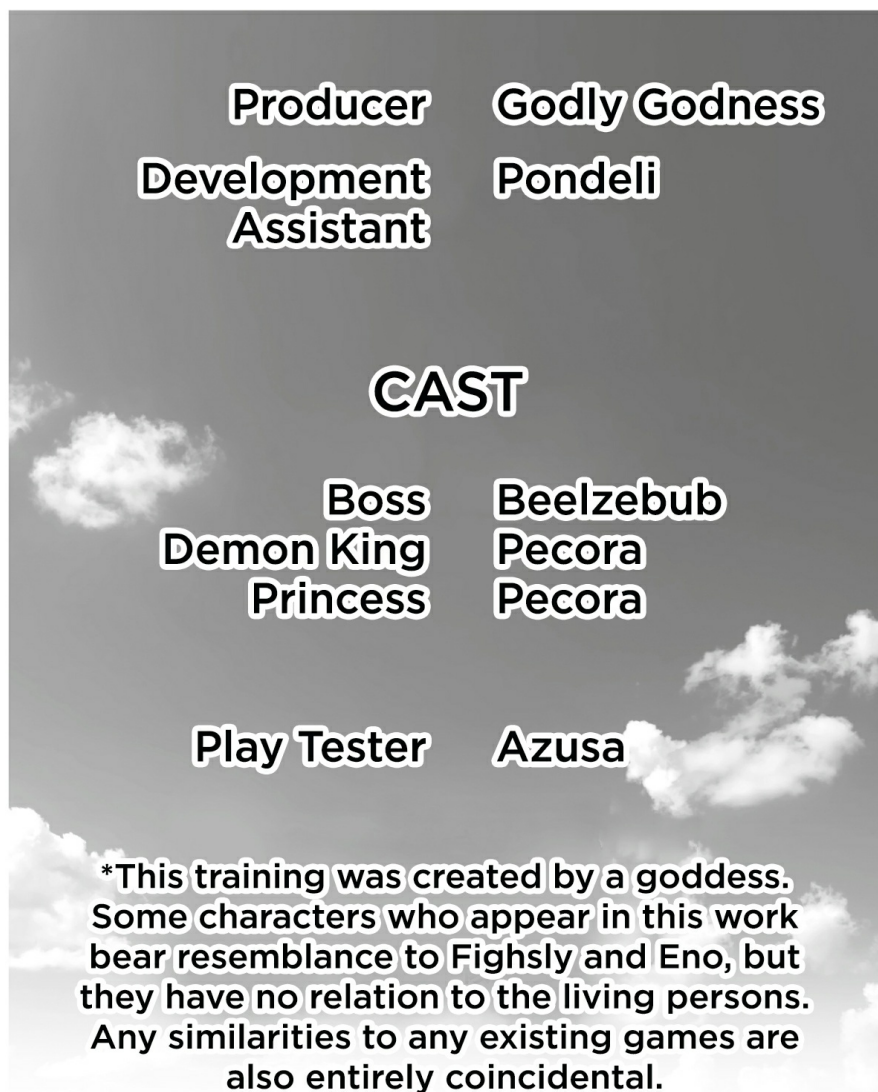
I defeated the demon king (played by Pecora) and was then hugged by the princess (played by Pecora) twenty seconds later.

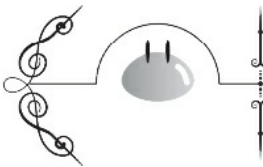
And finally, I beat the game.

Afterward, the end credits started scrolling through the sky.

"You sure were worried about litigation!"


The next morning, my head felt rather heavy. So much for getting a full night's sleep.





A CALLING CARD CAME FROM A

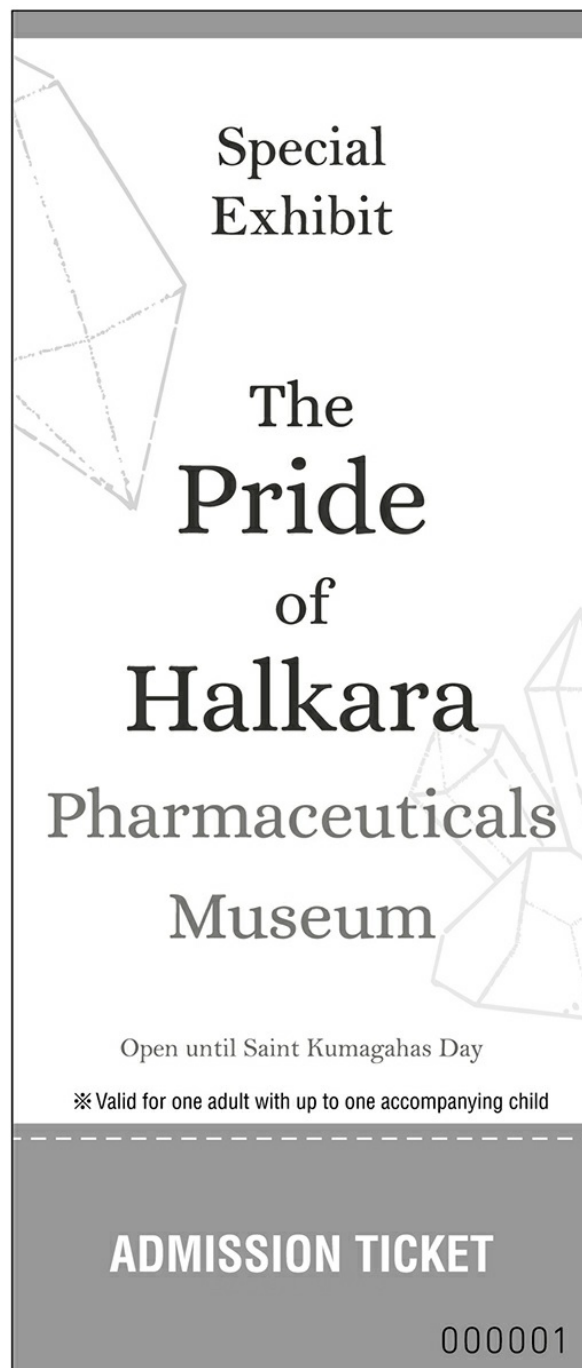
PHANTOM THIEF



That evening, when Halkara came home from the factory, she handed me a long, rectangular piece of paper.

“We’re holding an exhibit, Madam Teacher!”

The paper looked like this:



“Oh yeah, you had a museum, didn’t you...?”

Once, the goddess Nintan had asked me to clean up her lake. At first, she had just wanted me to deal with the huge number of mosquitoes, but it turned out to be a way bigger job than we had initially thought; we eventually found a crocodile living there among other fun discoveries.

In return, Nintan gave us some treasure that had been gifted to her temple. It wasn’t just one or two things, either. I doubt even Nintan knew exactly what she’d given us. It was hard to tell if she was being a magnanimous deity, or if she was just trying to get rid of stuff.

We then had everything looked over by the demon Appraisal Knights, a group that would appraise absolutely anything you brought them, and ended up receiving an unbelievably astronomical estimate...

Ultimately, Halkara built a museum to put everything in.

I sometimes forgot about it because the museum was on the outskirts of Nascúte, but it belonged to a member of the family. We really had an impressive group here.

“I see. You must really be managing it seriously to be able to open a special exhibit, huh?”

Halkara was highly motivated when it came to things like this. She was without a doubt an incredible person, but she made so many blunders that she rarely ever came across that way.

That said, I wasn't really interested in living with, say, the try-hard president of an IT company, so someone like Halkara was probably a better fit.

“I'd love for you to visit since this is our first exhibit. You rarely come to the museum, after all.”

“What? I've been there once... Is everyone else really going that often?”

It wasn't like I was super interested or anything, but I had still stopped by.

I often forgot because I was always getting mixed up with demons and spirits, but we *did* live in the peaceful highlands. There wasn't much in terms of entertainment out here, so a museum was invaluable.

“Little Shalsha has visited five times, and Miss Laika, seven.”

“That sure is a lot!”

By now, Laika and Shalsha had already joined us and received their tickets from Halkara. These two were hard-core fans...

“Will you be changing out some of the items on display for the second half of the exhibit, Miss Halkara? I would like two tickets if that is the case, please.”

Laika sure knew a lot about museums...

“No, we won't be changing out any exhibits, so you don't need to worry.”

“Shalsha has a question. Can Shalsha use this ticket to visit the permanent exhibits, too?”

And now Shalsha was asking a high-level question, too.

“Yes, of course. But haven’t you seen the permanent exhibits more than enough times?”

“Shalsha is happy to look at nice things as many times as it takes. And the museum atmosphere calms Shalsha down. It’s good for meditation.”

The culture in this house was more refined than I’d expected.

“I will go ahead and leave these tickets in my room, so take as many as you like. Actually, if you mention that you’re a member of President Halkara’s household, they will probably just let you in.”

“That’s not true,” Flatorte butted in. “The museum’s nice and cool, so I told the receptionist to let me in for an afternoon nap, and she said no.”

“That is because your intended use of the museum would bother the other visitors, Miss Flatorte! And I’m glad to hear that the receptionist is doing her job. Very impressive.”

That made sense... Even though Halkara owned the museum, she wouldn’t allow troublemakers in the door, family or not. I could tell she was handling everything very professionally.

Anyway.

Since she was holding a special exhibit, I decided it’d be a nice opportunity to go with my daughters.

“Shalsha? Do you want to go to the museum with me?”

“Of course. That goes without saying.”

I knew Shalsha wouldn’t say no.

But Falfa’s reaction was unexpected. “Falfa doesn’t want to. Falfa will go by herself another time.”

What? She didn’t want to come? Was she upset because she thought I was only asking Shalsha? That wasn’t my intention...

“Shalsha explains everything in too much detail, and Falfa gets bored. And the explanations are always a little off.”

“Oh, so that’s why...” I could see what she was getting at.

“Shalsha wasn’t running around the museum. Shalsha didn’t cause problems at all.”

“But Falfa wants to take her time looking at things. Falfa will go on my own sometime before the exhibit closes.”

Everyone takes information in at a different pace. Some people naturally preferred to be alone and free from distraction.

And so Shalsha and I decided to go to the museum together.



We picked a day with good weather and headed to the museum, which sat on the outskirts of Nascúte.

The number of guests in the museum was just right for our purposes. We wouldn’t be able to take our time looking at things if it was too crowded.

The lady at the reception desk said, “Oh, hello, Shalsha! I see you’ve come with your mom today.” It seemed Shalsha really was a regular. The staff even recognized her on sight.

The inside of the museum was comfortably dim, perfect for looking at the exhibits.

Part One

Weapons and Armor Once Donated to the Grand Nintan Temple

Various types of weapons and armor from all over the world were donated to the goddess Nintan, also known as the goddess of victory.

Here, you will find some of these incredible items that the museum has in its collections.

The Pride of Halkara Pharmaceuticals Museum

I see. Every world had a god people prayed to for victory. Even in a world with magic like this one, that still held true.

The first thing on display was a pitch-black suit of armor.

“It looks really heavy...,” I commented. “I doubt it’d be very easy to wear that

in battle.”

“This suit of armor was an offering from Lord Nohgeah the Careful. Lord Nohgeah the Careful was a feudal lord in the Kylar Province during the Era of Excess Heroes. Every night before he went to sleep, he would check if the lights were out, if his doors and windows were shut, and if there were any changes to his plans the next day. He would perform all these checks three times each.”

“He certainly was careful!”

Exploring the museum with the help of Shalsha’s detailed explanations seemed like it would be pretty fun. I was no expert on treasure or armor, after all.

But was it okay for a mother to have her kid explain everything to her...?

Or maybe this was typical?

If a child spent all their time researching, say, dinosaurs, you couldn’t expect a parent to have more knowledge on the subject just because they were older. You would need a researcher specializing in dinosaurs to explain anything new to a kid like that.

It was normal to not know anything about certain specialist topics, and if a kid got engrossed in one of those, there was no way a parent could outdo them.

All right, it was time to let Shalsha teach me what was up. There was nothing to be embarrassed about.

The next item after the suit of armor was a thick-looking shield.

It was placed at an angle that emphasized its thickness. I got the feeling it would be more appropriate to call it a wall, rather than a shield.

No way any sword could pierce through that. That didn’t mean, though, that it was very practical. If you tried to bring a wall to a fight, it’d be way too heavy to move around with. I doubted any human could do battle while holding this thing.

“I bet just holding this would count as weight lifting.” I didn’t know much about shields, so my thoughts on it were mostly fluff. “Or maybe it wasn’t meant for practical use at all, since it was an offering to a god, and they just

made it as thick as possible.”

“I think you’re on the right track, Mom. Additionally, the sign says that this was an offering by Marquis Macosia, the Sore Loser.”

That didn’t ring any bells. Maybe it was time I learned some history.

“When Marquis Sore Loser lost his castle to his younger brother, he wandered from land to land, asking other lords if they would assist him in taking his castle back. He visited forty-five different places in seven years.”

“He really couldn’t let it go, could he?!”

“But no other lord would help him. One lord said to him: *‘Your castle is fifteen days on foot from here. Please ask someone closer.’*”

“That’s the right answer!”

Considering he’d visited forty-five different lords, some of them would have to be pretty far away. But what were they supposed to do about it? It wasn’t like he was just asking a stranger for a subway fare here.



“As it happened, Marquis Sore Loser successfully regained his position as the local lord ten years later. It was then that he gifted this shield. There’s a message engraved on the back reading: *By the goddess Nintan, I am once again able to live in my own castle. I offer this shield as a show of thanks.*”

“Wow. After ten years devoted to the cause, it finally worked out.”

That kind of unwavering dedication deserved praise.

“Did he ever find someone to help him? Or did he gather his own army and recapture the castle?”

“His younger brother returned the position to him. He reportedly said, *‘I imagined the seat of lord to be much more interesting, but it was not as I expected.’*”

“This Marquis Sore Loser didn’t do anything...”

“It is said that after visiting forty-five lords, he prayed to every god around the world that his lordship might be returned to him. It is said that he had been in the Grand Nintan Temple the day before he received word from his brother that he was relinquishing the title, so he offered this shield in thanks for answering his prayer.”

“I’m pretty sure it was a coincidence.”

The next item on display was a massive helmet, big enough for a person to hop inside and hide in.

“I can’t imagine this has *any* practical use. It must have been made as an offering.”

Or could there be giants somewhere in this world, and it was made for them?

“This helmet was given in offering by Lord Gilson the Morning Napper of Yohgana Province.”

“These nicknames are really uninspiring.”

Was there just nothing else remarkable about these people...?

“Lord Gilson the Morning Napper was already a seasoned fighter in the Era of Excess Heroes. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he lived to fight.”

“Some eras saw nothing but wars and fighting. I’m glad things are relatively peaceful now.”

“His record was said to be thirty-two wins, thirty-nine losses.”

“He lost more than he won!”

Of course he wouldn’t get a powerful-sounding nickname like the Intrepid, even if he spent his life on the battlefield. That’s exactly the kind of record that earns a nickname like the Morning Napper.

That aside, another thought came to me as I looked over the display.

“I feel like I’ve learned a lot about the people who made these offerings, Shalsha. Thank you for explaining everything.”

Shalsha gave a little nod. “They are all famous. This is barely an explanation.”

“The designs on this helmet are so pretty, though. I wonder how they were made?”

It looked like jewels were embedded in it, but I couldn’t really tell.

Shalsha froze.

The inside of the museum was pretty sedate to begin with, and Shalsha wasn’t the type to make exaggerated movements, but she had become so still it almost felt like time had come to a stop.

“Shalsha doesn’t know much about that sort of thing, so Shalsha isn’t sure... It would be wrong to tell you something incorrect... Shalsha should stay quiet when she doesn’t know something...”

“I see, I see. I’m proud of you for admitting it when you don’t know, Shalsha.”

I felt a twinge of guilt as I patted Shalsha on the head.

So Shalsha wasn’t entirely sure of its technical or artistic value. I had considered that to be part of the humanities, but I guess it was still an entirely different field.

This must be the reason why Falfa didn’t want to come with Shalsha.

Falfa probably wanted to hear more about the items on display themselves, not Shalsha’s extensive historical knowledge.

I could see Falfa wanting to know more about an item's value. Rather than who donated the item, she was probably interested in what about the item made it unique or particularly attractive.

That said, I would probably be lost if I was suddenly pelted with a ton of art jargon, and I found Shalsha's storylike explanations interesting. I guess it was just a matter of taste.

"...Mom?" Shalsha spoke quietly, her head drooping.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Shalsha wants to learn some art history."

What a good kid.

"That's great! I admire your enthusiasm."

I gave Shalsha another affectionate pat on the head.

The exhibits we saw afterward were just as enriching.

"Wow, this really makes me realize just how much stuff the goddess gave us... All of this used to be in the house in the highlands..."

"Shalsha believes there were even smaller jewels and furnishings in the chest we received. Each of those would be exhibited separately in a museum, and of course they would take up space."

"I see... I bet there were a lot of offerings Nintan didn't even know about."

Even the grand temple hadn't been able to keep up with all of it, after all.

It was truly wonderful that each of those items now had their own spot, clearly labelled, for all the public to see.

Before long, I caught sight of the exit and headed over. It was a little brighter than the rest of the exhibit.

Just outside the doorway was a very colorful, eye-catching sign.

I should have figured she'd be running this like a business.

It was here, right at the last minute, that it finally hit me that this museum was being run by Halkara.

Museum gifts & Halkara Pharmaceuticals

NOW ON SALE!



*Unique
goodies
you
can
only
find
HERE!*

**We have every
type of
NUTRI-SPIRITS!**

The Pride of Halkara Pharmaceuticals Museum



That night, I made a slightly fancier dinner than usual to celebrate Halkara.

I knew putting together that exhibit must have been hard work, so I felt like I had to congratulate her somehow. This is just my personal opinion, but I don't think it's a good idea to do things for praise alone. You'll get stuck as soon as there's no one around to praise you.

People should do what they think is fun, even if no one's around to compliment them on it.

On the other hand, if you see that someone else has done something amazing, you shouldn't hold back. Don't let your admiration go unspoken.

And that's why I wanted to celebrate Halkara!

Soon, a dragon landed near the house. It was about the usual time. I could tell it was Laika who'd taken Halkara to work today; by now, I could tell the dragons apart by the sound of their wings.

I intended to tell Halkara just how good the exhibit was as soon as she came in.

But my plans fell apart.

"Lady Azusa, we have an emergency!" Laika rushed inside.

"What? Did Halkara eat another poisonous mushroom?"

It was safe to assume any trouble involved Halkara.

But Halkara ambled in behind Laika, looking totally relaxed. In her hand, however, was what looked like a piece of parchment.

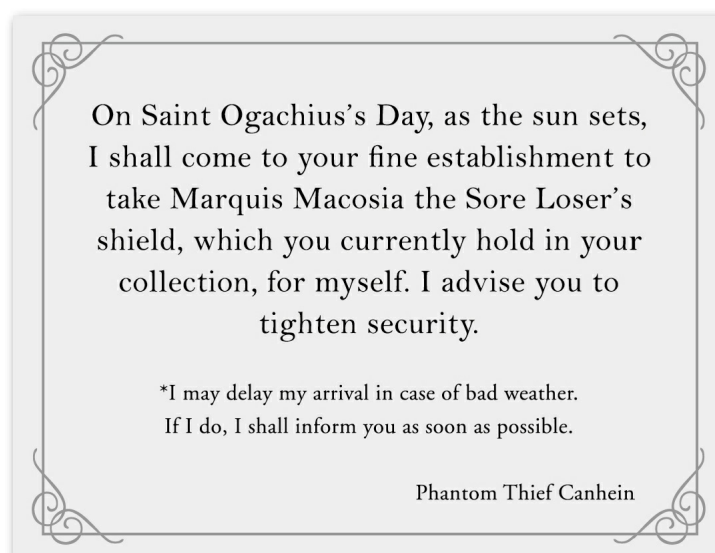
"Goodness, Madam Teacher. You'll never believe what just happened!"

"I'm picking up distinctly different vibes from you two... What's going on?"

"I found this in the factory office today~"

Halkara handed me the piece of parchment.

It was a phantom thief calling card!



So things like this really did happen. I never imagined phantom thieves could be found outside of fiction.

But on closer inspection, I saw something a little strange.

“They’ll delay in case of bad weather? That’s weirdly conscientious.”

“No, Madam Teacher, this excessive attention to detail is what makes a phantom thief a phantom thief. This is the genuine article! I feel sure even though I’ve never seen one before!”

She shouldn’t act so confident if she’s never seen one...

“I cannot believe a phantom thief will finally be paying my museum a visit. I’m so proud! For a museum, what really matters is if it can catch the eye of a clever criminal! This is a real testament to the quality of our collection!”

The museum director was getting really excited, but I wasn’t so sure if she should be...

“I can understand your feelings, Halkara, but shouldn’t you be a little more worried?”

There was a very good chance she could lose a valuable treasure. This was a professional thief we were talking about. Come to think of it, was there such a thing as an amateur thief?

“Precisely, Miss Halkara. The museum is in danger!” Laika was riled up. “Theft is a terrible crime. Though, in some cases, one may have no other choice but to do so, such as when one steals a piece of bread while starving, this crime is being committed entirely for the criminal’s delight! They have even told us about it ahead of time! They are perfectly aware they are committing evil, and the fact that they are enjoying it makes it all the more evil!”

I could feel Laika’s heart bursting with the flames of justice... In fact, I could imagine flames bursting out of her mouth at any moment.

I didn’t think she needed to get that hot under the collar before anything was even stolen.

Well, maybe I was being too soft. My life had been generally peaceful, and I’d never had to deal with theft.

The house in the highlands stood all alone out here, so I was sure a robber would hesitate to try to break in.

“How reprehensible of them to confuse evil with entertainment! We must

punish this individual!”

“Okay, okay... Laika, please settle down. We need to stay calm in situations like this, or they’ll catch us by surprise.”

“Lady Azusa! Of course, you are correct—I will not be able to make full use of my power if I lose my composure. I got carried away there...”

Laika, however, was less upset about the thief coming to the museum than she was about them sending a calling card. The act must be unthinkable to someone as honest and upright as her.

“First, let’s read over the warning a few more times. We might be able to find a hint somewhere.”

The message wasn’t hiding anything; it was pretty direct, in fact, but there was something I realized after reading it again.

“They’re going after the sore loser’s offering?!”

The marquis had sounded pretty pitiful based on Shalsha’s description, but was his offering actually worth a lot...? I guess he was a ruler, after all, so it had to be. He wouldn’t donate something cheap.

He’d probably face divine punishment if he offered some cheap trinket as thanks for being looked after by the goddess...

I had a feeling that if Nintan had seen him intentionally offer something cheap, she would have immediately turned him into a frog. That was despite the fact that she seemed to have no issue with how sloppily those offerings were cared for.

Laika, too, noticed something as she was rereading the parchment.

“This warning is written in decorative lettering! This individual is indeed making a mockery of the museum by sending something so foul in such a fine hand! This person is rotten to the core!”

“Please! Calm down! Calm down! Getting all worked up about it isn’t going to solve anything!”

Laika was getting dangerously close to actually breathing fire, so we had her step away for a while.

Then Halkara and I discussed what could be done.

“Hmm. I don’t see any hidden messages when reading it vertically~”

I figured someone easygoing like Halkara was most likely to discover the secret, but the warning may not have had any hidden meanings to begin with.

“Does this Phantom Thief Canhein person sound familiar to you?”

Maybe the thief was well-known.

“No, they do not. Halkara Pharmaceuticals only opened up the museum recently, and before that, we didn’t have anything worth stealing.”

“I guess no one would send a calling card about stealing a dozen bottles of Nutri-Spirits, would they?”

“Perhaps we should ask the guild if they know anything about this? A thief might feature on their wanted list.”

“Now, that’s the ticket!”



The next day, I showed the warning to Natalie at the guild in Flatta.

“Ah, *this* phantom thief.”

“Your tone makes it sound like they’re famous!”

Maybe there was a hefty reward being offered for their capture.

“Famous? Yes, I suppose so. But also unknown.”

“So a little of both...?”

“Yes, exactly. Those who know a lot about thieves would be familiar with them, but the general populace would not. I’m probably the only one in Flatta who knows about them.”

“Oh well, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

So they weren’t as well-known as L*p*n the Third or anything. Still, it’d be a little eerie if any random man or woman on the street knew the criminal’s name.

“This thief steals the strangest things. And I believe their success rate is quite

high.”

“So they’re a real phantom thief!”

I pictured L*p*n the Third in my head.

But then I saw a troubled look cross Natalie’s face. “I’m not sure I’d go so far as to call them a phantom thief... They did indeed manage to steal a bracelet from a temple vault once, though...”

“That sounds like a clear success to me.”

Natalie showed me a report of the incident. It said, “The warning card noted: *I shall take the bracelet on Saint Tanux Day.*”

“What a well-composed warning. It sounds like they were pretty confident!”

It was probably a bit indiscreet of me considering this was a crime, but reading about it was getting me excited.

“Please keep reading, Great Witch.”

Why did she sound so skeptical?

The latter half of the report said: *Furthermore, the warning was sent after the crime was committed.*

“What...? After the crime...?”

Now things were getting weird.

“Exactly. Can that even be considered a warning? The goods had already been stolen, so of course the thief was confident. That’s like saying you plan to get married sometime this year after you’ve already held the wedding.”

Natalie’s similes were trending toward marriage, probably because she still hadn’t found a partner yet. I decided not to touch on that. I didn’t want things getting messy.

“Are you sure it wasn’t just because the letter arrived late...?”

The postal system here was still developing, so it wasn’t unusual for things to take time in transit. At least that’s how I wanted to interpret the situation.

“No. That isn’t possible. The postmark clearly stated the day it was sent. The

thief definitely sent it after stealing the bracelet. Incidentally, the temple only realized the bracelet had been stolen once the warning arrived.”

This phantom thief was straying further and further from the image in my head.

“Other guild staffers call this thief the **Afterwarner**. This incident is a rather typical example of their work, I’d say.”

FORGOTTEN WALLET STOLEN FROM CARRIAGE

A wallet, left behind on a public carriage by an elderly gentleman, has been stolen. Days later, a letter arrived at the man’s house saying, *I have taken the wallet you left in the carriage*. The notice was signed *Phantom Thief Canhein*.

“That’s cheap! Absolutely none of the flair I expect from a phantom thief!”

Enclosed with the letter was the man’s wallet and roughly 90 percent of the money it originally contained.

“Were they charging a finder’s fee?!”

If the owner of the wallet decided to give them a 10 percent cut out of gratitude, that was one thing, but if they took it without asking, that just made them a thief. They were *actually* a thief in this case, though, so I guess that wasn’t an issue.

“As you can see, they are perfectly happy to warn people after the fact.”

“Ugh... They just sound annoying... Though, I guess sending out warnings is itself pretty annoying...”

I guess phantom thieves were only cool in stories.

“Oh, but, Great Witch, this is a little hard to say after I’ve knocked the wind out of your sails, so to speak, but there is one thing I want you to be aware of.”

“Hmm? What’s that?”

“We call this thief the **Afterwarner**.”

“Yeah, you just told me that.”

Natalie's eyes darted away.

"That means there is a chance that the item in question has already b—"

"Oh, crap!"

I dashed out of the guild and ran all the way to Nascúte.

With my stats, the run didn't take all that long, nor did it tire me out, and I got there without issue.

I'd won a relay race once, too, after all. Depending on your point of view, you could say I was a top athlete!

My destination was, of course, the Halkara Pharmaceuticals factory.

The receptionist notified Halkara of my arrival and let me inside.

"Oh! Madam Teacher! There's been an update on the phantom thief situation." Halkara spoke before I could say anything.

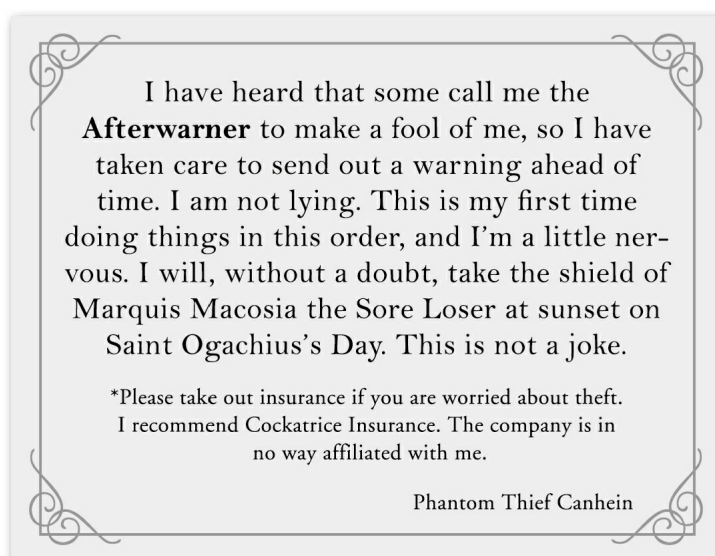
"Oh no... Was it already stolen?!" That sneaky cheapskate!

"What? No, not at all. It's still on display." Halkara looked at me curiously. The treasure was apparently safe.

"Then what has changed?"

"We received another letter from the thief!"

"They sent a reminder?!"



It sounded like they really hated being called the Afterwarner... But they also said it was their first time doing things in this order, so I guess it was true that

they sent all their warnings after the fact. They really were an afterwarner...

And they'd included a thoughtful note at the end this time, as well. That said, it didn't seem right for a thief to recommend insurance.

"My word. Phantom thieves are so gentlemanly, aren't they? I truly sense the spirit of fair play here~"

"I suppose you could say that. Well, if they're this insistent, then it seems unlikely they've stolen it ahead of time.

If it turned out the theft *had* already happened, I was going to spread this Afterwarner name everywhere I could.

"By the way, Halkara, what are you doing about crime prevention? This thief sounds serious."

The fact that the thief was saying they'd never tried this before meant they'd never succeeded in a post-warning theft, but at the same time, I was sure they'd be giving this their all.

And even if their warnings had come after the fact, it was still very likely that they had successfully stolen money and valuables in the past. In fact, if they hadn't, they wouldn't be a phantom thief at all... It'd just be a nickname they made up for themselves... Right?

"There's still one month left until the date on the warning, so you should do everything you can until then."

"You needn't tell me twice, Madam Teacher. I intend to do everything in my power. I will leave nothing to chance."

Halkara puffed out her chest with pride.

Most of the time, Halkara's confidence only ended up making me nervous, but we knew ahead of time that we had a thief coming. She wouldn't take this lightly.

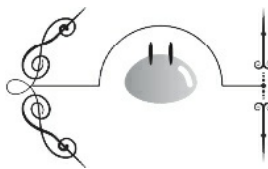
"This is a direct challenge to the Halkara Pharmaceuticals Museum, and I must step up to the challenge. The rest of the family need not worry. If I require your help, then I will ask."

That got me thinking about what the rest of the family could help with.

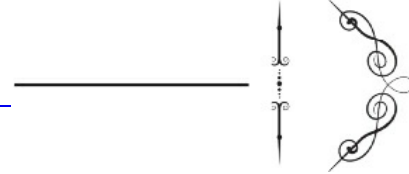
Rosalie could keep watch over the immediate area around the museum, for example.

She could even stand right next the shield's display, and it wasn't like she could be forcibly put to sleep or anything. She couldn't even be tied up with rope.

It occurred to me that having Rosalie on our side made us practically invincible...



THE PHANTOM THIEF ACTUALLY

SHOWED UP 

The day noted in the warning was fast approaching.

A change had occurred in Nascúte.

I heard about it from Flatorte, who'd gone to do the shopping that morning.

"Mistress, Nascúte is crazy busy right now. It's so crowded that I almost thought we were in the capital."

"What...? Why?"

There were still another five days until Saint Ogachius's Day, when the phantom thief was supposed to arrive. I hadn't heard about any festivals happening beforehand.

"What's happening out there?"

"Why don't we all go? There're a bunch of food stalls set up, too."

When she brought up food, I saw she had some kind of sauce stuck on her face. She must have grabbed a bite to eat before coming back.

"Okay, I'll go ask the kids if they want to go to the festival."

In the end, the entire family ended up heading over to witness the strange commotion.

I carried Sandra on my back, since walking quickly tired her out, and held hands with Falfa and Shalsha on either side of me. This was what you called mom-style travel.

Ahead of us, the dragons and Rosalie were pressing forward.

In the distance, I could see there were a lot of people walking in and around the town of Nascúte.

“Falfa can hear all the sounds from here~ Sound carries so far on the wind~”

Indeed, the bustle from town sometimes even reached the highlands, since there were hardly any natural sound barriers up there.

But there weren't many times of the year that saw this level of bustle, so it was a rare experience.

“Shalsha, there wouldn't happen to be any kind of unusual celebration that only happens once every hundred years or something, would there?”

Shalsha had a book open as she was walking. It was probably the *Nanterre Literary Calendar*.

“Shalsha is searching through this book, but nothing matches. This may have occurred suddenly.”

“Then what could it be? The only thing I can think of is the Phantom Thief's warning.”

“Oh, but, Big Sis, it didn't suddenly get this crowded overnight. I heard that people have slowly been showing up over the past few days, and it's only now that things have gotten this big.”

Apparently, Rosalie had been aware of the changes. Were such developments easier for ghosts to detect?

“When people gather, curious ghosts tend to accompany them. The number of ghosts in Nascúte has been climbing, so I figured something was up.”

“So paranormal activity has also increased...”

But it's true that there probably weren't any ghosts where people had never set foot before.

As we approached the town, it became even clearer just how lively the place was.

I could see the food stalls all lined up.

“Oh! They're making candy! Falfa wants some!”

“Shalsha will follow you as your little sister.”

“Go ahead and get some, you two.”

I was thankful that Falfa and Shalsha were able to enjoy themselves. There wasn't a lot in terms of entertainment around here, after all.

But this wasn't just a stagnant crowd—there was clearly a flow here.

The majority of the people were making their way in one direction.



At this point, I couldn't be sure what was going on, but I had a pretty good guess.

“The flow's headed toward the Halkara Pharmaceuticals Museum, isn't it?”

“Hey, Azusa? Was that sign there last time?”

Sandra spoke up from her spot on my back.

As soon as she spoke, I spotted a sign that said HALKARA PHARMACEUTICALS MUSEUM: 12-MINUTE WALK.

A bit farther along the way, there was another sign that said HALKARA PHARMACEUTICALS MUSEUM: 11-MINUTE WALK. Did they really need a separate sign for each minute?

“I have a feeling she put this here recently...”

Then, as we followed the flow of people, we came to the front of the museum, where we found a banner hanging on the museum wall with the following message: **“Halkara really is doing everything in her power!”**

When I’d heard how lively Nascúte was, I’d had a feeling this was what was happening.

And I was right.

I remembered what Halkara had said.

“I intend to do everything in my power.”

In other words, she intended to use the phantom thief’s threat to advertise her museum and make tons of money!

The museum sat on the outskirts of town, so a lot of the space around it was usually empty. Now that space was filled with stalls. I saw so many businesses riffing on the theme of the phantom thief: There were LOCKS NO PHANTOM CAN GET PAST and PANCAKES SO DRY THEY WILL STEAL THE SPIT FROM YOUR MOUTH.

“Hmm... I have mixed feelings about this, Lady Azusa.” Discomfort was spread across Laika’s face. “This strategy may indeed work to outwit the thief, but my conscience feels otherwise...”

“Yeah, I know how you feel, Laika...”

This wasn’t what I’d meant when I told her to prepare for the thief’s arrival.

“With so many people around, the thief could easily disappear into the crowd. Rather than protecting the items on display, I believe this will have the opposite effect...”

Laika was right on the money.

“We should save our judgment until we see how the shield’s being handled. We came this far, so we may as well go inside and check.”

We had brought our tickets from home, so we all entered the museum together.

It took almost ten minutes to get inside because of how crowded it was. It was rare for a small local museum to get this many visitors.

As I had expected, the excitement was at its highest around the shield, the phantom thief’s target.

The shield was in a different place from before; it had been moved to the middle of a previously unused room.

It sat on a very tall marble pedestal, and the surrounding walls were decorated with the thief’s calling card and information on Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser, who had offered the shield to the goddess.

“I do not think this museum ever had the marquis’s private letters or land ownership certificates, so Halkara must have borrowed them from other institutions. It seems the museum is operating legitimately, at least...”

So concluded Laika, who was apparently very familiar with museum operations.

The expression on her face, however, told me she still didn’t agree with all this.

Not to repeat myself, but I understood how she felt.

“It’s just a thick shield. I don’t really get why everyone’s coming to look at it.”

As I had thought, this was Flatorte’s first time seeing the shield. She really wasn’t interested in this kind of thing.

“I wonder if it would break if I gave it a really hard punch. Perfect thing to test my strength.”

“You absolutely cannot punch it, okay, Flatorte? This is a museum display item, okay?!”

“Mistress, not even Flatorte would do something so unreasonable as fighting with a museum display.”

Right. I guess I was a little on edge.

“I, Flatorte, want to test my strength against that phantom thief!”

“Uh, phantom thieves aren’t really known for their strength...”

“But anyone who can pick that thing up and run away has to have some serious muscle. Not just any person could carry it and fight at the same time.”

Well, I was pretty sure it wasn’t made to be used in actual battle, but...

This was no tiny little ring to steal. How was the phantom thief planning on taking this home, exactly?

It’d be difficult to steal if they weren’t from a species that was confident in their physical prowess, like a dragon.

Could they have some dazzling trick up their sleeve?

We decided to pay a visit to Halkara.

We couldn’t just come out to the museum as a group and not say hello, after all.

We were brought to the museum’s reception room.

“Oh, you’re all here! What do you think? It was definitely worth doing all that advertising! We have thirty times the number of visitors we had when we first opened the special exhibit! This is also doing wonders for Nascúte’s economy, and I even got praise from the mayor!”

“The economic benefits are painfully obvious, but is this doing anything to counter the thief?”

With a crowd this big, I had a feeling the thief would be like, *Wow, how lucky! They made it so much easier to get the shield!* This was only benefiting our opponent.

“I have that covered as well. I used my sober brain and thought very hard on the matter!”

Then I guess she *did* have a plan.

Maybe she'd made a replica shield to put in the real shield's place.

"Even if the shield is stolen, we'll have recovered the cost and more! It is not a problem at all!"

"I don't think the director of the museum should be talking like that."

"No, Madam Teacher, I had some appraisers come by and take a look at only the shield. They valued it at just three hundred thousand gold."

"Oh... That's not a lot..."

Of course, it wasn't right to judge a museum's items by their monetary value, but it didn't seem expensive enough to warrant a phantom thief sending out a calling card.

"Considering how cheap that is, it can't have much artistic value, either. Of course, I would rather it not be stolen, but if it is, then we will cross that bridge when we come to it. In fact, if the thief was to introduce themselves, I would almost be tempted to thank them for spreading word about the museum by handing them the shield myself."

That would just make it a donation!

"You have certainly thought this over, Miss Halkara. If we present the shield to them directly, then it would no longer be theft. You would be spoiling the thief's very enjoyment in the deed."

"Laika, I don't think a witty plan like that would count as a win for us... The thief (or would-be thief) would still end up with the shield..."

"I—I know... But I believe Miss Halkara's methods are correct, at least in the sense that they would foil the thief's plans..."

Somehow, this had become a logic problem.

But while I knew we should do our best to stop the criminal, I was starting to wonder if a shield that was only valued at three hundred thousand gold was really worth the effort. Losing it wouldn't affect the museum's business at all.

At this point, we might as well consider the phantom thief business settled.

"The day of the theft will be even more exciting! I do hope you come to

watch! Will the thief win? Or will my museum prove victorious after I pour all my effort into crime prevention?”

Oh-ho, it sounded like she might actually have something planned for the day of the theft.

But then a different kind of smile spread across her face.

“Regardless, the museum has already secured financial victory. Heh-heh-heh...”

It wasn't like she was doing anything bad, but I could feel all my concern for her vanish.

After all, Halkara certainly wasn't worried.



At last, Saint Ogachius's Day came.

Both Macosia the Sore Loser's shield and its marble pedestal had been moved outside.

The shield had been placed in a stone chest, and around the chest was a barrier that would shock anyone who touched it without dispelling it first.

Standing around the towering marble pedestal were four massive, brawny men, and standing between them were four renowned mages.

A deep, empty moat had been dug around the men and the mages, wide enough to make jumping over it difficult.

Also, Sandra was paying careful attention to any vibrations in the earth to make sure there was nothing amiss, and to tell us if the enemy was coming.

Flatorte was circling the sky above in her dragon form. That would make it difficult for the thief to get the drop on us from the sky.

We also checked ahead of time to make sure that none of the men or the mages were the thief in disguise.

Beyond the moat was the jam-packed crowd, seated in what were basically bleachers.

A banner hung on the museum wall that read: WELCOME, PHANTOM THIEF CANHEIN.

“Lady Azusa, the countermeasures ended up being quite rigorous, huh?” Laika said, looking up at the pedestal under the shield.

“Yeah. They’ll have earned the right to call themselves a phantom thief if they can manage to steal it in this situation.”

I’d been apprehensive that Halkara was letting her guard down, but I was happy to say I was wrong. To her, the day of the thief’s appearance would be the highlight of the show, so she was putting her all into countering the thief.

“Oh yes, Lady Azusa, you once drew a magic circle that could catch any invading thief, correct?”

That had been around when Laika first arrived. Ah, memories.

“Yeah, I put one at the entrance to town this time. Halkara requested it.”

Halkara was really covering all her bases.

“But that’s really just a bonus thrown in with the rest. There’s a big chance that the phantom thief’s already in town. Besides, that magic reacts to your emotions, and I’d like to think that a phantom thief would have control over their own emotions.”

That magic circle could only trap people who were thinking overtly bad things like, *Mua-ha-ha, I am going to steal a wallet today!*

If it was any more sensitive than that, it’d be snatching up anyone and everyone who had the tiniest fragment of a bad thought, and that would make it like a mind-reading censorship machine...

At last, Halkara appeared, dressed in her most formal clothes.

“And now, Phantom Thief Canhein, the promised time of sunset is upon us! I have done everything in my power as museum director! It is your turn to show me what you can do!”

That was Halkara’s declaration of war.

The whole area fell quiet.

Everyone was wondering where Phantom Thief Canhein was going to appear.

No one knew when they would show up, of course. It’d be a shame if they

missed the whole thing while they were chatting with their neighbors.

Calling it a shame to miss was a little weird, but everyone present was here to see the showdown between the thief and the Halkara Museum's security system.

At any rate, this had brought a whole lot of money flowing into Nascúte's economy... Not to mention every inn in the surrounding area had been packed full, even in Flatta.

This thief was practically a golden goose.

However, no one knew if the thief was going to show up in the next five minutes or the next thirty minutes; it'd be hard to sit still and stay quiet the entire time.

And so I decided to lower my voice and start a conversation. "Hey, Laika? Just wondering, but what would you do to get the shield if you were the phantom thief?"

"Interesting question. Personally, I would change into my dragon form, eliminate Flatorte, then fly away with it, stone chest and all."

"That does sound like the right choice for you, but it probably doesn't apply to our thief..."

Conventional wisdom wasn't very useful where a massive dragon was concerned.

But whoever the thief was, they would need some kind of trick up their sleeve in order to successfully steal that shield.

After they jumped across the moat, eight adventurers would be waiting for them. Even if the thief had the strength to defeat all of them, it wouldn't get any easier. Flatorte was right up there in the sky.

Personally, I would have found the difficulty level a little discouraging.

But phantom thieves were phantom thieves because they stole things under impossible-seeming circumstances.

If they could be blocked by a security system like this, then they weren't a phantom thief, they were just a forewarning idiot.

*I know you're *supposed* to warn ahead of time, but since this thief was nicknamed the Afterwarner, I felt I needed to specify.

Then, just as the tension in the waiting crowd had started to dissipate...

There was movement.

Someone fell—no, jumped down into the moat!

They had long ears, dark skin, and silver hair—a dark elf. And their physique was feminine.

Was that the phantom thief? Wait, there was still no way to tell. It could just as easily be someone who fell into the moat.

But then the dark elf dug some kind of pick-like tool into the earthen wall and started climbing up toward the shield.

I heard someone say, “That *has* to be the phantom thief!”

Obviously, if a bystander did something like that, they'd be mistaken for the thief and attacked.

This was way beyond the level of a prank, so there was a good chance that this was our thief!

“There they are!” “We'll beat you back!” “Begin casting!”

The mages stationed around the marble pedestal started to cast their spells.

They pelted the dark elf with fire and wind as she climbed the moat walls.

The whooshing sounds of wind and explosions reached my ears, too.

It didn't seem like she was going to be able to dodge all that, so this was probably the end.

But she defied the expectations of every single person watching.

“Hah! I can take it! There's nothing I can't endure!”

The dark elf kept climbing up the moat! She was in tatters after taking so much damage!

“What? How? Does she have some magical defenses—no, she doesn't. She's a wreck...”

“Lady Azusa, she is surpassing all obstacles out of sheer determination!”

I could see the slightest hint of admiration in Laika’s expression.

“What? Can you counter spells or whatever with determination alone?”

“Well, she is making progress right before our eyes...”

I mean, I doubted any of the mages Halkara had hired could use instant death spells, but...that didn’t mean this dark elf wasn’t incredible.

The dark elf in question finally came to stand before the marble pedestal, where the mages and big men were waiting.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Phantom Thief Canhein enters the stage! The shield will be mine!”

She had finally named herself. She *was* the phantom thief who sent the warning.

“I arrived one week ago, and to be honest, I regretted coming so early!”

I don’t care!

“You there, thief! Sorry, but I’m not goin’ easy on you!”

One of the large men rushed at the dark elf with both arms out to try to catch her.

Right, if she gets caught, then it’s all over.

But the dark elf slipped out of his hands.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! I have lathered myself in slippery frog mucus!”

Gross!

The people in the audience weren’t shy about their opinions either; I heard some people say “I bet she smells.”

“I do smell! My nose is about to fall off! But I can endure it if I ignore it! Behold my grand, superior perseverance!”

It wasn’t grand at all! She smelled like mud! Or like a frog!

“Yaaah! It’s at the top of this pedestal, isn’t it?!”

Phantom Thief Canhein clung to the marble pedestal.

But there was no place for her to steady her feet, so she immediately slid down.

Spells kept pelting her; fireballs hit her one after the other.

“Ha-ha-ha! That hurts! But I will get through this with my superior perseverance!”

What was up with her?!

The phantom thief leaped at the marble pedestal again.

She immediately slid down.

“This slimy frog mucus is much more slippery than I originally thought! I can’t climb this at all!”

“Foiled by her own ingenuity!”

“Lady Azusa, I don’t think that’s very apt, as she hasn’t shown any ingenuity...”

“You’re right, Laika. Which means...she’s just an idiot.”

Hesitantly, Laika murmured, “Perhaps you’re right.”

Coming here with no chance of winning wasn’t really a display of her superior intellect.

Laika, however, looked more sympathetic than exasperated.

The phantom thief slid down the marble many more times.

Even when she did manage to make a little progress, one of the big adventurers would always peel her down, and then she had to try again.

She failed over and over, more times than I could count.

And yet she continued to fling herself at the marble, desperately trying to reach the chest with the shield in it.

“Th-the treasure will belong to me, Phantom Thief Canhein... I won’t lose; I won’t give in...”

At some point, part of the audience started yelling “You can do it, Phantom

Thief!” and “Go for it!”

Some people were being strangely drawn in by the thief’s unyielding determination!

“I know I shouldn’t say this, considering Miss Halkara, but, Lady Azusa...I feel an urge to cheer on the thief, too...”

Laika did strike me as someone who was easily moved by earnest displays of character.

“Halkara won’t be mad if all you do is cheer her on. It should be fine.”

In Halkara’s eyes, the most important thing was to enjoy the show.

She was probably thanking the phantom thief for causing such excitement.

That aside—

“This person isn’t anything like a phantom thief.”

I thought phantom thieves were supposed to surprise you with their unusual methods, but she was just bulldozing her way forward.

“She could at least try to drag the treasure down with one of those ropes with a hook at the end or something... Her methods are way too straightforward...”

“Harrumph! Harrumph! Endure! Endure!”

The dark elf had finally managed to reach the top, where the treasure chest sat.

Coos of admiration came from the crowd.

And the moment she reached out to touch the chest—

The barrier sent electricity through her whole body.

“Byaaaaaaaaah!”

Oh yeah. This was over...

“I’m all right! Once I get used to the feeling, I’ll walk away with better blood circulatiooooooon!”

She was planning on pushing through everything with endurance!

The lid on that chest was pretty heavy, so opening it was going to be a challenge, too.

“Hrrrrng! Graaaaaaagh! Aaaaaaargh!”

She was trying to forcibly pull it open with both hands!

I wished she'd try something a little more clever.

“Dammiiiiit! You're just a box! I can open a boooooooooox!”

It was hard to tell if it was her muscles or her blood vessels, but something was straining against the skin all throughout the dark elf's body. She was clearly using every ounce of her strength. Actually, I hadn't seen her do anything the easy way yet.

The lid budged slightly.

That must have destroyed the barrier, because the electricity stopped.

She stuck her leg inside.

And of course, it got stuck.

“Owwwwww!”

“Anyone could have seen that coming! Maybe it's time to give up?!”

“I go through special training like this all the tiiiiime! Don't try this at hooooooooome!”

“No one will!”

There's no need for a thief to give the audience safety advice!

But the lid was slightly ajar now that she'd stuck her leg in it, and she was finally able to pry it open the rest of the way.

She then lifted up the shield.

The thick, wall-like shield.

“*Huff, huff...* Do you see this? I have the shield! Hooray for Phantom Thief Canhein!”

She stumbled when she lifted it up, but she had a firm hold on it.

Laika, Falfa, Shalsha, Sandra with her feet in the ground, Rosalie inside the pillar checking for paranormal interference, Halkara, and I all had our eyes glued to her.

I wasn't sure why, but I was touched by the sight.

She had emerged victorious from a desperate situation.

But then a large shadow fell over the dark elf.

Large claws clamped down on her shoulders.

It was Flatorte in dragon form.

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Oh yeah, Flatorte was up there! I totally forgot...

“Yes, got you! I’m gonna take you somewhere nice and open.”

“Gaaaaaaaah! Stooooooooop! I’m not giving the shield baaaaaaaack!”

“I was enjoying the show from above. But I’ve got a job to do. And I’m not gonna go easy on you, because if you steal the shield, then that means I lose.”

“Hah, fascinating! Give it your best shot! But I’m going to die if I fall from up here, so please don’t drop meeeeeee!”

I would have thought a phantom thief would be fine getting dropped from an insane height, but that didn’t seem to be true for this dark elf.

There was nothing phantom thief–like about anything she did, so I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised.

Flatorte flew off with the dark elf.

As she vanished into the sky, held in Flatorte’s clutches, some of the audience members started applauding.

“Nicely done!” “Great show!” “But that wasn’t a phantom thief!”

Laika was giving a round of loud applause, too.

“It was clear that this individual had limited skills. And yet she obtained the shield through sincere conviction alone. Determination can truly move mountains.”

“Yeah. I could feel my eyes getting misty when I saw her lift up the shield.”

It was nice to see someone succeed at something.

“—But Flatorte took her away.”

“...That she did.”

I think that meant our thief had failed.

“Hello, esteemed visitors, I am Halkara, museum director. As you can see, we have taken the thief into custody. We will be handling the rest of the proceedings. But I think we can agree she put up quite the fight. To finish us off, why don’t we chant Phantom Thief Canhein’s name to show her our

appreciation?”

The audience eagerly jumped on board with Halkara’s considerate (?) suggestion.

Cheers of “Canhein!” “Canhein!” echoed throughout the town as the sky grew dark.

Where was Flatorte taking the thief anyway...?



Flatorte had the phantom thief tied up to a big pine tree that was growing next to the house in the highlands.

This was the tree that had grown rapidly from the sapling Misjantie had given us. Now it served as a landmark for the house in the highlands.

Misjantie the pine spirit had said “*Don’t use it to tie up criminals or anything,*” but Flatorte had apparently ignored her request.

“Give me three hours, and I’ll break out of this flimsy rope! Hrmph! Hrmph! I will dislocate my own joints! ...Ow! Dislocating joints hurts!”

Can’t she think even one step ahead?!

She still hadn’t given up... I didn’t want to keep her tied up to the tree the whole time, but I knew she would try to run if we undid the rope. We needed to get information out of her as soon as possible...

The interrogation—er, the questions, that is, were being asked by our museum director, Halkara.

In a way, she was the only person directly involved in this event.

“I shall go easy on you, Phantom Thief, if you answer me honestly. All right?”

“Of course! I, Phantom Thief Canhein, am an honest person who does not lie! I presently live on the second floor of a four-story apartment situated on the corner of Granite Gargoyle Lane and Falconer Avenue in District Eight of the royal capital!”

She immediately doxed herself!

Halkara wrote down the address and then asked, “First, why did you send the

warning? You had never done so before, is that correct?”

“No, I’ve sent warnings before. But usually after I’ve stolen the item.”

I was pretty sure everyone present was thinking, *That wouldn’t count as a warning, though.*

“I need to subject myself to difficult trials in order to progress to the next step in my life as a phantom thief. That was why I sent out the warning ahead of time, to prevent myself from backing out!”

That seemed like a weird concern for a thief.

No, wait, maybe she had just started at an exceptionally low skill level? I was starting to get confused.

“Next question. Why did you decide to steal such a low-value shield? We own plenty of lighter, more expensive things. This shield is very thick and heavy.”

I was wondering the same thing.

I had no idea why this thief would target Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser’s shield.

“Because I’m collecting things that once belonged to him!”

She was being very eager with her answers, so this interview was probably going to be over soon. However, the mystery was only getting deeper.

“What? Is that a thing people get into? Are you a history nerd?”

The dark elf’s eyes widened. “It is to hide my family’s shame! That is why I chose the life of a phantom thief! I am going to collect all the evidence of his shame and make sure no one else can learn of it!”

Family? She said family, right?

“Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser is my ancestor! His blood runs in my veins, even if it is only a little bit!”

So *that* was the connection!

Shalsha had a thick history tome open under the moonlight.

“Toiaval the Obstinate, Marquis Macosia the Sore Loser’s son, married a dark

elf woman according to this genealogical chart. His family seems to have relocated to dark elf territory after that, so I assume she is their descendent.”

No way! The plot thickens...

Regardless of whether she was actually related to him (every world had people who boasted their ancestors were great people), she believed she was.

“Mommy, this dark elf is a big sore loser.”

Aha! As soon as Falfa said that, everything came together.

“She must have inherited his sore loser gene!”

I bet the marquis himself was something like her when he was alive...

“Very well. I believe you.” Halkara nodded firmly.

“This discussion is over! Send me wherever you will! Even if you put me in the most secure jail, I can dig my way out with a spoon!”

She might really pull that off!

This would-be thief didn't seem like a bad person, but she certainly wasn't evil. Maybe that was strange to say.

However, it was true that she had tried to steal something from a museum. Maybe she really should be sent to jail as punishment. I doubted her sentence would be very long anyway.

Then Laika approached, carrying a heavy shield.

Halkara smiled broadly and said:

“Phantom Thief, the museum would like to present you with this shield.”

“Wh-what...? What are you doing?” The phantom thief stared in disbelief.

“It belongs to you, which means this is not theft.”

I had to hand it to Halkara for giving such a messy situation a cool ending.

Doing this would resolve all the loose threads and leave no hard feelings.

“Mrf... O-okay... So you are offering the shield to me, Phantom Thief Canhein? I will graciously receive it. And I will send a thank-you letter in a few days' time.”

She sure had a strong sense of obligation for a thief!

“Th-then untie me. My arms ache; failing to dislocate my limbs hurt...”

She was trying her hardest, I’d give her that, but she was kind of bad at living...

Halkara and Laika exchanged uncomfortable glances.

“Allow me to speak first,” Laika began. “We have settled the matter regarding the shield by Miss Halkara transferring ownership to you, but you have still committed repeated theft in the past. You must serve your time for what you have done. Now that we have apprehended you, we cannot allow you to escape.”

Oh, right. A phantom thief would necessarily have a criminal history...

“I can tell you do not easily give up. Once your sentence is over, I am certain you will return to society and thrive.”

It was a difficult decision, but I guess there wasn’t much choice...

We’d be committing a crime, too, if we sheltered her.

“In that case, there is no problem. It is true that I have stolen things in the past. But—however! There is no need for me to serve jail time!”

Well, that would certainly be convenient for her!

“Please do not argue with me, Phantom Thief. You have done wrong, and you must be punished appropriately for your crimes. Don’t betray my respect for you.”

Laika had acknowledged the phantom thief’s perseverance, and that was why she didn’t want that faith to be betrayed.

“What are you saying?! It’s the objective truth that I have no need to serve a jail sentence! If you don’t believe me, then ask someone familiar with the law to check!” The phantom thief didn’t sound like she was joking. “All my crimes are beyond the statute of limitations!”

So *that’s* what she meant!

“I see... If that’s the case, then you are no longer guilty...”

Laika was rather bewildered, too. She didn't have a lot of experience with such things.

"I take on a new job only once the statute of limitations on my previous theft has run out! Until then, I wait! I am an elf, so I have all the time in the world!"

That was cheap! She was super cheap!

"After I returned the wallet to that old gentleman, I ended up spending a lot of time with him and his family!"

"That just makes you a nice person who returned a wallet! I'm sure that's how the family saw it!"

When I went to check in with Natalie at the guild afterward, I learned that everything had been as Canhein had said: All her crimes were past their statutes of limitation.

There really were all kinds of people living all kinds of lives in this world.



A little while later, Phantom Thief Canhein was working in the house in the highlands.

She tilled our fields. We had a vegetable garden at the house, and that's where she did her tilling.

It wasn't like I was forcing her to work, though.

As Canhein herself said: "Any goodwill given must be repaid. That is what makes us human."

I did think that her going around thieving made her a bad person, but there were plenty of thieves out there who were treated as heroes, so both things could be true.

To tell the truth, our two dragons could till the fields in the blink of an eye, but I wanted to respect Canhein's eagerness.

Laika, too, had something to gain from watching Canhein working so absurdly hard—she was inspired.

"Till! Till! Till! I must not imagine how nicely the vegetables will grow while

I'm tilling! Calculations will only bring betrayal! The most important thing is to till when tilling is needed!"

"Indeed! You are not truly training if you are thinking only of the results!"

Honestly, Canhein's way of life was so extreme that I couldn't imagine telling anyone to follow in her footsteps, but I couldn't deny that she was earnest.

It was a sunny morning.

Canhein had packed her things and was ready to leave the house in the highlands.

"Please, Miss Canhein, give up on your evil deeds and live an honest life." Once again, Laika handed over the shield to her.

"I don't think I can. I wish to inspire children through my work as a phantom thief."

That was quite an aspiration...

If she really wanted to inspire kids, I felt like she would need some more impressive skills. It was hard to be inspired by someone crawling through the dirt, covered in frog slime.

"The next time we meet, I will be such a dashing phantom thief that I will steal all your hearts!"

Now she was resorting to clichés...

"Phantom Thief, I believe the museum could purchase all the Marquis Sore Loser's related artifacts and documents using our item acquisition budget, if you would like. We have earned more than enough money from your exploits to make up for it."

Halkara had achieved an overwhelming victory in financial terms. She was easily the biggest victor here.

"That would take away the guiding goal of my life, but I appreciate the sentiment! I wish to win them all back with my hard work alone!"

"You are drunk on your own ideals, Phantom Thief. But being drunk is fun, isn't it? It's hard to stop. Heh-heh-heh!"

That was a really gross laugh coming from Halkara.

“Fare thee well!” Canhein waved.

We waved back to the phantom thief.

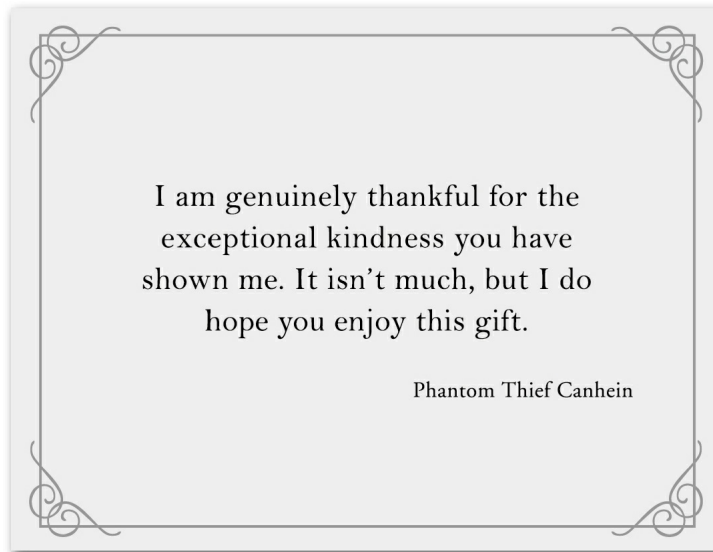
Falfa and Shalsha were moving their arms enthusiastically. “Bye!” “Safe travels.”

“Agh! I waved so much I dislocated my shoulder!”

That must be from when she tried to free herself from the rope before...

A little while later, a crate filled with an assortment of dried fruits arrived from Canhein.

The card that came with it read:



“She really is a good person with a strong sense of obligation.”

From this incident, I learned that there really are all kinds of people living all kinds of lives in this world.

The End

★ ★
The Red-Dragon
Academy for Girls

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

★ — SPIN-OFF — ★

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**



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THE MASTER RETURNS



“I appreciate the sentiment, but I have no intention of taking on any new younger-sister figures.”

I politely bowed my head to a new student with a ribbon in her hair.

“Please,” she kept begging despite my refusal. “I will do my absolute best as your sister.” She sounded so desperate, which made me feel even worse.

“I have had many requests just like yours, and I have turned them all down. So you see, I cannot make an exception just for you.”

My refusal was very reasonable, but that made me feel even sorrier for her, because it meant I was turning down this girl solely for impersonal reasons, regardless of her sincerity.

That said, I had no way of knowing if she was particularly more reliable or faithful in comparison to everyone else I had turned down so far, so I still couldn't choose her.

After about more five minutes of a futile back-and-forth, an individual who seemed to be her friend appeared and handed her a handkerchief.

At some point, unbeknownst to me, she had started crying.

The friend graciously bowed to me and said “I apologize for causing you so much trouble, Upperclassman Laika,” then comforted the crying girl as they left together.

“...Ahh, I'm so tired. I feel as though I've just emerged from a gauntlet of one hundred battles.”

I staggered backward to sit on a brick planter directly behind me.

Then, out from behind one of the shrubs in the garden stepped Hialis.

I had been aware she was hiding there for some time.

“You don’t have it easy, Sister. Here, have one of these new salted croissants.”

“As always, thank you. Ah, the salt makes the butter all the sweeter.”

When I bit into the croissant, I felt a bit better.

“You sure are popular with the new students, though, *Upperclassman Laika*.” She emphasized the title.

“I know *challenge* is part of the school motto, but it still is not easy to be challenged...”

Time had flown by, and I was now a second-year student.

The sixth-years were heading toward graduation, but there were scarcely any of them in the student council, so I hadn’t had to deal with any related issues.

But as one group leaves, a new one must take its place, and so a fresh crop of first-years had arrived at the academy.

And what was waiting for me, a newly minted second-year student, was a deluge of requests from said first-years to act as their big sister...

“That girl was the fourteenth... Do they think I am the only second-year student? And second-years are not the only upperclassmen they have, either. They should consider a more diverse range of options.”

Hialis came to sit beside me, placing a warm hand on my back to cheer me up. Red dragons typically had warm hands.

“But it’s only natural, Sister. You’re the only second-year in the student council, and so they have a lot of chances to see you when you’re conducting orientations—and you’re you, after all.”

“That last part isn’t a reason.”

“And people in the third year and above already have lots of followers in the lower grades. The first-years probably feel like they have no chance with them. That’s why they go for the second-years, who probably don’t have sisters in a

younger grade yet.”

“I understand the logic, but it does not sound very convincing from you, another second-year who calls herself my ‘little’ sister.”

“But isn’t it normal to train under someone stronger than you?”

I had better grades, but Hialis could almost always talk circles around me. According to her, my one fault was that I was too honest. However, she had gone on to say that my virtue was also being too honest, so I was not entirely sure which it was.

“But soon they will be joining clubs, and they can find some elder-sister figures there.”

“That’s not very convincing coming from you, considering you never joined a club after your brief stint in the training association.”

Ah... Once again, she was talking circles around me.

“And not every club will have strong upperclassmen, like my ghost investigation club, for example.”

“Oh yes, that is your club, isn’t it?”

“We typically conduct our activities on our own. One of our members entered an abandoned house that was said to be haunted and hasn’t come back for three weeks now.”

“I think it’s high time you sent a search party.”

“I don’t know about humans, but there is no ghost strong enough to kill any of us dragons with a curse. She’s just doing a very thorough job investigating. I know she’ll show up again before long.”

We were dragons, after all. Even our cultural clubs were extreme.

That aside—

“In which case, why did you not come out of hiding to say that I’ve already reached my capacity for younger sisters? That might have settled things much faster.”

“Are you honestly asking me that, Sister?” Hialis looked genuinely astonished.

“Had I done that, that girl would have challenged me in order to take my place. Anyone who joins the academy already has high confidence in their skills. Then things would have only gotten more complicated.”

“Y-you are correct... I underestimated the Red-Dragon Academy...”

These sparring matches were happening across campus, all the time—even during breaks and after school.

The academy asked students to polish both their beauty and their strength—“Yes, you must push your will forward with strength. If you cannot, that is a sign that your will is still weak.”

All of a sudden, Ricuen stood before us.

My croissant caught in my throat.

“Please stop appearing like that without warning. You are not an assassin...”

“My boss was speaking with a first-year student, so I wanted to know what was going on.”

Yes, I might be her boss, but she was still hard to deal with.

Hialis, incidentally, had started shivering when she saw Ricuen. Anyone would be on edge if they were right next to a member of the student council, after all. They were probably even more frightening than ghosts.

“So I thought I may as well drop by to speak with you. There is an oddity among this year’s new students.”

Her sharp gaze flitted around the area.

Was she surveilling? I had indeed lowered my guard, but while there were a lot of battles here at school, it was against the rules to attack someone without warning. It was required that we first request a fight.

But when she lowered her voice, I understood that she had merely been checking for potential eavesdroppers.

“One of the new first-years has been challenging upperclassmen and winning badge after badge.”

Ricuen gripped her own badge.

“What! How can that be?!”

When an underclassman won against an upperclassman, they would take the senior’s badge as a symbol of their victory—this was a long tradition at the academy, a show of the underclassmen’s independent spirit.

But it was not an easy feat.

There was a massive gap in skill between under-and upperclassmen, especially between first-years and those in the higher grades. Hardly anyone had ever managed to pull it off.

Even if they were to win a few times, they would attract the seniors’ attention and soon be crushed. Once that happened, all the badges would be returned to their original owners, and in some cases, the underclassman would become the younger ‘sister’ of the one who defeated them.

The only girl who had ever succeeded had continued winning badges until she rose all the way to student council president—my sister.

“This hasn’t been announced publicly, since it would greatly unsettle the academy, but it is almost certain there is someone truly terrifying among the new students. The first-years are likely to recognize you, so be careful, Boss.”

I was almost certain that she was calling me boss intentionally, out of spite.

Even though Ricuen was the earnest type, like me, I found it hard to open up to her. Then again, I had the feeling that even if I had a subordinate exactly like myself, I would find it hard to open up to her...

Now that I thought about it, I was thankful there were many in my grade who respected me, and I felt like my reputation had only improved after we successfully fought off the blue dragons during our field trip... Though, I got the feeling people thought of me less as a friend and more as someone to admire and look up to...

Opening up to others was not easy. Perhaps it was even more difficult than physical training.

Ricuen’s gaze slowly drifted toward Hialis.

“Hialis, was it?”

“Y-yes! I am Bodybreaker Hialis... C-can I help you...?” She was terrified.

“As vice secretary of the student council, my job is to support Secretary Laika. But it is your job as her little sister to support her emotionally. Good luck.” She then extended a hand.

Hialis was perplexed, unsure what to do.

“Shake my hand,” Ricuen told her, and Hialis timidly reached out to do so.

“My boss is easily swayed by her emotions. Sometimes she can give it her all, but sometimes she can only give thirty percent. Give her the strength she needs.”

“O-o-o-okay! I will! I-i-i-it’s an honor to speak with a member of the student council!”

I was reminded once again that those in the student council were special.

Ricuen and I exchanged a brief glance.

I thought I saw the corners of her mouth curl up.

“See ya.”

By then, she was already gone. She was truly fast.



There was a first-year student taking upperclassman badges.

As I headed home, thoughts of this epic-sounding story filled my head.

It was after I had finished my work at the council for the day, so I was later than usual, and there were not many others around.

Perhaps I should check the first-years’ student roster? No, I should not be snooping around in such a manner, and the rosters did not contain battle records anyway.

Maybe I would even witness the badge taking, if this student was indeed winning so many...

I passed a particularly empty lot on my way home.

There, I found a girl wearing the academy uniform surrounded by other girls

dressed the same.

This was off-campus vigilantism!

That was completely against the rules. Unless you were suddenly attacked by an enemy and had no choice, fighting outside of the academy was strictly forbidden. That was because fights among academy students could greatly affect the environment around them.

That aside, seeing so many others fighting a single student was unusual.

Battles between uneven numbers of students were permissible if both sides agreed to the arrangement. But more often than not, an entire crowd surrounding a single individual was evidence of cowardice.

Furthermore, crushing a student in an unbalanced skirmish was an immoral deed worthy of suspension.

But I was also hesitant to interrupt without seeing what was going on first. Intervention into red-dragon matters would often only complicate any problems, and a fight that both sides agreed to would be difficult to stop, even if it was against the rules.

“You took Cotor’s badge!” “She looked so exhausted that I was shocked.” “I won’t let this happen again! Know the wrath of an upperclassman!” “Your badge hunting stops now!”

To think I would come across vigilantism against the badge-hunting first-year!

I had to stop them!

Even beyond my duty as a student council member, I needed to protect my underclassman!

But before I could stop them, the fight had begun.

In fact, it was essentially already over.

The underclassman moved with such calm, weaving between the older girls’ attacks.

In the end, she dispatched her foes by using their own energy against them.

Anyone with a background in martial arts could tell, after a few moments of

watching, that she needed no assistance. She completely overwhelmed her opponents. I decided not to intervene.

As I watched, captivated, all four upperclassmen collapsed, their shoulders heaving.

The younger girl stooped down and casually plucked the badges from her seniors' uniforms.

What power!

But it was not as though she was brimming with energy. I suppose you could call it a cool strength. There was an otherworldly calmness about her—like she had already learned all there was to the world, or like she was a sage who lived alone in the mountains.

The image of a certain woman suddenly flashed across my mind.

She reminded me of Miss Pixie Cut, under whom I once studied.

I had never battled with her in reality, nor had I ever seen her fight, but I had a feeling that this was how it would look, if she were to do battle in the real world. Everything about this girl's movements reminded me of her.

But wait—was it possible for someone else to bear such an essence?

Now that I thought about it, I noticed the underclassman had a pixie cut, too...

“You are brittle. You are brittle because you rely too heavily on your power.”

The sound of her voice changed my doubt into conviction.

“Miss Pixie Cut!” I yelled just as she kicked her final opponent to the floor.

And when the first-year student turned to look at me...

...it was obvious that she was the one I had imagined.

“Ahh, Laika. I am aware that you're a member of the student council. And you don't need to address me with 'miss'—I'm your junior now. I decided to join the academy in order to test the results of my training. They say the most powerful red dragons can be found there, after all.”

Her words were shocking but spoken very simply.

“So far, I’ve had decent results. I’ve taken sixteen...no, I have four more now, so twenty badges.”

She was so powerful, though I suppose I already knew that.

And it was not simply her raw strength, but the flexibility with which she used it. It had been cultivated over time, just as wood takes on a shine after many years of use.

Then, as if this were of no consequence, she said to me:

“It’s a bit sooner than I’d planned, but this was always my intention. Laika, battle with me. In reality this time.”

I sensed no fighting spirit from her, but she was overflowing with an unusual presence.

“Last time, we fought only in our mindscapes, and I have the tendency to lose initiative when I act as a mentor. I am a hundred times stronger than I was then.”

I doubted she was bluffing.



“Laika, as one of the Four Secretaries of the student council, you will have the honor of losing to me. I shall challenge you to a fight at the next morning assembly.”

I had never imagined the badge hunter herself would challenge me to battle in such a manner.

“That way, I will have an idea of how powerful the student council is, and you will get a taste of my strength as well.”

Her only goal was to test her power, so it made sense that she would call me out.

I had the lowest seat in the student council, the body said to be the pinnacle of the academy.

But there were other possible reasons I could think of.

“I will accept your proposal, but are you also intending to dismantle the student council itself, Miss Pixie Cut?”

To some people, the council might look like an organization completely under the control of its evil president, Leila.

“You don’t need to call me ‘miss’,” she corrected me before continuing. “And I’m not interested in any of that. I know that my sincere desire may appear as a joke to someone else, not unlike a cat playing with a ball of yarn. But it is also my wish to fight you, my former apprentice.”

Personally, I couldn’t imagine a fight with Miss Pixie Cut being anything less than dead serious.

Good grief. It was not so long ago that I was worried about all the attention I was getting from the first-years.

If I were to lose this battle, there would certainly be fewer people hoping to be my younger sister, since I would be branded as a graceless loser. Perhaps losing was just the thing I needed.

But on the other hand, I needed to win to prove to myself that I had grown.

“What is your name, Miss Pixie Cut?”

“Noenalle.”

That was the first time she told me her name.



Just as Noenalle had promised, during the student council announcements at the morning assembly, she stepped out from the first-year line.

As a murmur rippled through the room, she held up the bag containing the twenty badges she had taken and challenged me, the lowest-grade student in the council, to battle.

There was a mixture of animosity and expectation directed at this unusual first-year student in the assembly room.

The student council president glanced my way. Despite her position, she loved trouble; glee was written all over her face.

“What do you think, Laika? Can you do it?”

“Of course. I cannot run from this fight. Otherwise, the council’s trust in me would plummet. It would hamper student council functions in the future as well.”

Now that she had officially challenged me to battle, it would be embarrassing for me to turn her down without an appropriately good reason.

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m asking if you think you can beat that first-year.”

I could see a grin on my sister’s face.

I had a feeling the more unsettled I looked, the happier she would be.

It was so typical of her. I fought back a smile. “I will win. I will.”

“Good, that’s what I wanted to hear. I mean, you apparently beat Flatorte once, so you’ll be fine. Of course, Flatorte has her ups and downs, so I guess it depends what mood you caught her in.”

“Are you saying both of us let our emotions affect our ability?”

Ricuen had pointed out the same thing earlier.

“No, just that she’ll pick fights even when she has a stomachache. She’s easy

when that happens.”

So she was just a fool...

My sister had already turned to look at Noenalle. “Our secretary has agreed. The fight will take place at the next morning assembly, in this auditorium. Any objections?”

“None,” Noenalle replied boldly.

And so the most powerful first-year and I were officially set to battle.



That day, after class but before heading to the student council room, I made my way to the cave.

The very same cave I had used when I was a part of the training association.

There, I found Noenalle, sitting with her legs crossed.

“So you are still using this place.”

“It’s fallen into disrepair. I see *you* haven’t been using it.”

“It isn’t wise to get too attached to a single place. I have learned that in order to get stronger, it is best to associate with many other people.”

“Mmm. There is no reason there cannot be many paths to the truth. You must seek it your own way.”

We began talking, almost as though we had been part of the training association together for years.

“I thought you would look more uneasy now that the match is official, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“It was difficult to deal with in class. Hialis, the one who acts as my younger sister, was very worried about me.”

Even though I stood to lose what I had built so far, my heart was calm as a placid sea. To be honest, I was a little happy.

“I have always wanted to battle you in earnest, Miss Pixie Cut.”

“You don’t need to call me ‘miss.’”

“Leaving it off sounds unnatural...”

“I wanted to see how you’ve changed, as well.”

We had said all we needed to say. Other students might have asked why she decided to join the school now, or her real age, but none of that mattered to me.

“May the best dragon win.”

I quietly left the cave.

I might never have reason to visit it again.



From that day until the day of the match, I did no special training or preparation. All I did was carry on with my usual basic exercises.

I did not shirk my duties at the student council, either, so once class was over, I headed to the council room.

I must have come a bit earlier than usual, because I found Ricuen sitting there alone.

“There’s a difference between relaxing and lazing around, you know,” she scolded me again.

Each time she said this, I replied that my opponent would not be defeated with superficial training—and that keeping a routine was much more important. This conversation happened a handful of times, and every time, I gave her the same answer.

“I get that... But I have seen plenty of students with the same refreshing attitude who had actually just given up.”

I took Ricuen’s words to heart. I, myself, had a hard time separating my present state of mind from the feeling of giving up in despair. It was no wonder I was worrying those around me.

I sat down in my chair, intending to begin my council work.

But then Ricuen wrapped her arms around me from behind.

“I’m so worried and scared that you’ll lose and quit the student council. I can’t

sleep.” She continued without letting go. “This is a battle that the council itself has accepted. You don’t need to shoulder all this alone. You don’t need to feel responsible for any of it.”

Perhaps this sounds odd, but I was so happy to hear her warm words of encouragement. Ricuen was only worried about my well-being.

“I will win. And I will not quit the student council. This is not an election. Even if I lose, all she will do is take my badge. It’s not as though I forfeit the right to sit on the council.”

“...I believe in you.”

Despite her words, her expression remained sour.

“But I can’t send you off like everything’s okay... Maybe this is my weakness talking.”

“I don’t consider it weakness. I see it as kindness.”

For a while, my small-framed senior stayed behind me, arms outstretched.



The auditorium was packed with students. No, it wasn’t just students. I saw plenty of teachers, too.

I heard some of them saying, “This might be the first time since the student council president...” That reminded me, Noenalle was rehashing what my elder sister had done: taking down upperclassman one after the other until she had risen to the seat of student council president.

However, Noenalle was not trying to become student council president. Even if she did receive the position, I could easily see her quitting after an hour and leaving the school entirely.

My challenger was already waiting for me on the stage built in the center of the auditorium.

She had pushed up her sleeves in preparation for the fight. It was not a very elegant look, but she would scoff if I pointed that out to her.

I came and took my place before her.

I could hear people cheering for me, but even more in the audience held their breath, waiting to see how this would unfold. As far as they were concerned, the very order of the school hung in the balance.

Though many students feared the student council members, it was those members who had long kept the academy safe, after all.

Their worries were groundless, however. Decades ago, my sister had been a revolutionary, but now her order was accepted by all. People grew accustomed to these things.

But I did not care about any of that.

I wanted to fight Noenalle, and I was going to give this my all.

“You seem like you’re having fun,” Noenalle said, her expression stiff.

“Of course. I am happy you came back, Miss Pixie Cut.”

“I keep telling you, you can drop the ‘miss.’”

We faced each other and exchanged a few words before the teacher who acted as a referee stepped forward to explain the rules. No fire. No taking on dragon form. This was an untimed battle where the victor would be decided once someone acknowledged defeat or fell unconscious.

Let the battle begin!

As the fight began...I closed my eyes.

Noenalle must have done the same thing, because I heard others exclaim in surprise, “Both of them closed their eyes!”

Nevertheless, the fight was taking place. We both knew where the other was—and where they were aiming. The pain from Noenalle’s attacks served as a means of locating myself.

I had a reason for closing my eyes.

As Noenalle and I fought in reality...we were also fighting in the mindscape!

Behind my closed eyelids, I saw not darkness but Noenalle and myself standing in a martial arts gymnasium.

Only Noenalle and I were aware of this. This was something only she and I

shared.

After all, she was the very teacher who had shown me how to fight in the mind!

This meant we were fighting two battles at once.

“I did not think you had reached this stage,” Noenalle said to me in the mindscape.

“I continued my training, even after you left. But I also learned a lot from others.”

“You can only learn so much from friendships with your fellow students.”

“That’s not true. There are many things one can gain by interacting with others. You came back here because you felt the same, did you not?”

Cheers from reality reached my ears.

“Amazing! They’re having a real fight, even with their eyes closed!” “They’re so fast that I don’t even know what’s going on!”

The audience’s words made sense. Ever since my first day of school, I had slowly grown in power. I understood why many would be shocked upon seeing me fight.

As I dealt a kick to Noenalle in reality, I blocked a punch Noenalle threw at me in the mindscape.

This was the world’s first simultaneous reality-mind battle!

No, I was still being pulled toward reality.

I should be able to fight more freely! I took on my dragon form in the mindscape.

It would be against the rules for me to take on my dragon form in the auditorium, but I was free to take on either form here. I had no restrictions.

“Heh. Then I will do the same.” Noenalle transformed, too.

Our battle raged on, one massive life-form versus another.

The necessary tactics were different compared to fighting in human form, so

imagining it was also a challenge. However, I doubted something as insignificant as that would slow me down. I had gone through plenty of mental training.

A honed mental image was an advantage in the real world, too.

Human scholars agreed—a positive mental image made magic in the real world more effective. That meant the state of the fight in the mind could influence reality.

As I moved my physical body, I breathed fire in my mind, scratching Noenalle with my dragon claws.

There was tangible heat, pain, and sound that came with it.

Perhaps it was more apt to say there were two realities rather than calling one a mindscape.

“This...is like a mirror,” dragon Noenalle sputtered, her breathing heavy. I could hear the satisfaction in her voice. “This fight is indeed the result of enlightenment. I never thought I would do battle with someone who so embodies my ideals... Joining the academy *was* worth the trouble.”

“I appreciate the compliment, Master.”

“But we need to end this soon. I need to defeat you so I can advance to further heights.”

She came at me with vigor such as I had never seen in a red dragon.

She was right. One’s training was never done.

I would repay her for her kindness.

I am going to surpass you, Noenalle!

The moment my master’s imaginary dragon form dashed toward me, my dragon form swelled to a size ten times bigger.

Yes—this was the mindscape.

I needn’t be concerned about real sizes. I could become big enough to crush my opponent underfoot.

We are all of us caught in shackles—the shackles of a poor imagination and a weak will that urges one to give up on the impossible.

Once those shackles are gone, one's battle ability in the mindscape is limitless!

Dragon Noenalle looked up at me. Her form was darkened, hidden under my shadow.

She then nodded slowly.

"Excellent. Laika, you are far more enlightened than I!"

I nodded, then stomped on my dragon master as hard as I could.

—Simultaneously, our fight in reality came to an end.

Noenalle and I lunged at each other with all our strength, and it was my fist alone that made contact with my opponent's face.

A gratifying blow.

Confidently, I opened my eyes.

I saw Noenalle fly backward and slide across the floor before eventually coming to a halt.

The teacher who was acting as referee announced the end of the fight.

It seemed I had been able to accomplish what I set out to do.



...However, victory came with a cost.

The moment I passed through the school gates, I was surrounded by dozens of other students.

"Please let me be your apprentice!" "I'll draw water, clean, do laundry or anything else you want!" "I would be perfectly happy to just study by your side!"

There were too many to turn down... And some of them were in grades higher than me. I couldn't make my seniors my little sisters...

"This is your own fault, Sister," said Hialis. "No one had ever heard of someone fighting with their eyes closed in front of the whole school. And then you won. Of course you're popular."

It didn't seem like Hialis was interested in defending me—she bit into her pastry alone.

Then Ricuen appeared suddenly before us, a terrifying light in her eyes. “Do not bother other students! Remember your manners!”

Had she not dispersed the crowd for me, it would have been difficult to get to class. Wyrmspeed once again lived up to her name, appearing suddenly and coming to my rescue.

“Thank you. It's been two whole weeks since the match, and the fervor still hasn't died down.”

“You just need a bit more patience. And, Laika...” The strength in Ricuen's eyes weakened. “I'm sorry for suggesting before that you might quit the student council or that you might lose... You were never that weak of a dragon.”

Back then, in a way, Ricuen had been much more concerned than I had.

“I was simply looking forward to fighting against my master. That's all. I appreciate your concern for me.”

Having an underling worry about me as her boss (even if in name only) wasn't half bad. I was looking forward to her support in the future.

“And it seems her entering the academy has inspired the other students.”

In front of the flame pillar in the garden, Noenalle was going through strength training—armless push-ups and slow abdomen exercises—with her new trainees.

The training association had reached a roster of over ten people and had apparently gotten official recognition from the school.

I, too, had to strive to do better as a former member of the association.

As I passed Noenalle, she murmured something to me. “Laika, I am training to become your younger sister one day.”

“I don't think I would be much of a big sister to anyone. Please find someone else.”

I turned Noenalle's wishes down using the same words I had received once

before.

I understood now. One could not make another their sister with half-hearted feelings alone, much less someone with skill and talent worthy of respect. Of course, I had done just that on my first day of school... But it was too late to take that back now...

“Then I will only pretend I am your younger sister. In the mindscape, you are my elder sister.”

“In the mindscape...? Is that possible?”

But Noenalle remained unfazed.

“Yes. We are currently bathing in the mindscape. I have just started to scrub your back.”

“That is unnecessary!”

I began to wonder if Noenalle had become enlightened in more ways than one...



THE STUDENT COUNCIL

PRESIDENT'S GRADUATION



The frequent hot blasts of volcanic air from the ground meant that it never got very cold in the red dragons' home of Mount Rokko. But it was still colder than normal in the winter.

The red dragons were a people who did not much like the cold, so it was during this time of year that many families would go together to the hot spring village inside the volcano to enjoy themselves.

Similarly, since I was on winter vacation, my family and I leisurely spent our time at the inn run by our relatives. We could get home straightaway if we flew in our dragon forms, so it felt a bit like a second home.

Once winter vacation came around, the whole family would go to the hot springs; this was our familial routine, and barring anything serious, there would be no change in plans. I knew the hot spring village intimately, down to what lay at the end of every winding alleyway.

But that year, my heart was in a different place, even though the hot springs themselves had not changed; I spent most of my days staring into space in my room at the inn.

Even when my family went out for walks, I remained by myself, occasionally poking at my academy homework.

“Aw, Laika? You’ve been in your room this whole time?”

My sister came back just before lunch. She had apparently gone to get snacks; she held several skewers of meat in her hands. Though we were away from the

campus, there was still a good chance that other students from the academy were at the springs, so it was best we remained on good behavior. I was not going to admonish her for every transgression, though.

“I’ve been doing homework all day today. I can concentrate better here than I can at home.”

“That’s only half true. I know you are capable of finishing all the homework you get right at the start of break, and you do most years. You purposefully left work to distract yourself from unnecessary thoughts, right?”

Leila came to that conclusion after peering at my notes. I always knew it was impossible to hide things from her. It wasn’t so much that she was especially insightful, but that I was too easy to read.

“Yes, that’s right. Because you’ll be graduating soon.”

“Aww, you’re sad I’m graduating? You love your big sister, don’t you?!” Leila forcibly pulled me into a hug.

I let her rock me around like a doll, my head lolling back and forth. I knew she wouldn’t stop even if I fought back. If I reacted, that would only encourage her to keep going. The best strategy was to let her hug me until she was satisfied.

She smelled slightly of soap, perhaps because she had been in and out of the baths so many times.

“I won’t miss you. You’ll be there when I come home. I rarely see you at school anyway, since we are in different years.”

“Even if it’s true, that hurts, Laika!” Leila puffed up her cheek and pressed it against my own.

She knew everything, and yet she was still making me spell it out.

“I am worried that something will happen at school after you graduate. Perhaps it’s none of your concern, since you will be gone, but it weighs on my mind as a part of the student council.”

Leila was in her tenth year of sixth year.

It was finally time for her to graduate.

I had a feeling she would take a leisurely flight around the world once she left. Well, after her long reign as student council president, she could do anything she wanted, so I was not particularly worried about her future. If I did worry about her, she would only viciously tease me.

“Whaaat? But I’ve already given up my presidential duties. You already saw me pass the position on to the Vice President of the East, Rubiaflash Sadie.”

It seemed I needed to keep explaining, even though she already knew all this.

“Yes, I know you are no longer the president in name, and only a regular sixth-year. In name, that is. But you ruled over the academy as its dictator for a long time, so you still have some influence.”

“I don’t like you calling me a dictator,” she said, starting to grind her fist into my head. As a dragon, it dealt me an insignificant amount of damage, but it would certainly have caused a human’s skull to cave in.

“You may not like it, but it’s true! You’re the one who made me say all this! The VP of the West, Airshock Temiyainu, is in the same grade as you, and she will graduate as well, which will mess up the power dynamic for next year!”

My sister had long held the seat of student council president at the Red-Dragon Academy for Girls.

She was unanimously celebrated as the strongest student, and under her iron fist, the academy had run smoothly without too much chaos.

But when she left, I had no doubt in my mind that there would be several others who would step forward and try to become the new president. Perhaps even more people would run in the council elections.

If that were to happen, then a fierce fight would break out.

After all, the current president, Rubiaflash Sadie, had been *given* the position.

The students of the academy did not necessarily recognize her as the strongest.

That did not preclude other students from claiming that they were the strongest dragon and thus deserved to be council president.

If that individual was indeed the most powerful, then everything would settle

down again.

But if they were merely more powerful by a small margin, then that would just invite someone else to try for the presidency, restarting the cycle!

Once the monolith of Leila was gone, the academy would descend into chaos. An era of war and upheaval would be upon us.

And yet here was my sister, who must know all this already, irresponsibly living her life and showing no strong feelings one way or the other as her time of graduation drew ever closer.

At last, she stopped grinding her fist into my head.

“All I can say is good luck to you. I didn’t try to run or hide while I was president. That just goes to show what level the other students are at. And what do I care if the academy falls into chaos after I graduate? The rest of them can scrabble for power all they want.”

Her words were cold, but that was the kind of person she was.

She had never acted like this openly at school.

“I’ve heard the academy used to have eras of violence. By the time I joined, it’d already become a haven for proper young ladies, and it was easy for me to keep that going, so I did. No one knows if it’ll be like that in the future. But it’ll be the future students who have to decide.”

“I know... You never broke any rules. In fact, it was more unusual that the same person remained president for decades...”

Even if Rubiaflash Sadie fulfilled her job as president, she was still a fifth-year. She would immediately become a sixth-year and graduate within the decade. After her, they would have to carry out an election to determine the next president.

The council president acted as the leader for all the students in the school, so it was natural for an upperclassman to take that spot. That meant a new person had to assume the role quite often.

“That’s—too—bad!” Leila whispered into my ear, spacing out her words.

I jumped in surprise.

“What are you doing?!”

But my sister looked angrier than me as I protested.

“I’ve been listening to you, Laika, and you’re thinking too small. Why is the future of the student council and the academy all you can think about? When did you get so petty? I’m so sad that I could almost cry.”

“But I’m a member of the student council! Of course I’m concerned about its future and the future of the academy!”

It didn’t make any sense for her to get angry at me for such a reason!

“Laika, you didn’t even want to join the student council when you first entered the school.”

At Leila’s words, I suddenly saw the light, as if a curtain of darkness had been pulled away.

She was right.

What I was originally aiming for was—

“You wanted to surpass me, to become the strongest dragon in the academy. To be the strongest red dragon, the strongest dragon, the strongest *being*. That’s what you wanted, right? You’re simple, Laika, so of course I understood that much.”

A terrifying look crossed her face, and she pointed at me.

“In the third semester, before I graduate, we’ll fight. I’ll give it my best, so you better come at me with all you have.”

This wasn’t a declaration of war from my sister, but from the former student council president!

She then stuck out her tongue, and her expression relaxed.

“And if you beat me, then everyone will think you’re the strongest, and the academy should stay in line, right?”

I see—this was my sister’s last gift to me, as I lamented the future of the academy.

If I were to defeat her, then everyone would acknowledge me as the most

powerful in school.

And perhaps, that would keep the chaos at bay.

But a gift was not always given for free.

“And if I win, then that’s that. People will probably assume that the present student council members aren’t that big of a deal. I won’t go easy on you, either. That would be unfair. I swear that to you on my pride as the former student council president.”

She had given me a tremendous assignment.



When winter vacation came to an end and life at the academy resumed—
“Former president, for many years, you have been celebrated as the strongest individual in school. Now I wish to challenge you to a fight.”

I took the initiative and issued a challenge to Leila.

I stood right at the flame pillar in the garden in front of the school.

When I did, Leila grasped her stomach in laughter. “I knew it, Laika! I knew you’d be the one to challenge me!”

“You have achieved more than I. It’s only logical that the one of lower standing request the battle.”

It went without saying that my sister agreed.

Our battle surpassed the sixth-years’ graduation to become the talk of the school.

There were all sorts of reactions—some casually enjoyed the prospect of two sisters fighting each other, while there were some student council members and teachers who were worried that it might negatively influence how the student council was run.

But no one ever blamed me for it.

They knew that no matter who had challenged my sister to a fight, she would surely have taken them up on it.

If anyone had the courage to prove that they were the strongest, they simply

needed to battle her before graduation. There was no reason for it to be me alone.

The only reason no other student had stepped forward was because Leila was just that much of a presence. No other student believed they could defeat her.

But I would do what I could.

Class ended an hour early that day, giving us time for the fight. Perhaps the teachers had planned it that way since they knew this would be the former president's retirement match.

The fight would be taking place in the auditorium. No matter what happened, the entire school would be watching.

There were so many people still cheering for my sister.

She had ruled as the face of the school for many years, after all. I would say that 20 percent of the entire student body fervently idolized her.

Leila had been the academy's model student: She had mastered both battle and the arts and was beautiful, kind, and strict. Students at the academy made it their goal to live like her, and that was what the teachers looked for in their students as well.

I was one of them, of course.

No—it was precisely because she was my elder sister that I had always aimed to be like her.

There was no other student here who knew her as well as I did.

And that was why I had to surpass her!

My life would be easier if I always followed in her footsteps, but I could not stay this way.

I think I was smiling when I came to stand before her.

I thought back and realized I had never earnestly fought with her. She was always gentle with me, and we never got into fights. Meanwhile, I had naturally sensed how great she was and felt both admiration and fear toward her.

But now, in this moment, I was going to fight with everything I had.

There was a strange atmosphere in the auditorium. I had heard that some students even felt sick before the match and had to go to the infirmary.

But I kind of liked this feeling.

Perhaps this is what I had been looking for this whole time.

At this point, there was not much left for me to do or think about.

If I were to accurately describe all the actions I wanted to take during battle, it would take me a very long time. But precise movements and theories lived in my body and mind, so all I had to do was follow them.

The rules were that we were to fight with our own limbs—no magic—so it was a surprisingly simple match for the academy.

If I won, I won; if I lost, I lost.

And wanting to win, fighting to keep from losing, was the very nature of a match.

Relaxed, I faced my sister, and she faced me.

“I’m not going easy on you because you’re my little sister—but I don’t need to tell you that!”

My sister leaned forward and rushed at me.

Her attack was simple—its aim was to beat the opponent with as much force as possible. There was nothing artistic about it. There were plenty of other students in the school who were far better than her in technique.

But all of her blows were terrifyingly heavy!

I could hear each dull *thud* resonating in my bones!

“They called me the Queen of Destruction when I first came to school, because no matter how hard you guarded, I’d destroy it with a blow from above. But at some point, they just started calling me the strongest. Then they called me president.”

This was my sister’s----Leila’s-----strength!

There were no textbook moves, no correct strategies in her playbook.

She was not thinking about how to effectively take down an opponent or how to withstand another's attacks.

Her technique was almost childish; anyone would be hesitant to imitate her.

But the sheer force in her blows was second to none! She pulverized her opponents with sheer power!

Despite how sloppy her method was, she was still this powerful without any need to train for years and years. This was her natural talent—her inborn gift!

The heavens had granted her great power!

“I see why...so many people look up to you...”

There was no logic to why no one could defeat my sister. And that was why they acknowledged her as someone born to rule, their only choice to follow her.

Before them was someone beloved by the gods. It would be impossible for them to surpass her.

“The only one who ever challenged me to a fight was Flatorte, the blue dragon. It's hard to get a handle on idiots like her. I think I hate her because she's so much like me,” Leila said.

“Indeed... You are very similar; you both ignore technique.”

“Unlike her, though, I don't ignore techniques for daily life! And that makes me superior!” Leila kneed me in the leg.

It was not so much painful as it felt like a shock wave creeping through my bones.

I was on the verge of giving up resisting her power. Every attack threatened to paralyze the senses in my body. Even when I blocked correctly, the sheer brutality of her attacks seemed to mock my petty wisdom.

But at the same time, I felt something.

I felt I had the power to overcome this.

Even if she was far, far more talented than me, all I had ever done was strive to better myself. *Challenge, Victory, Growth*: I had lived according to the academy's motto, simply repeating these three ideas over and over.

I could close the gap between us!

Though she was indeed chipping away at my strength, I was still standing!

I threw a punch at my sister.

She was not very good at dodging, so I hit her with ease. She had never needed to dodge, so it was likely she had never practiced.

“Nice hit. Here’s one back!”

She immediately countered with a harsh kick. I flew back and slammed against the auditorium wall, denting the structure.

Yet I had still dealt damage to Leila.

I just needed to deal a little more!

Brick by brick, I was going to build a tower. And that tower would reach the heavens.

If the foundation crumbled, then I would simply have to build an even stronger one and start again.

Prodigies had their own way of fighting, and so did fools!

No matter how much Leila struck me, I never forgot to deal a hit back to her.

“You’re still not going down...? You sure have a lot of energy.” Leila’s face was scrunched up.

“I’m not a quitter!” I shouted back.

“I’d rather not see a new side of my little sister *here* of all places!”

“If you think you know everything about me, you’re sorely mistaken!”

After that, our fight became—no, our fight had been mudslinging right from the beginning.

I blocked just as much as I needed to while attacking, thinking only of tiring my opponent out. I would keep this up until I reached my limit.

Right after Leila struck me, I would always have the chance to deal her damage in return.

An eye for an eye. If I could only hold out, I could keep wearing her down.

I was holding out through willpower alone.

I could not hear those cheering for me anymore, even though I knew they were—Hialis, Ricuen, Noenalle, and everyone else in my class.

It was as though only my sister and I existed in this world.

I'd had a taste of something very similar when I fought with Noenalle.

Conversing with our fists—as violent as it seemed, it was a very honest form of communication.

Both of us took direct hits and were sent flying into the wall. Yet we both got up in order to send the other into the opposite wall. This went on seemingly forever. If the rules hadn't forbidden us from using fire, the auditorium would have become a sea of flames.

"Just go down already!" Leila punched me again.

I would not!

But I was not standing here just to contend with my sister. I could not give in—I had to get stronger for my own sake!

"Why are you still standing?!" Her heavy blow collided with my chest.

My head spun; my legs quivered.

She must have thought that would be the end. I saw relief pass through her eyes.

"I can still go on! I can keep going!"

I used the momentum of my stagger...

And sent a fist flying into her cheek.

If you asked most people to dig a hole to the other side of a mountain using only a hoe, they would tell you it was impossible.

But was that necessarily the truth?

Maybe it was entirely possible to dig a hole to the other side.

Didn't the existence of tunnels prove just that?

Now take this!

Just as I raised my arm, my sister lowered hers...

Thump.

And she collapsed to the ground.

“Aww, I lost~” Leila looked refreshed, as though she had been freed from everything. “The academy is your burden now.”

“I don’t plan on settling for being the academy’s strongest,” I quickly replied.

This place was important to me, but one day I would graduate and leave.

There was no point to it all if I did not find strength that proved valuable in the outside world.

“You’re right. Do as you please. That’s what I plan to do once I graduate.”

It was at that moment that I finally understood how Leila had been bound to the position of president, the academy’s strongest.

It must have been a lonely and isolating struggle to stand as the face of the school for so many decades. No one could do that without a will of iron.

But at the same time, it was unnatural. Even though we dragons lived long lives, it was still an oddity for a student council president to stay in power for so long.

That was why I had been tasked with ending it.

I got down on my knees beside my sister’s face and grasped her hand.

“That was a good fight.”

But in that moment, there came an earthshaking rumble.

The cracks and holes we had made in the walls when we slammed into them had spread all throughout the auditorium, and the entire building began to collapse.

There were screams, but no one was too alarmed. Dragons could survive a building collapse with minor injuries, after all.

“Sheesh. The builders must’ve cut corners if that’s enough to bring this place down,” Leila said, exasperated, as she looked up at the ceiling.

A bit of the ceiling cracked off and clattered to the floor.

Bright sunlight poured through the hole.

“Aww, look. The sun is blessing you.”

“I would much prefer it bless you,” I said to her.

She pulled my hand, and me, downward.

As I fell forward, she gave me a light kiss on the cheek.

“I hope my precious little sister stays happy and healthy.”

I felt tears pooling in my eyes. “I always will be, Sister.”



Spring was the season of beginnings.

I stood before the new students as student council secretary.

The current student council president asked me if I would like the seat of president, but I politely declined.

Though I had defeated my sister in a fluke, I still did not have the ability to call myself the academy’s strongest, and even if I did, the strongest student was not required to be council president. Excessive personnel changes would only bring unnecessary confusion. Secretary was the perfect position for me. I had Vice Secretary Ricuen’s support, too.

The nervousness on the new students’ faces reminded me of my past self.

I hoped that their worries would propel them forward to new challenges and victories. Losing was all right, too, but I hoped they would at least aim to win. And the more they challenged, the more chances they would have to do so.

Three days prior, Leila had said she was off to travel and flew away. Perhaps now she was soaring the skies somewhere, maybe exploring a market in a distant town.

Luckily, the weather was fair on the day of the opening ceremony, and there were no ominous hints of disastrous beginnings. The new auditorium to replace the one we had destroyed was still under construction, so we were holding the ceremony outside. It would have been terrible had it rained.

But if anything bad happened, we would deal with it when the time came.

I decided to take a page from my sister's book and approach things with a carefree attitude.

If nerves made me weaker, I would shed my nervousness and grow my strength.

After student council president Rubiaflash Sadie finished her congratulatory speech, she said, "Next, we have a few pointers from our secretary, Laika." Yes, that was part of my job.

I slowly stepped up to the podium.

"Welcome to the Red-Dragon Academy for Girls!"

The End



AFTERWORD

Hello! This is Kisetsu Morita!

We've finally reached Volume 13. Now we're getting into less significant numbers.

I have a lot of stories I want to tell that can only be told after a great number of books have been published already. I actually have those written and ready, so I would be delighted if you kept supporting me!

Now, let's go through announcements.

The next drama CD will be coming out in October!

Like all previous times, the CD will be released as a part of the special edition of Volume 14 (and of course, a normal version of Volume 14 will come out at the same time). I hope you preorder!

A new voice coming to this CD will be Demon King Pecora!

Her voice actress will be...Yukari Tamura!

It's such an honor to have her voice that I can scarcely put it into words, so please check out Yukari Tamura's Pecora!

Volume 7 of the comic adaptation drawn by Yusuke Shiba is coming out in September!

Volume 7 focuses on how much Kuku has grown. I'd also be happy for you to see just how valiant Flatorte looks, too!

Volume 3 of Meishi Murakami's *I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1,500 Years, and the Demon King Made Me a Minister* is also coming out at the same time! Meishi Murakami has now adapted all chapters of the *Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat* spin-off. Thank you so much for everything!

I also had Meishi Murakami introduce an original character for the manga—

Yuyu, a girl searching for some hot springs.

This was something I had been wanting for a long time as the original author, so I was so excited. The novels serve as the stem for the manga and anime adaptations, but nothing makes me feel more blessed as the author than to see new characters and ideas derive from those adaptations.

This might be a weird example because I'm not very good with technology, but I guess it feels like making a program that everyone around the world ends up using.

Also, both of these comics will have Pecora on the cover. Isn't that exciting?!

And at the end of this month (July), our new spin-off will be getting a manga adaptation!

This spin-off had two chapters in this book already: It's the *Red-Dragon Academy for Girls*! It will be illustrated by Hitsujibako!

There is such a cute cast of characters in this spin-off, including Laika during her student days, so I'm looking forward to it!

This serialization will be available to view on GanGan Online, just like the spin-off in this book. Please check out the site.

The anime, too, is steadily making progress.

I can't announce anything yet, but I think news will be published in the future on the official Twitter, so please check out the *Killing Slimes for 300 Years* official account (@slime300_PR)!

I'm done with all the things I can announce, so it's time to get into the real meat of the afterword.

There are new characters again in Volume 13. Thank you, Benio! One of these did not fall under the category of "cute girl," so I feel like I may have caused you trouble... Ha-ha.

There are so many characters now that even I don't know exactly how many there are, but I hope to slowly expand the cast even further with a variety of characters.

The other day, I saw someone online drawing fan art of a character that

hasn't shown up in the manga yet and appears pretty far along in the novels.

It was Nosonia.

I was so happy to see that people are paying attention to these characters!

I doubt the story will ever focus on anything but Azusa, Laika, and everyone else in the house in the highlands. But on the other hand, I want to write stories that will make you love the characters in the demon lands and the kingdom of the dead and everyone else scattered around, too.

In Volume 13, we had a story that involved Halkara's museum. I've been very slowly incorporating new elements into the already-existing members of the house in the highlands.

I have no plans on fiddling with the basis of the story, since big changes to their life would make it a completely different kind of series, but I want to depict more interesting incidents and start incorporating new elements. I am going to keep expanding on things slowly!

Since the anime has started production, there are suddenly so many more people involved in the series. I sincerely thank all of them for their part in *Killing Slimes*.

And to all my readers who have been keeping up with the series so far, you have my genuine thanks! I'll see you in the next volume, 14!

Kisetsu Morita



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